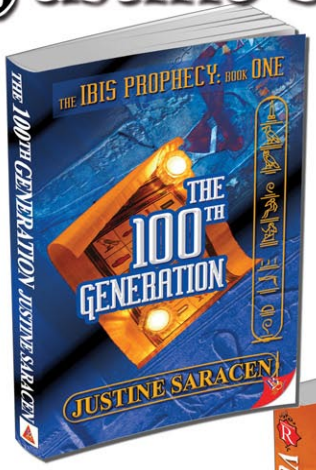
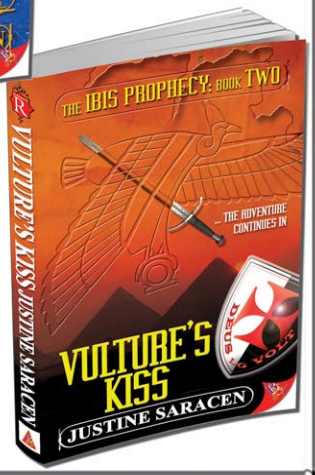
Justine Saracen





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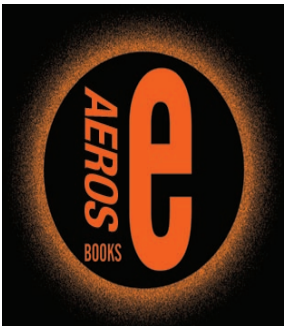

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Ibis Prophecy

100th Generation Vulture's Kiss

Justine Saracen

THE 100TH GENERATION

THE IBIS PROPHECY BOOK ONE

by

JUSTINE SARACEN

2006

THE 100TH GENERATION

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Dedication

For Angelique, my Wadjet, who began the tale as a joke,
and is the spirit that will waft through it forever

PROLOGUE:
ORIGINAL SIN

Pharaoh wept in his sleep. Everywhere before his burning eyes the beasts, the winds and waters, and the hills cried out. Pitiless, the Sun Disk rose and smote them, rendering them dumb. Ā en Seth, iron-eyed guardian of the light, loosed his spear upon the vanquished.

But lo, a humble priest stepped forward, an amulet in his hand, and the spear blade shattered into sparks upon it. Gathering the sparks with the power of his breath, he sucked them in—and spat them out again as words. "*Khetet! Rekhi renusen. Djedi medjatsen*," blazed into the air and faded.

Pharaoh Meremptah awoke, clutching the bed cloth to his pounding heart. To his chamberlain he called, "Light the torches. Summon the court!" He rose in the darkness, donned the immaculate ceremonial kilt, and strode to the Great Hall. Ā ere he sat upon his throne, white-lipped and shaken, while his court assembled.

❖

Roused betimes from his sleep, the priest Rekemheb dressed quickly while Pharaoh's messenger waited before his door.

His wife, disquieted, stood by him. "Why does the god-king summon you so early?" she asked, laying on his wide collar of lapis lazuli and tying it in the back. "Ā e light will not come for hours."

Ā e priest looked at his children—the girl, with ochre-stained fingers curled in a fist, and the boy smiling even in his sleep—and his heart was light. "It will have something to do with the New Year ceremonies, I am sure. Be sure to wake the children in time for the dawn."

He embraced his wife with brief tenderness. "Be full of joy today, as I am full of joy for you," he whispered. Ā en he turned away and hastened with the messenger along the still-dak streets to the palace. To his surprise, the doors to the G reat H all w ere thr own open and the cour t stood in attendance. Palace guards stepped to his side and escor ted him down the center aisle to the throne. Bewildered, he fell to his knees at the feet of the god-king, his hands raised and open in the gesture of adoration.

Pharaoh leaned forward on his golden stool. "Ā e gods have given me a vision this night and hav e revealed their chosen one. I speak his name: Rekemheb, P riest of the Temple of H athor." Taking up a wide pectoral ornament from the hands of a ser vant, Pharaoh placed its chain o ver the bowed head. "Ā is is the sign of thy sacred office. Go now with this on thy heart to prepare for the Opening of the New Year."

Rekemheb glanced up for the briefest moment at Pharaoh's face and caught his breath. Where he had expected strength, he saw fear.

He rose with lowered head and backed down the length of the throne room, eyes sear ching among the cour tiers for explanation. H e saw only surprise and confusion to match his o wn. At the door, the priest turned and hurried along the corridor . A t each of the r ed-painted columns, braziers of burning oil cast tr embling semicircles of light upon the stone. Guards stepped aside to let him pass.

As Rekemheb came to the great pylons that fronted the royal palace, he stopped at the last brazier. Drawing the chain over his head, he held the filigree gold plaque toward the flame and studied its spar kling images. At the center stood the sacred Balance weighing the heart of a man, witnessed by the gods of the underworld. Around the periphery, in shallow relief, the forty-two Judges sat enclosed in a vulture's wings. Ā e priest's hand shook, for he held in jeweled miniature the entry into death.

"You do well to tr emble, Hathor Priest," a voice said, star tling him. He turned to see a man, hook nosed and gaunt, standing in the shado ws. Ā e long palette and reed case of a scribe hung from his shoulder.

"I do not know you, sir, nor that whereof you speak," Rekemheb said courteously. He dr ew the chain o ver his head again, pulling his priestly side lock up through it.

"But I kno w you," the scribe r eplied, holding his palette to his hip like a weapon. "And I will tell your story."

"My story? Of being chosen for the Rebirth of the Year?"

"Of being chosen for the rebirth of the gods. It is a great honor, and you will die for it. Yet a child of y our line will bring y ou for th into the

world again in the hundredth generation. Then you shall be witness to these things: the Balance, the Book, and the bearing of the Child. This is our hope against the Aton, rising in the west."

"The Aton? But the Sun Disk cult is gone. Its priests are scattered. Surely—"

The scribe laid the tip of a bony finger on the amulet. "Hold fast to this. It is the prophecy."

Rekemheb stood speechless as the scribe faded into the shadows and then, bemused, he descended the wide steps of the palace. The dawning city was still quiet, for every man was in his house preparing for the New Year festival. The Dog Star had appeared, and in the east, the molten sun cast the street in a comforting orange glow.

Then he saw them, stepping out from behind the granary. Two men armed with spears, and a third one who ought to have been banished along with his usurper god. The Priest of Aton glared at him with iron hatred in his eyes.

Rekemheb bolted, drawing his pursuers away from his house and family. His heart aching, he ran through alleys, along mud-brick walls, over heaps of refuse in the streets.

White-hot, the spear blade pierced his back, throwing him onto the dusty ground. He opened his mouth, desperate to inhale, but no air came. He felt only the searing, nauseating pain of the metal tearing upward through his flesh as the spear shaft fell. He lay paralyzed and choking, and he tasted the frothy blood filling his mouth. Dread hissed over him like locusts as with dying eyes he watched the scorching sun disk rise.

Chapter I:
God Is Great

"*Aaallllaaaaahh uakbar*!"

The faint whining cry of the muezzin that drifted toward them in the darkness told them the city was near.

"*Aaallaaahh uakbar*!" It came again along the breeze as, reluctantly, Valerie Foret slowed her camel. Unbeliever that she was, she had always loved the first call to prayer, imagining bearded muezzins summoning the faithful through cupped hands from atop their minarets. Now she resented it, for it brought them to a halt. She stopped the moment Ahmed did and sat impatiently while his honking camel broke first at the front and then at the hind legs and he dismounted.

The excavation foreman unrolled the prayer rug he kept on his saddle and stepped out of his sandals. Scooping up handfuls of the limestone sand, he purified his hands and feet and turned eastward. *"Bismillah Arrahman Arraheem."* With open hands cupped to his ears, he began.

Valerie rode a respectful dozen meters farther on, annoyed. She tapped with her knuckles on her knee, recalling the forced rosaries of her childhood. *Ave Marie…Mère de Dieu*. Oh hell. They should have been in Giza by now, instead of a kilometer away from the pyramids. She could see them now in the increasing light, the great tombs of Khufu, Khephren, and Menkaure. In the predawn sky that silhouetted them, they had a majesty they would lack the rest of the day, when the plateau would be crawling with tourists and vendors. Now, mute black monuments to an ancient faith, they towered over the new one.

Restlessly, she laid her booted foot over the crosspiece of the saddle, brushing off the powdery sand that had collected in the folds of her trousers. She took off her hat and rubbed her gritty scalp. Six

months in the sun had lightened her brown hair at the edges and tanned her like a farmer, from her elbows to her hands. She fidgeted. So close, and so much to be done. Derek. She had so much to tell him. Things that would knock him over. And Jameela. Yes, Jameela. She tried to moisten dry lips but had no saliva.

"Y'alla bina!" Her foreman was suddenly beside her, brushing sand from the tail of his turban. "You will wish to return to the site right away, I think. I will get supplies today and have camels ready to go tonight."

"I wish we could, Ahmed, but we can't leave for two days. As for the provisions, I will get a few things at the souq, but I depend on you for the rest. I have people to visit and an opera to see."

"Opera?" A slight drawing together of his thick gray eyebrows indicated his astonishment. "You stay two days to see an opera?"

"I know that delays us for another day, but the singer is like a brother to me, and I missed his last visit here." She looked over toward Ahmed's leathery, avuncular face, which had grown familiar in the months of the project. "Besides, he's performing *Orpheus*, about a man who visits the underworld. A good omen for an Egyptologist, don't you think? By the way, you will need to hire another camel. He's coming back with us."

"An opera singer in the desert," the Egyptian replied with studied neutrality. "Very good."

Squinting in the half-light, she barely heard him. Giza, finally, had come into sight, a wide gray-brown stain behind the pyramids. She tapped her camel lightly with her goad, urging the tired beast to move a little faster. She felt excitement growing, in spite of her fatigue.

Soon the travelers arrived at the west façade of Menkaure, desert-most of the pyramids. Without looking up, Valerie sensed the edifice that filled space above them, rendering them trivial. Lines of men and boys swarmed toward them, peddlers with their sacks of postcards and plaster sphinxes. "*As salaamu 'alaykum*."

"*Wa 'alaykum as salaam.*" They passed through them to the next phalanx of "guides" who recited a mélange of facts and fictions about the tombs, and the stablemen, who for a few pounds would snap a photo of a foreigner sitting bravely on one of their emaciated horses. She tapped her camel with her goad again, urging it faster. She hated what the site had become. There was more refuse on the ground now—soda cans and plastic water bottles and countless cigarette butts.

At Khufu she could see Giza clearly under a gray morning haze, its apartment blocks and sooty squalor encroaching like lava upon the pyramids. "It's a pity," she said to her companion. "Egypt swallows up its own history."

"There will be more history, Doctor. God is ever telling His story."

Valerie shrugged. "The Egyptians trust too much in God and too little in themselves, I think."

"*Imshii*!" A rock flew out of nowhere and thudded against her camel. The snorting beast danced sideways, and she spun around to see a boy with a sling hanging open from his hand. She thought, absurdly, of the biblical David.

"Uh!" A second stone slammed into the side of her head. Stunned, she swayed blindly on the saddle, raising her hand to her ear. Bright pain radiated through her head; infantile fears, jagged pieces of memory like shattered glass, showered down on her. Confinement, hard hands thrashing her, a stone floor rising up to meet her. "*Maman*," the child had whimpered uselessly.

Then sight returned.

As she tottered, a bearded man sprang upward at her, his eyes bright with rectitude. She raised both arms against him, but he seized the cloth of her shirt, yanking her forcefully toward him. She toppled from the high saddle into his arms, and they fell together onto the sand. Furious, she rolled away from him, rose to her knees, and snatched her pistol from her holster. Ahmed, somehow dismounted, threw himself at a second man. A few meters away, peddlers had a third man on the ground.

Panting, Valerie struggled to her feet, still pointing her trembling pistol at her attacker, who had not risen from the ground.

He stared at her, composed, his glance intense, intimate. "You insult God," he snarled, "and your punishment will come."

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

From behind her a small hand reached out and touched her wrist. Dark fingers with milky white nails pressed gently into her skin. "Do not," a woman's voice said softly.

Valerie lowered her arm without taking her eyes from the attacker.

"Lady." A uniformed soldier suddenly stood in front of her, huffing, his carbine across his chest. "You knowing these men?"

Behind him, other soldiers reached into the roil of men and pulled them apart.

"No. Of course not. I am an archaeologist." She replied in Arabic, to his obvious relief, and pointed toward her foreman. "And this man is my *rayis*. He will confirm that we have just come in from Ghard Abu Sennan, where we are working. With government permission." She laid her free hand on her shirt pocket, suggesting the letter was there.

"Yes, Captain." Ahmed nodded to the soldier, who was clearly not an officer. "We have just come from the desert and know nothing of these men. But now, as you can see, the lady is injured and we must hurry into Giza."

"Yes, of course. Then it is the fanatics. They have been causing trouble at the tourist places. But don't worry. These will not bother you again."

"Y'alla bina!" he shouted at his men, who fast-marched the three bloodied attackers and the boy toward the causeway. Twisting in the grip of a gendarme half again his size, the bearded one turned back for a moment, his expression unreadable.

Valerie cupped her right hand over the throbbing wound on her cheek.

"Are you all right, Doctor?" Ahmed took hold of the rein and couched the camel so she could remount.

Valerie looked down and realized she still held the grip of the holstered pistol. She let it go finally, flexing her cramped fingers at her side. "My God. I almost shot him, Ahmed. I almost shot a man. This woman stopped me."

Shielding her eyes against the light of the sun, she turned around to see who had stayed her hand.

She recoiled. A vulture hulked on the lowest block of the pyramid swinging its leathery head left and right, as if noting the outcome of the incident. Savage eyes watched her for a moment, and then the beast unfolded its wings. Black feather-fingers opened at the tips as the creature hopped awkwardly off the block. Within inches of the ground, the wings beat laborious strokes, drawing its mass slowly upward. Finally the creature gained height and banked in a wide arc over the desert.

"I am sorry for this, Doctor. The extremists cry out against foreigners but they are ignorant. They do not speak for Egypt."

"I know that." She gingerly touched the cut on her cheek, frowning down at the blood on her fingertips. "I wonder who does."

Leaving the desert plateau for Giza proper, they made their way southward along the dirt road that paralleled the highway. At the familiar side path, they turned into the squalid patch that was Younis's stables, and she braced herself for the onslaught to her senses. That she had a headache and an open cut on her cheek did not help.

"Dr. Foret! *Ahlan wa sahlan*!" Rajab called out to her as he came from the stable with a bucket of what seemed to be fresh manure. His brother turned from the water urn by the roadside where he was splashing water on his face and waved as well. She waved back, touched by the boy's warmth. They were motherless, she knew; Younis's wife had died of some infection or other, and the family toiled, like millions of the Egyptian working class, in grinding poverty. She wished for the thousandth time that her university budget allowed for an act of charity.

Farther away, a third boy, still a young child, urinated into the center of an automobile tire. The tire, she noted, was one of several leading toward the taxi-garage a half a kilometer down the highway. Its sooty little black-and-white Ladas buzzed past every few minutes on the road behind her.

At the far corner of the property, but not nearly far enough, a square marked out with rocks held the stable's accumulation of dung. In the early morning its stench was tolerable, but the blanket of flies that swarmed up as Rajab emptied his bucket reminded her why she never stayed long at the stable. Today least of all.

The two dismounted by the side of the stable, and Valerie shifted her knapsack from the camel's back to her own. She patted all her pockets to make sure she had everything.

Younis emerged from the stable doorway. A man who ought to have been portly at his age, he was instead merely swollen at the middle, his arms and legs still spindly. The bales of hay along the stable wall did not stop him from smoking, and he took the cigarette from his mouth to smile at her with tobacco-colored teeth.

"*As salaamu 'alaykum,* Younis." She brushed away flies.

"*Wa 'alaykum as salaam*, Dr. Foret." He took the reins of her camel with one hand and raised the other in a friendly salute rather than shake her hand. She was relieved.

"Take good care of our girls here, Younis. Give them some extra food, a little fruit too maybe. They've been hard workers the whole time we've had them, and we'll be taking them out again in two days."

"Yes, Dr. Foret. Extra fruit. But when they see how fat you keep them, my other camels will stage a rebellion."

"Then feed them too." She laughed. "And put it on our bill."

She turned around to her foreman and pressed a bundle of currency into his hand. "You have the list of supplies for the excavation? Good. This should cover the expenses here and the purchases. I'll meet you here at dusk in two days. If I need to, can I phone you at Sammad's?"

"Yes, Dr. Foret. I will be ready. But now, please see to that wound."

"I'll be fine, Ahmed. Really, it's nothing. In two days, then." She shook his hand, adjusted her knapsack, and set off on the way back to the road. She badly needed a shower, a good meal, and some attention, she thought, and her pace quickened from a walk to a jog. As she hurried toward the taxi-garage, the two sensations came at once, confusing her: the ominous throbbing in her battered ear and the delicious anticipation of Jameela.

Chapter II:
Other Men's Toys

Bathed, breakfasted, and sated, Valerie caught her breath among fresh white pillows. Her earache was gone, and the handsome head of Madame Jameela al Rashidi, wife of the President of the Supreme Council of Antiquities, lay on her shoulder. Her chin resting on the fragrant hair, Valerie felt her sweat cooling and considered how to extricate herself.

The forty-year-old woman was still a knockout, Valerie thought, and still willing at a moment's notice to deceive her husband—even early in the morning. In the months of grueling, fruitless labor on the excavation, her visits to Jameela had been a relief and an adventure, with just the right amount of risk. But now this one seemed a digression. Now something more important loomed. She felt a pang of guilt as the woman stirred in her arms.

"Mmm. That was nice. Something I can think about all day long," Jameela murmured into Valerie's neck, then rose up on her elbow and blew long hair out of her face. She threw back the sheet, exposing them both to the sluggish air that wafted from the overhead fan.

Valerie glanced downward and smiled at the difference between their two nude forms. Jameela's caramel-colored body was sleek and pampered. Shaven and well-lotioned legs led down to pedicured feet with painted toenails. She herself, for all her time in the desert, was pale the length of her, all but her forearms and face, and her muscled legs were spotted with the bruises of hard physical labor. Jameela's womanly belly curved softly toward her own flat one, and the dark Egyptian breast swelled against the small white one like a hen sheltering its chick.

She did not want to be sheltered right then. She wanted to be on her way, but it was too crass to leave so soon. She closed her eyes, savoring the residual arousal of their play. Any other time, she would have stayed half the day. But now…She let herself drowse awhile, losing her train of thought. The image of a white limestone step formed in her mind's eye, filling her with joy, impatience. "Thank you, Egypt," she murmured.

"Egypt? My dear, I am the one you should thank, not Egypt. The rest of the country would be quite horrified by what we just did."

"Of course, I mean you, *Habibti*." Valerie opened her eyes, turned her head, and slid down the pillow to kiss the full breast. "Ouch! Damn." She sat up, pressing two fingers just in front of her ear.

"Oh, look, your cut is bleeding again." Jameela touched her hand. "Poor thing. Let me clean it once more." She slid off the bed, snatched a silk dressing gown from the foot of it, and swayed across the room to the bathroom.

"Don't worry, Jameela. I'm fine." Valerie glanced around the room that had once impressed her. She knew the scimitars and Bedouin weavings on the wall were all fabulous antiques, and the chairs expensive copies of Egyptian artifacts. Even the family pictures, of children posing in their school uniforms, were in extravagant gold frames. But their beauty no longer fascinated her. Now every object simply seemed to be one of President Rashidi's trophies, even his bored and restless wife.

The cheerful adulteress came out from the bathroom with a small brown bottle and a piece of gauze. "I thought the government had cracked down on those fanatics. But it just gets worse and worse. So much anger. I don't understand it."

Madame Rashidi sat down on the side of the bed and dabbed at the sore until Valerie flinched. "Sit still, now. The iodine is good for it." A lewd smile played over her lips. "And now we are both going to be sore this evening."

"Jameela, don't paint my cheek red." Playfully, Valerie moved her lover's hand away from her face. "I'll look like a clown. I've got an opera to go to tonight."

"An opera? How very nice for you. I have to play the hostess tonight at one of those dreadful receptions, shaking hands, talking nonsense about pyramids and tombs in five languages. And the men will be peering oh so discreetly at my bosoms." She leaned forward to

display the coveted objects inside the silk robe. "I shall be thinking of you the whole time."

"I will be thinking of you too. Of course." Valerie kissed her quickly on the lips and rose from the bed. She walked naked to where her knapsack lay on a chair, gathering up her soiled clothing on the way.

Jameela followed her across the room and embraced her again from behind, kissing her between her shoulder blades. She reached past Valerie to grasp the shirt folded in the knapsack. As she pulled it out, it unfolded, and she held it up by the shoulders. It was an exact replica of the soiled shirt Valerie had just rolled up. "*Habibti*, don't you have anything more, well, feminine? All this boys' clothing!"

"Oh, but it's the boy part that you like, isn't it?" she teased. Valerie took the shirt from her hand. "I know that I look like one of your boyfriends. Without the beard, of course. Are you still sneaking around with that Saudi journalist?"

"Never mind him. He is not at all like you. Nobody is like you. You may be a foreigner, but those eyes are more Egyptian than any I know. And your kisses make me want to leave my husband." She leaned over and picked up a .22 caliber pistol by its holster. "But then there is this." She held the weapon up in the air between them. "What is chasing you anyhow so that you feel you have to carry a gun?"

"Nothing is chasing me. But I travel alone all the time. I don't want to be locked up someplace at someone's mercy."

"Locked up? Why would anyone lock you up?"

"Don't leave your husband, and don't worry about me, or my gun. We'll both be fine." Valerie took the pistol from the other woman's hand and laid it back on the night table. She planted another light kiss on Jameela's lips and drew on the clean shirt. "I'm sorry to leave so soon. Really. But I have to meet a friend and buy supplies for the dig site. You understand."

"You and that excavation. You still have a fantasy of being the next Howard Carter and finding a Tutankhamun, don't you? But after eight months digging in the middle of nowhere, you've got nothing more than a cut on your face. Didn't that Lord Somethingsomething—the one who financed the Tutankhamun excavation—die of a cut just like that?"

"Carnarvon. His name was Lord Carnarvon." The archaeologist buttoned her shirt, ignoring the question. "The reception tonight. Who

is it for?"

"Oh, I don't know. Someone from Belgium. An academic, I think. Do you suppose you would know him?" Jameela fussed over Valerie's collar.

"It's a small country. Not a lot of Egyptologists." Valerie drew up her trousers, zipped, and buckled her belt. "Are you sure it's not a cultural minister or curator?"

"You know I don't pay attention to that sort of thing. It's just another hand to shake. I'll show you the announcement." The president's wife went into the next room while Valerie laced up her boots, disquieted.

Jameela returned holding up a folded paper. "Is it anybody important? Should we serve the good champagne?"

Hooking her holster onto her belt at the hip with one hand, Valerie took the announcement in the other. Her hand closed into a fist, bending the paper. She read the text a second time slowly, biting her lip, wanting it to be a mistake. With her free hand she slid the gun holster behind her under her jacket.

"*Merde.*" This was the last thing on earth she needed.

Chapter III:
Family

Valerie read the announcement for the fourth time and then tucked it back into her shirt pocket. It didn't seem fair. All the euphoria of the dawn had deflated to confusion and dread. Well, Derek would help her figure something out.

She leaned one arm on the iron railing of the balcony café and studied the flow of people on the El Hussein Square below. The midmorning crowd that streamed past the El Hussein mosque was already dense, and from one side it oozed sluggishly into the Khan al Khalili bazaar. Egyptians mostly, she noted, with only a few tourists, they pressed in clumps of two and three off the main thoroughfare into the narrow side streets. Their individual voices blended into a curtain of white noise, punctuated by car horns and the bray of a donkey somewhere. The dusty air carried the scent of animal ordure, car exhaust, and cigarette smoke and irritated her nose. She was glad the open skin in front of her ear was covered by a bandage. From the narrow ledge where she sat, she leaned forward and watched for her old friend, tapping her knuckles softly on the railing.

He was late, of course. He was never not late, excusing himself on every occasion by saying he was on "black time" or "gay time" or "opera singer's time." She decided it was the last, because that was what most excused him from reality. His countertenor voice, neither male nor female, but some transcendent mixture of the two, gave him an otherworldliness, as if he were a priest in the service of some splendid god. That was why she cared for him, she supposed; he elevated her.

"*Allah yirhamuh.*" The waiter collected the empty tea glass at her elbow and set down a second one. "Another funeral. Too many this year."

"Yes," she agreed, realizing what she saw. Across the street a stream of men was pouring out from around the side of the mosque. In their midst, four pallbearers carried a simple wooden bier. Coffinless and shrouded in white, the body lay exposed. The mourners gathered around the pallbearers until, at some signal, the entire cortege flowed into the square.

A sudden movement from the right caught her eye. Conspicuous by his tank top and shorts, a pale-skinned man—journalist or tourist, she could not tell—hurried across the street. Taking up position slightly in front of the procession, he began filming with a handheld video camera.

Three of the mourners approached him, waving. One of them snatched the camera from the stranger's hand and threw it into the oncoming traffic. Outraged, the photographer lunged at the assailant, and as the two men tussled, a crowd gathered around them. The funeral cortege continued in the direction of the necropolis while the smaller crowd dragged the photographer into a side street. She stood up and leaned on the terrace railing, trying to catch sight of them. The fool. Didn't he have any sense that he was trespassing?

A hand gripped her shoulder. Instinctively, she spun around—and bumped against a wide chest.

"Well, aren't *we* jumpy today? Hello, my darling bone collector!" Large lips kissed her noisily on her undamaged cheek.

She stepped back, grinning at the handsome black man who smiled down at her.

Large eyes rimmed with lashes of extraordinary length were set above cheeks a shade lighter than the rest of his face. Together, they gave him a sort of radiance. In spite of his hair, which she thought he wore far too short, he was rather beautiful.

He pressed her back onto her chair and sat down knee to knee with her. "My lovely Valerie Marie-Ghislaine. How *are* you? And however did you get that big nasty thing on your cheek? Someone's angry husband? Well, the bandage has *got* to go." His hand, spread wide on his chest, signaled his aversion. "It's just too too…*vilain.*"

"No, nothing like that." She laughed at his concern, not for her health, but for her appearance. "More a political statement from a Muslim fundamentalist. A young one, but with very good aim, apparently."

"Other than that, you look delicious. Nefertiti face and almond eyes to die for."

"You're looking good yourself, Derek. I see you're sporting jewelry now."

"You mean this?" He held up his hand as if admiring his fingernails. At the base of his ring finger was a wide silver band, studded with tiny blue stones. "I bought this in Cairo, in fact, after the October performance. You weren't around so I had to console myself with a little self-indulgence. Does it look too sissy, you think?"

"Not at all. It looks good." She grasped his hand. "And I'm sorry I missed your Cairo debut, darling. You know I was stuck in Brussels, organizing the excavation."

He took a sip from her tea glass and winced. "Needs sugar. Yes, that was heartless, simply heartless." His voice rose in pitch. "And I was hideously lonely. But then I ran into an Egyptian friend, Auset, who took care of me. Very good care." His expression had changed three times during his speech.

"An Egyptian? You have an Egyptian friend? Should I be jealous?" She leaned back on her chair and stretched out her stiff legs, crossing them at the ankles.

"Uh-huh. A Jewish Egyptian, if you can believe it, and barely that. She lived for a long time in New York, so she's more American than I am. You'll see. She's meeting us this afternoon." He leaned his chin on one hand, supporting his elbow on the other. "But what about you, girlfriend? What trouble have you been getting into?"

"Well, to start, I moved the dig site to another location. That didn't sit well with the committee at all."

"Moved? Why *ever* did you do that?"

"You're the only person I'm telling this to." She sat up again and leaned in, embarrassed. "Anyone else would think I was crazy." She dropped her eyes for a moment. "I…I had a dream. Don't look at me like that. It was very vivid. You were in it, dressed like an Egyptian, with a priest's braid on one side of your head."

"Really? How did I look?" He ran crossed fingers down the side of his face and turned in profile.

"Pretty good, actually. Thinner. But you spoke Egyptian, and you told me to dig in the next valley. So I did."

"Oh, so now I get the blame for the trouble you're in?" His fist went to his hip.

Her smile began small, then grew as if slowly releasing some joyous inner creature. "Not the blame, dear. The credit. We found

something."

"Oh!" His eyebrows shot up again, and he pressed his fingertips over his mouth. "You found a tomb?" he whispered.

"Limestone steps in the middle of nowhere? Can't be anything else."

He bounced slightly in his seat, his hands clasped in front of him. "Oh, Valerie, honey. Fame and fortune! I can hardly wait!"

"Well, there's also this." She pulled the crumpled paper from her shirt pocket and tossed it onto the tiny table. "Just got it this morning. An announcement of a reception for the new chairman and head of excavations at Brussels University. It's a disaster."

"A reception a disaster? Why?" He unfolded the paper and glanced over the announcement, pursing his lips.

"Not the reception. The man. He's one of the senior professors in my department and a religious fanatic who thinks women don't belong in the university. But more to the point, he arrived in Cairo without warning, and he'll of course want to see the dig site. This is the absolute worst moment for him to arrive."

"But you've got something good to report now."

"Not yet. I don't know what I've discovered. I've spent months digging for this thing, but until it's opened, it isn't really 'discovered.' I've got to be able to say, 'Look here. I, Valerie Foret, have found a tomb.' Until then, I've got to evade him."

"No problem, darling." He patted her hand. "After the performance, and a good night's sleep, I'll be ready to go out and play archaeologist with you. We can head out tomorrow as soon as it's cool to finish the job!"

Furious shouting from the street below interrupted them. Derek peered over the terrace railing. "What's going on? The police are all over the place."

Valerie stood up to see. The group of men that had pursued the photographer had grown larger and was spreading out into the square. The original offender was nowhere in sight; only the angry mourners tussled with police. Individuals broke away from the crowd and ran along the street under the café terrace. Several police vans had pulled up in front of the mosque, and white uniformed men with bayoneted rifles were pouring out.

"Come on," Valerie said. "We're conspicuous here. We'll be better off in the souq."

"You want to go shopping with all this going on?" Derek looked back at the street where a knot of men engaged the soldiers and were thrown to the ground.

"It's not going to stop, I'm afraid." She hoisted her knapsack onto her shoulder. "And we still have supplies to get."

"What are they so upset about? I mean, what's gotten into them?"

"That's the big question, isn't it?" she said over her shoulder.

Behind them a dark object rose up in an arc from the street. It seemed to hover in the air for a second overhead, revealing itself as a Coca-Cola bottle. Then it crashed onto the iron balustrade, spraying a shower of brown fluid and glass splinters across the terrace floor.

Chapter IV:
Gifts from a Dark Hand

The two of them withdrew into the winding alleys of the souq, threading their way past carts, bicycles, dogs, donkeys. Merchants called out to them, announcing the quality and prices of their wares in several languages. Valerie drew Derek through narrow passageways of shops for footwear, copper and brass, jewelry, pottery, and papyrus and stopped finally before a spice merchant. Bushel baskets of dried teas, flower petals, ginger, and unidentifiable vegetation lined the front. Flies swarmed over everything.

"Tell me again why we're buying food in the souq instead of a nice clean supermarket?" He wrinkled his nose. "Where people don't throw things?"

"Don't be so American, dear." She squeezed his arm. "Enjoy the history. Besides, I really want to smoke a little *sheesha* later." Valerie turned to the bearded merchant, who already held a wooden scoop and an open paper bag. She pointed at the heap of dried hibiscus petals. "*Tneen kilo, min fadlak.*"

The merchant dug into the dark red mass and scooped them into the bag. The flies swarmed leisurely over to the neighboring basket. "*Ishrin guineh,*" he said, handing over the bag. He smiled, revealing horrifying teeth.

Valerie raised her hand politely. "*Ashera guineh.*" She pulled a ten-pound note from the breast pocket of her khaki shirt and laid it on the counter.

He shook his head. "*Tamantashar guineh*." He pushed the note back to her.

"*Ashera*," she repeated. She opened her knapsack but was distracted. In an alley, off to the side of the merchant's stand, someone

stood watching. A woman in a dark dress and black head scarf thrown over one shoulder seemed to study her.

The merchant's voice registered shock and an appeal to common sense. He held out his open hands to show he had nothing to hide. He was an honest man. She was ruining him. *"Sittashar guineh."*

"*Ashera*," Valerie persisted courteously.

The woman still watched from the side, intense and blatant, as no Egyptian woman would be in public. Delicate dark hands, their fingernails much lighter than the skin, were clasped in front of her.

The spice merchant lamented his debts, his ailments, his many children. "*Arba'tashar guineh*."

"*Ashera*," Valerie repeated, but could not focus on the haggling. She kept glancing to the side at the strange woman who stared at her and would not look away.

"*Itnashar*." The man made his last offer.

"*Ashera*," Valerie droned, wondering if the woman would approach.

The merchant shrugged finally and picked up the ten-pound note. The transaction completed, he offered his hand. The gruesome teeth appeared again as she shook hands and then packed away her bag of *karkady*.

Derek frowned as they stepped away from the shop. "What was that all about?"

"The usual. He assumed we were tourists and doubled the price. I haven't got time for all that today. I paid him the going price. Besides—"

The stranger stepped out from a doorway and blocked their path.

She looked like no other Egyptian Valerie had ever seen. Her features were sharp, her jaw and cheekbones well delineated. The long, straight nose was more Greek than Arab, and her eyes were so dark that Valerie could see no iris, only depth. Her long black hair was uncovered, conspicuous in a quarter where women wore the hijab. Under a loose black abaya, she was spare, lacking the voluptuousness of the mature Arab woman. Age and youth combined in her oddly, and she was, in a curious, severe way, stunning.

"I have something you will need," the woman said solemnly. She held up a narrow ivory box, not quite the length of her forearm, incised with a line of text and capped at both ends with gold. Attached to it by a cord was a tiny leather bag.

The archaeologist recognized it instantly: palette, reeds, and pigment bag, the paraphernalia of an ancient Egyptian scribe. "It is very beautiful," she replied. "But we are not looking for souvenirs, thank you."

"It is not a souvenir," the Arab woman said. She stared from fathomless eyes and laid the object in Valerie's hand.

"Yes, but…" She studied the box palette. It had the usual two wells cut at the top, with faint traces in them of the ochre and kohl pigments. Below the inkwells a column of hieroglyphics descended. She held them up to decipher them. "'I am the instrument of Jehuti,'" she read. "'Let each word that floweth herefrom be given life, forever.' Interesting. It is correct New Kingdom Egyptian."

"Can I see it?" Derek took the object from her and peered at both ends of it. Suddenly the gold cap came off in his hand. "Oh my God! Did I break it?" Horror swept across his face for a second and then relief. "Oh, but look. There's something inside." He pulled out a tube of papyrus and unrolled it. "It's got that picture writing."

Valerie looked past his arm at the text. "It's the Negative Confessions, from the Book of the Dead. Hmm. Beautiful work. Whoever made this is really good."

Derek pursed his lips. "Who are these guys all around the edges?"

"Those are the forty-two judges. Amazing. How much is it?"

The stranger nodded in agreement, although it was not clear to what. "There is no price. It is for you alone."

"No price? You are giving this to me? Why?"

The dark woman stepped forward, until she was just inches away. She reached out, touched the bandage delicately with the tip of a dark finger. Then she leaned in and whispered into the other ear. Valerie stood astonished, as the ache faded. The strange woman stood a moment, motionless, her hand still resting on the wound, her face close. Valerie could smell her hair, a scent vaguely like cedar, and feel the warmth that radiated from it. The woman's hip, covered by the abaya, still brushed against her faintly, ambiguously. The memory of Jameela's nude body writhing under her flashed through her mind.

Then the stranger stepped back and Valerie watched, speechless, as she turned and disappeared into the native streets.

"Well, what was *that* all about?" Derek exclaimed, tucking the palette into Valerie's knapsack. "What did she whisper?"

"She said, 'It begins now. And I will follow you.'" Valerie touched her cheek. "What do you suppose that means?"

"I don't know, girlfriend." Derek laughed, crinkling the light patches under his eyes. "But if I were you and some good-looking woman suddenly appeared and offered to follow me home, I'd be pretty turned on. Oh, that reminds me." He looked at his watch. "There's another attractive woman expecting to meet both of us in just about an hour. We better hurry up."

"Yes, of course." Valerie linked her arm in his and guided him toward the brass merchants. She looked around for any sign of the mysterious woman but saw none. Follow her home? Well, that wasn't going to happen. She had been living in a tent for the last six months. She had no home at all.

Chapter V:
El Fishawy

Laden with packages, they made their way awkwardly around chicken crates and motorbikes into the street of the jewelers. At the end of a row of tiny shops, all of which seemed to sell the same thing, they turned sharply to the right.

"Oh, loook!" Derek halted suddenly before an alley.

Shaded on both sides and with only a thin strip of sunlight along the middle, the street had been claimed as a coffeehouse. Clusters of men sat along the walls sipping from glasses and smoking hookahs while peddlers made their way back and forth among them. Here and there ragged children held out their small hands. Heavy mirrors in carved frames hung on both walls, doubling the images and the confusion in the street. From a radio somewhere overhead, the whiny strumming of the oud and the plaintive Koranic singing of Umme Koulsoum covered the buzz of conversation.

Valerie laid her hand on his shoulder. "This is it, Derek. El Fishawy. The heart of the souq. Every visitor to Cairo ends up here. Let me buy you a drink, Egyptian style."

"Oh, I love it! Looks like something from an Agatha Christie movie. Is this the place where people meet Inspector Poirot, that French detective?"

"Belgian. He was Belgian." Valerie rolled her eyes.

They fitted themselves into the line of men on the benches and chairs along the wall. An aproned waiter approached and stood silently. Valerie knew he waited for the foreigners to speak so as to decide which of his half dozen languages to use with them.

"Coffee with cardamom, please," Valerie ordered in Arabic, and he smiled. "For both of us," she added. "And *sheesha* for one."

Derek studied the walls of the street café and the ornate covered windows that ran along the upper stories of the buildings on both sides. "Wow, this place looks medieval."

"It is medieval. All but the electricity." She pointed to the rows of cables strung loosely along the tops of the wall on all sides. "It's a wonder there aren't more fires."

In a moment an old man, with the tilted gait of some lifelong disability, set the tall *sheesha* pipe down on the ground between them. From his pocket he drew out a plug of something fibrous and laid it on the clay stopper before turning away. A boy followed behind him with a small cauldron on a chain. Derek watched, clearly intrigued, as the boy picked up one of the glowing coals with a pincer and dropped it onto the wad of *sheesha*.

Valerie took a long pull on the mouthpiece and heard the satisfying gurgle of water. She leaned back on the cushioned bench and blew out a stream of sweet blue smoke. "All right, now tell me about this Auset person."

Derek crossed his legs, watching the bubbles percolate in the glass vessel. "Uh, well, there's not much to tell. I know her from New York, where she studied at Columbia. She's Jewish but her father is Arab, believe it or not. In the export business. She took me everywhere in January. We became…close." He lowered his eyes coquettishly.

A battered metal tray appeared on the table, crowded with cups and a badly chipped enameled pot. Valerie poured the spicy coffee into both their cups. "You and an Egyptian woman? In all the years I've known you, you've never looked at a woman."

"Oh, I never do. For sure. But it didn't seem to matter. She was really persistent, and…I don't know. It just happened." He picked up his cup and sipped delicately.

"Well, I can hardly wait to meet this woman who had the power to turn *your* head." She puffed again, tasting the honey-sweetened tobacco, visualizing him in the arms of some Egyptian siren. Somewhere overhead the recorded voice of Umme Koulsoum still sang of love.

"Don't worry, my sweet. You'll always be my significant other. Lord knows, we both are 'other,' aren't we? Do you think we'll ever settle down and have a real life?"

At that moment, a woman walked up behind him and laid her hands on his shoulders. Her loose, uncovered hair contrasted with the somber green abaya she wore which, for all its volume, could not

conceal the fact that she was pregnant.

Obviously startled, he twisted around suddenly. "Auset! How are…" As he stood up to offer her his chair, his eyes traveled downward from her face and gradually widened in alarm. "…you?"

"Sorry I'm late." She kissed him lightly on his cheek and sat down in his place.

His eyes fixed on the woman's midsection, Derek drew over another chair and dropped down wordlessly next to her. Shock and a hint of fear played over his face.

"Yes, *Habibi*, it's yours." Auset made herself comfortable on the narrow seat. "One of life's little ironies." Turning her attention away from him, she offered her hand across the table. "And you must be Valerie. He's told me all about you! Ooh! I love your desert hat. Very Indiana Jones! He didn't mention the bandage, though."

"Uh, thank you." Valerie found herself smiling. Auset's cheer was infectious. Her speech was almost masculine in its straightforwardness, but her face and voluptuous body were all woman. Large Semitic eyes were outlined with sable lashes that needed no kohl, and her lips were full and sensual. Valerie glanced with sympathy at her old friend. The poor man was lucky to merely be seduced and not devoured alive.

Auset turned back to the still-speechless Derek, who stared at the bulge of his descendant the way a man stares at a small, dangerous animal. She laid her hand on his. "Relax, dear. It's all right! My father won't have you killed. Or me. It took a while, but he and mother have gotten used to it finally."

He grasped her fingers. "Auset. Why didn't you write and tell me? You must have known I would care."

She slid her hand out of his gentle grip. "Whatever for? You wouldn't have run back here to marry me, would you?"

"I might have. I don't know. Well, maybe not. But I'd have… well…sent money or something. A single mother alone in Egypt? Don't they stone women for that?"

She leaned back, crossing her legs with difficulty under the swelling of new life. "Well, there are a few people in Egypt nowadays who would still do that. Fortunately, that does not include my family. My father was horrified, of course, and refused to talk to me for a few weeks, but my mother defended me. When I got my own apartment in Zamalek and was careful not to embarrass them in front of their neighbors and customers, things settled down. Here, let me give you

the address and phone number."

"Yes, of course. We have to talk." His eyes darted around, as if trying to pick one of the questions that hovered in the air. "What religion will you raise him in?" he blurted suddenly.

"You mean will I tell him God is called Allah or Jehovah or Lord Jesus? So that he can fight for one of them against the others?" She looked heavenward in feigned despair. "Everyone has got a story. Well, don't worry, my songbird, he will hear all of them. Just like I did."

"Uh…speaking of songbird, Derek, don't you have a performance soon?" Valerie looked at her watch.

"Oh, hell! Right!" He jumped from his chair as if jolted by electricity. "I'm sorry. There's just so much going on. I have to get made up, costumed, warm up my voice. You know." He pressed fingertips to the side of his head. "Can we discuss this some more tomorrow, Auset? I can't think just now." He kissed them both lightly on their cheeks and hurried away just short of running.

Auset laughed. "If I didn't know him better, I would have called that a panicky escape."

Valerie took a long drag on her *sheesha*. The slight light-headedness she felt finally dispelled the nervousness that had driven her all day. She leaned back and allowed herself to be studied by the other woman.

"So, you are an Egyptologist," Auset said. "You can read the stories on the walls in our tombs and temples."

"Yes, I can, when there's something to read." She blew out smoke in a long, slow stream. "A lot of them are damaged, though. By vandals, religious rivals, time."

"I know. I was in the Valley of the Kings last year to see the royal tombs. The walls are covered now by glass panels."

"Yes, to keep people's hands off the paintings. The Antiquities people want to do it in the temples too for the same reason, to stop people defacing the inscriptions. So many of the old texts are ruined now."

Auset nodded sympathetically. "I guess it's because people see the inscriptions just as decoration. They forget the temple used to be holy. Marking the walls is like defacing an ancient Torah or Koran. The glass is a good idea."

"You're the first Egyptian I've met who has shown any appreciation of the old religion. I would love to show you—" Valerie looked past Auset's shoulder suddenly and stopped.

"Quelle extraordinaire coincidence!"

A voice smooth as silk came from the peculiar man who walked toward them. He had a long oval face with wide, almost Asiatic eyes. An overlong nose dropped to full Negroid lips, conspicuous on the face of a white European. His slender upper body swelled at the hips like a woman's, although the distortion was artfully diminished by well-tailored white linen trousers. It was obvious that he dressed with attention and expense, and he had the quiet demeanor of one used to being accommodated.

Valerie stood up and pressed dry lips together. "Dr. Vanderschmitt."

"Well, Miss Foret. A surprise to find you here, of all places. I would have thought you would be at work." He inclined his head as he spoke in slightly Dutch-accented English. His voice, when he spoke, had neither volume nor emotion.

"I came in for a few days to purchase supplies." She indicated the pile of packages at the side of the table. "Excuse me. This is Auset, a friend of mine. Auset, this is Volker Vanderschmitt, a colleague in the Archaeology Department at Brussels University."

"Colleague? Perhaps you have not been informed. I have been appointed Chairman and Head of Excavations." He smiled and pursed his full lips at the same time.

"Uh, well, I never received an official announcement. As you know, I've been out at Ghard Abu Sennan, more or less out of touch." While she spoke, he turned away and surveyed the clientele of the café, as if she did not deserve his full attention. He was beginning to get on her nerves.

He cleared his throat. "Were you not aware that field operations must remain in weekly contact with the University Committee? Since you have omitted to do so I came, among other things, to find out what exactly you are doing. You see, the committee is distressed that you are digging at a site other than the one proposed."

"I explained all that ages ago. There are unmistakable indications. Besides—"

He went on, overriding her reply. "Therefore, the committee has decided it would be more advantageous to have a man—a senior scholar—directly oversee the project. That would be myself." He paused, letting her absorb the full weight of the announcement. "I will of course accompany you to the excavation site when you return. I

assume that will be in the near future? Or do you plan to extend your shopping trip?"

Valerie fought against the urge to sit down, not wanting to have to look up at him. Her voice, when she replied, was tight. "Yes. Tomorrow night. At dusk. You can follow along then."

"Follow along? Ah, yes, of course. I will hire my own camel and be ready at that time. Since you speak Arabic, you can inform your team of the change in supervision."

Without looking at her superior, Valerie gathered up her packages. "Uh, would you excuse us now? We still have errands to settle." She glanced at Auset, who stood up with her, pulling her own purse strap over her shoulder.

"Yes, of course. I too have obligations." He gave a hint of a military bow in Auset's direction. "Congratulations on the blessed event."

"Thank you, Mr. Vanderschmitt." Auset laid her arm protectively over her abdomen.

"Dr. Vanderschmitt," he corrected, his eyes half-closed.

"Sorry. *Doctor* Vanderschmitt." Auset was already away from the table.

"Until tomorrow evening, then." Valerie laid several five-pound notes on the table and stepped past him without offering her hand. It was a slight no one could overlook.

❖

Vanderschmitt watched his junior colleague hurry away from him. Infuriating creature, he thought. A young European woman wearing what amounted to men's clothing and smoking a *nargileh* in front of the whole street. Despicable behavior. And her suggestion that he "follow along," as if he were a servant rather than the official head of the excavation was…unforgivable. Did she not realize what trouble she was in?

He knew her type; every generation had them. Ambitious women, contemptuous of authority and of the whole institution. Emasculating, unnatural women like Mead, Goodall, Hawkes, Fossey, who invaded the field sciences to plant their flags. Or like Monique, who thwarted men in other ways. They were a plague, exploiting men's natural desires.

Monique. He still remembered the sting of her hand on his face, the shock of looking down and seeing his white jacket flecked with his

own blood.

He continued to stare at the street long after Valerie had disappeared into the crowd. No woman would ever humiliate him that way again. He was chairman of a department now; he was the authority, and she was his subordinate. If she did not yet know her place, he would certainly teach it to her.

Chapter VI:
Half in Myth; Whole in Nature

Gluck's *Orfeo*. Such a beautiful opera with such a preposterous libretto, Valerie thought. Maybe it was just her unbandaged cheek that itched, irritating her. Her fingers crept obsessively to the spot near her ear to touch the wound. Orpheus's great aria "Che farò senza Euridice" thrilled her briefly, but then she decided it was the Orpheus myth itself that annoyed her. She was a scientist and knew what love was. Hormones, nothing but hormones, and all the rest was loneliness. Transcendent love was a myth, a cruel lie that kept the heart craving. Certainly none of *her* lovers would go into the underworld to save her. Jameela least of all.

Valerie thought suddenly of the woman of the souq who had promised to follow her. She looked around at the well-coiffed ladies and gentlemen who sat with her in the mezzanine. Well, it was clear no Arabian femme fatale had followed her there. Damn. She felt like a fool even thinking about it.

The chorus of "Trionfi Amore!" signaled the end of the opera, and she rose with the rest of the audience to applaud. When the curtain calls were over, she threaded her way back to the dressing rooms.

As always, the backstage corridor was crowded with admirers chirping their adulation of the singer. Derek was already out of his costume and in street clothes, but his stage makeup was still in place. A part of him remained in myth as he let himself be kissed and complimented. "Flowers? How lovely! Recorded? Yes, Deutsche Grammophon. So glad you could come. Roses, oooh, how sweeeeet!"

Valerie kissed him quickly and stepped past him to wait at his dressing table until he came in, still chattering and flush with excitement.

"My, how pretty you are tonight with that lovely hair all tucked up—just for me—and the teensy-weensiest bit of mascara around those heavenly eyes! No nasty bandage, I'm glad to see. And, dear Lord, she's wearing a dress! Now if only you didn't have those muscley arms, my sweet." He kissed her again.

"Muscles are what you get when you dig in the ground all day. But that's not something you choirboys would know about, is it?" She play-punched his shoulder.

He sat down before the mirror and began to apply thick layers of cold cream to his cheeks and neck. "Oh, you are *such* a bully, my dear. *Ta chère Maman* had no idea what you'd grow up to be! A pity I never met her. I'd have told her a few things!"

"No chance of that. I barely met her myself, since she died when I was six. I told you that. But I don't think Maman would have approved of you either, my little opera queen who makes babies. By the way, is Auset here tonight?"

"No, she reminded me the last time she came to one of my performances she got pregnant. I said I'd call tomorrow and we'd make plans to get together."

"Uh, you might want to make that call tonight." Valerie leaned against the back of his chair.

"Why? What's going on?" He snatched up tissues to wipe makeup-tinted cold cream from his throat.

"Derek, darling. We have an emergency. My department chairman has tracked me down and is about to take the excavation away from me."

The singer turned around to face her, Orpheus mascara magnifying his already large eyes. "I don't understand. Did you tell him you've found something?"

"No, of course not. He'll try to publish it under his own name. He's a predator, a hyena, showing up after someone else's hunt. Once he's gotten his hands on the discovery, I become invisible. We *have* to open the tomb before he gets there."

"Before he gets there? What"—his voice dropped in pitch and volume—"does that mean?"

"It means we have to leave a day before he does."

Derek threw his makeup-stained towel aside. "But the day before he leaves is—"

"Tonight." She nodded.

"Tonight?" His jaw fell behind pursed lips, and his eyebrows did a ballet from astonishment to indignation. "I…just…sang…an…entire… opera."

She picked up his leather rucksack from a chair and began dropping in objects from the dressing room table: cold cream, towel, bar of soap, toothbrush. "You've got clean socks and undies along, I assume? Good. I've already called my foreman. We'll take a taxi from here to the stable in Giza where he's waiting with the camels. I'll change there." She zipped up his bag and reached for the doorknob.

He stood dumbfounded, his scowl rendered ferocious by stage-makeup eyebrows. He looked at his wristwatch. "But it's—"

She threw his rucksack over her shoulder and opened the door. "Don't whine, Derek. Midnight is perfect. Nice and cool."

❖

Midnight was long past when the little caravan set out southwestward over the Giza plateau. Four camels padded, somnambulant. Ahmed drew ahead, leading the heavily laden pack animal and leaving the two friends to their own company behind him.

They rode without speaking, adapting the sway of their bodies to the lopsided gait of their mounts. In the quiet of the desert they listened to the chuffing of the camels, the soft flopping of the animals' feet, the creaking of the saddle frames.

Derek fidgeted on his unfamiliar seat, leaning forward, then sideways, fishing with his foot for a stirrup that was not there. "Valerie, I'm sure we look really fabulous on these camels, but my butt's killing me. Is there any special reason that we're not riding in a nice jeep?"

"Very special. No road. The sand's hard-packed here, but it gets very soft about a kilometer from the excavation and won't support the weight of a car."

"What's it like at the camp? Am I going to have to sleep on the sand? I have such sensitive skin." He touched his brow.

"Don't worry your pretty head, Derek. The workers sleep on mats in a common tent, but I have a tent all to myself. You'll be accorded the status of weakling, thus permitted to sleep on a camp bed there."

"'Weakling' is fine with me. I don't have to sleep on rocks to prove I'm a man."

"No, you don't. And since we're on the subject, what'll you do about Auset?"

"I called her while you were changing and apologized for leaving. When I get back to Cairo, I'll find out what she needs. You know, just because I'm gay doesn't mean I'm irresponsible. And, well…the more I think about having an Egyptian son, the more it pleases me. I like these people."

"I do too. But not all of them like us." She raised her hand to the barely closed wound that she had covered with her head cloth. "I told you I was accosted at the pyramids by fundamentalists. What I didn't tell you is that I nearly shot one of them."

"Girlfriend, you can't go around shooting people for that. And besides, you're asking for trouble. You're doing the Antiquities president's wife, remember?" He looked pensive. "Weren't you already getting in trouble back in school for that sort of thing? Some little Egyptian girl they caught you in bed with?"

"She was Moroccan. I forgot I told you that story. Yes, the nuns expelled her, but they couldn't send me home, so they simply beat me and locked me in a dark room for the rest of the night. I was nine years old. After that I simply made up friends I couldn't lose—Cleopatra, Hatchepsut, Ramses…" Her voice trailed off as she remembered loneliness.

"I know what you mean. Only in my case, it was Batman and Robin." He sighed. "We spend our lives looking for love, don't we? And here we are, adults, still looking. Or have you found it?"

She dropped her voice, although Ahmed was a good hundred meters ahead of them. "With Jameela? I don't think climbing through a window for a few hours of forbidden sex with a powerful man's wife counts as true love."

"Oooh, when you say it like that, it sounds delicious!"

"Yes, but dangerous. Islam is just as hostile as Christianity is to people like us. More so. They all go by the same book of rules."

"What's the answer, then? What religion would accept us?"

The nocturnal predators became audible—the shriek of a kestrel, the high-pitched yipping of desert foxes, and farther away the deeper bark of the jackal.

"Listen to them. They were here long before there was a West. Before there were pharaohs, even. The Egyptians made a theology of them."

"Vultures and jackals and snakes, oh my!"

"Don't scoff at vultures and snakes, Derek. They've survived for millennia in a searing desert. Particularly those two. They were revered as protectors of Pharaoh. That's why their heads are on his crown. Not to mention that we wouldn't dare eat them. But for a million years, they've eaten us."

"Eeeeewww!"

"It's just the balance of things." She patted her knapsack, which hung from the horn of her saddle. "The papyrus that woman gave me yesterday lists certain crimes. Holding back the Nile flood, driving animals from their pasture, for example. Even tampering with the merchants' scales. It's all about balance."

"Hmm." Derek rode for a while without responding. "God's world as ecosystem. I like that. But who was that woman anyhow—the one who gave you the palette and scroll? Did you ever find out?"

"No, I didn't have a chance to ask around the souq."

"She was a looker, too. Do you think she was making a pass?"

"I dunno. I've been thinking about it."

"I'll bet you have, girlfriend," he said dreamily.

In the bluish desert light Valerie watched his outline slouch as he managed to doze even while in the awkward camel saddle. Suddenly a screech cut through the darkness, and a ragged form swept across the face of the moon.

"Huh? What the hell was that?" He lurched upright.

Valerie laughed. "You'd better stay awake, *chéri.* Looks like there's a vulture watching."

"A vulture? Oh, Jesus," he muttered.

She chuckled again. "Jesus? I don't think so. We're *way* out of his jurisdiction."

Chapter VII:
The Tomb

"*Alhamdulillah*!" Ahmed exclaimed as the excavation came into sight.

Slouched in a semitrance from the six hours of monotonous rocking, Valerie was startled by his voice. She squinted through the folds of her head cloth at the blurred ellipse of activity a shade darker than the eye-scorching sand on both sides of it and the featureless shapes moving in the distance. "It looks like everyone's already up working. That's a good sign."

"Look!" Derek awoke as well and leaned forward, rubbing his back. "They've seen us too. Someone's running out to meet us."

"It is my son," Ahmed said with quiet pride.

The boy waved both hands excitedly, and as he neared, Valerie could see that his galabaya was torn in several places.

He met the oncoming camels and then danced alongside them, breathless. "*As salaamu 'alaykum*. Father! Doktor Foret! Come along, quickly. We have found a door!"

"Good man, Ibrim! Let's have a look."

At the edge of the excavation site, the four animals knelt down first at the front and then at the back and blinked long eyelashes at the boy who took their reins. Valerie and Ahmed swung their legs over the saddle post with the ease of long familiarity.

Glancing behind her, Valerie watched Derek pry himself with obvious effort from his own mount. "You okay?" she asked.

"I'm fine, really. I'll be along in a sec." He stamped his feet and squeezed the back of his thighs, encouraging circulation, then limped behind the others.

In and around the pit, Arab workers leaned on their shovels and greeted the archaeologist as she arrived. She felt a wave of affection for the men who had labored while she was away. She offered her hand first to Hamada, Ahmed's second in command. A slender man in a wide turban from a family of Sufis, he had a mysterious authority. Though she had never heard him raise his voice, he had kept the men working intensely while she was away. "Hamada, thank you. Selim, good job. Thank you for all your work, Shafik." She met each of them eye to eye for a moment as she walked past them. "Gamel, can I use your torch? Thank you." She clicked the switch once, to test the batteries.

Valerie stepped down into the cut they had made in the chalky ground. It was obvious that in their hurry to uncover the ramp and tomb entrance, the men had dug only the narrowest channel. She felt the abrasions of the shale and limestone chips on both sides and understood why everyone's clothing looked so ragged. Finally she stood at the end of the pit before what was unmistakably a door. She pressed her hand against it.

Sealed. The lumps of clay were still pressed into the door lintel and jamb, and the priests' markings were still readable. She ran fingers gently over the priestly seal, a vertical cartouche of the Anubis jackal squatting on a platform over nine captives. It was an efficient way of suggesting harm to any who might violate the tomb.

"Have you taken pictures of the seal?" she called up to the men at the edge of the pit.

"Yes, many pictures," one of them said.

"All right then. Ahmed, have the men break it open."

The workers chiseled around the sides of the mud-brick door and pulled at it with crowbars. A section broke away; then the whole door collapsed in a shower of mud bricks. They stepped back, fanning at the cloud of dust until it settled.

Derek threaded his way down the ramp to join them. "Oh! It's just a tunnel!" He peered into the darkness.

"There's supposed to be a tunnel." Valerie stepped over the rubble, swinging the light beam back and forth, illuminating rough-cut stone walls and the floor, which inclined gently downward. At the end of the corridor, they stood before a second sealed doorway.

"Give me your tools, Ahmed," Valerie said, hooking the flashlight onto her belt. The foreman handed over chisel and hammer, and she gave a single tap with the chisel tip, knocking away a chip from the

surface. "Wood covered with mud plaster. Standard."

She scraped a layer of plaster from the surface and incised a circle a few centimeters in diameter. Euphoric but exhausted, she wiped her sleeve across her face and began hammering. In three firm taps she was through.

There was a faint whoosh of air moving from one pressure to another. She sniffed carefully. "No organic gasses." She hammered around the periphery, enlarging the hole to the size of a fist. Pressing her forehead to the wood over the aperture, she peered in over the rim of the flashlight, waiting for her eye to adapt. In a moment she could see it. She felt like weeping.

The circle of light slid along a wing to a red-orange disk flanked by cobras, then to another wing. Unmistakable. The merged goddesses of Upper and Lower Egypt.

"*Bonjour, Mesdames*," she murmured through the hole. "Have you been waiting for me? God knows, I've been waiting for you." She stepped back and covered her face again with her head cloth. "Finish the job, Ahmed."

The foreman hooked the crowbar into the wood and pushed the iron bar sideways. The door split cleanly at the center and fell in two pieces against the opposite walls. The group waited for a few moments, and then Valerie stepped inside. She turned slowly, sweeping her light beam like a lighthouse, in a full circle.

"Oh…yes," she exhaled.

The four walls were covered in brilliant colors. Scenes, texts, invocations called out to her as if they had sound. The floor was cluttered with objects, and she dared not take another step for fear of trampling on them.

She was drenched with sweat and could scarcely breathe in the dust that still hung in the air. Yet when she drew off the long twisted cloth from her head, it seemed as if a breeze wafted over her face, cooling the fever of her wound. She felt a familiarity, a powerful déjà vu, like a traveler coming home. The texts on the wall seemed private messages, and the mummy, which she knew with certainty would be there, waited for her alone.

"Oh…wow," Derek whispered from the doorway. Around him in the tunnel the men murmured, "*Alhamdulillah*."

Valerie turned again, holding the light for a moment on each object on the floor in front of her. A statue of Osiris stood in one corner of the

chamber. To his right against one wall a wooden bed stood on slender animal legs with lion heads carved at the upper end. Along the opposite wall, chests of wood and ivory were lined up, with alabaster vessels spread out over them.

One object drew her like a lure and she crouched in front of it, illuminating it with her flashlight. A river barque, of gold leaf hammered over wood, nearly a meter in length from swanlike prow to the high curved stern. At the center, the naos-cabin housed a gleaming sphere. She dared not touch it, but its sheen suggested it was solid gold. Ra in his essence and glory, and ten painted wooden gods sailed in state with him.

"Beautiful," Ahmed said softly. "This god has long spear, goddesses have horns and feathers and every little thing. Is great piece of art."

"More than art, Ahmed. This was to the ancients like a cross to a Christian. More, even." She inhaled with effort, needing air again. "This is the Barque of the Sun. The emblem of their living world."

Derek had crept into the chamber behind them. "What's this writing here, in the long columns?"

Valerie stood up from a crouch, fighting sudden vertigo. "That's a calendar, twelve thirty-day months ending in July. The last five days were just tacked on." She took a cautious step closer to the wall. "It looks like this man died then, just before the beginning of the New Year. That's curious—"

"Ho! What's this?" he interrupted from behind her. "Men kissing? Is there something you haven't told me, girlfriend?" He pointed toward a drawing of two male faces touching.

"What? Oh, that's the God's kiss. To empower the king for the New Year. It's the transfer of knowledge, not romance." She coughed dryly. "Sorry to disappoint you."

Something moved in the corner of her eye, and she spun around to shine the flashlight on it. A parrot-like bird perched on the top of the lion's bed. In the flashlight beam the bird's eyes ignited as it tilted its head, as if studying them. Then it lifted from the bed, fluttered over her head, and disappeared.

"How did a bird fly down here? And what's a bird doing this far out in the desert?" No one answered, and pivoting around made her suddenly realize how little strength was left in her legs. And the air was stifling.

"Hey, come here. You have to see this." Derek stood transfixed before the opposite wall of the tomb.

"What? Another kiss?" Rubbing the muscles above her knees, Valerie went to stand beside him, adding her light to his. Two circles danced over the scene of a king bestowing a gift upon a kneeling man. Pharaoh wore the double crown of Upper and Lower Egypt. The maternal Vulture hovered over him with outspread wings.

"Look at the guy who's kneeling. With the African features. Jeez, Valerie. Am I narcissistic or does he look just like *me*?"

She leaned on his shoulder. "He does, kind of. Nubian, probably. Owner of the tomb." She was mumbling, scarcely able to form words. Her mouth felt like paper. With a shaking hand she unhooked her canteen and took a long drink. Her heart would not stop pounding. She felt her hair hanging in clammy ringlets around her face, and she was unsteady on her feet. One more wall to see, she thought. Three more minutes.

She shone her light beam on the west wall and smiled in spite of her increasing vertigo. It was a scene every Egyptologist would know, the Weighing of the Heart in the Underworld. She took another drink of water and shook her head, trying to clear it.

Still light-headed, she stepped forward toward the Great Balance, blinking to focus her eyes in the insufficient light. The painted gods on both sides seemed to shimmer and move, their eyes registering her presence. She felt drawn into the scene itself, and she knew suddenly whose heart lay on the scale. She shrank before the unrelenting gaze of the Jackal-god and the Ibis-scribe, and she heard the whispering of the judges. She covered her eyes, murmuring, "You live on truth…and gulp down truth…Let me enter in. I am without falsehood…" Then she stumbled backward.

Familiar hands reached toward her as she heard herself condemned—and she collapsed unconscious on the floor of the tomb.

Chapter VIII:
Rekemheb

Well, it's about time, Miss Drama Queen."

Valerie awoke to the light of an oil lamp somewhere below her feet and the smiling face of Derek hovering over her. Slowly, lethargically, she came to her senses.

"I fainted, didn't I? *Merde*. In front of all the men."

He wiped her face with a damp cloth. "Don't worry about it. You actually came to right away, but you were babbling, so we carried you in here for a good long sleep. I thought I was the weak one, but I guess you don't have superpowers either."

"Is everything okay? I mean with the tomb?"

"Yes, the tomb is fine. Ahmed let everyone in to see it and then got them busy unloading the supplies. He gave them the afternoon off for a little celebration, and they kept coming by to ask if you were okay. Uh….what's the matter? Why are you looking at me that way?"

"Not you, behind you on the chair. It's the bird again, the one we saw in the tomb. Something's not right…"

Derek twisted around to look over his shoulder and shot up from the chair as if jolted. "God. What is this thing?" The creature remained, unruffled, on the back of the chair.

Derek leaned toward it, peering at its head. "It doesn't have a beak or feathers on its head, just a little dark face." He swallowed hard. "My face."

The bird bobbed up and down as if agreeing and walked sideways along the chair back. Then, as if startled, it lifted off the chair and swooped out through the tent entrance.

"It can't be." Valerie sat up on her cot. "God help us. It just can't be." She took hold of her friend's arm. "Derek, listen! It came for us. I

know it came for us. We have to follow it!"

He shook his head. "What are you talking about? That makes no sense."

She pounded her feet into her boots without lacing them and stood up. Snatching a flashlight, she stumbled out of the tent, stepping awkwardly over flapping shoestrings. The creature hovered a few meters away, defying gravity.

"Just grab another light and come on!" she hissed back into the tent.

Derek emerged and the creature fluttered on toward the excavation. It circled once, as if looking to see if anyone followed, and descended the ramp into the tomb.

Valerie took a deep breath. "Listen. What we just saw, I think… well, it looks like…" She inhaled deeply. "A Ba-bird." To give her trembling hands something to do, she knelt down to finally lace her shoes. "A dead man's soul."

"A dead man's soul? With my face? Excuse me? I may be out of my element here, but I'm pretty sure *I am not dead*!"

"No, No! It can't be *your* Ba. What am I saying? It can't be anyone's Ba. It's a myth." She lurched to her feet again. "Come on. Just follow the damned thing!" She dragged him by the elbow toward the hole in the desert floor. "And if you're running, you can keep your knees from shaking."

"If that's your encouragement speech, it needs work," he said, huffing alongside of her.

They reached the narrow channel to the tomb and were slowed immediately by the sharp limestone. "Ow!" Derek grunted. "I just tore my shirt." At the foot of the ramp, before the entrance, a figure curled up in a blanket startled awake.

"Ahmed, did you see the bird fly past you?"

He stood up. "Ah, Dr. Foret. You are well again. *Alhamdulillah*. A bird? No, I saw nothing. Is something wrong? Should I call the men?"

"Thank you, Ahmed. That's not necessary. But you can go back to the tent. Now that I'm rested, I want to look around in the tomb again. There's no need for you to stand guard. Go and get a good night's sleep."

"Are you sure? All right, Doktor. But please call me if you need anything." He shuffled up the ramp, throwing his blanket over his shoulder.

Their fear dissipated by the delay, they stepped over the rubble that once was the doorway and hurried along the stone tunnel. Valerie noted that the men had cleaned away much of the dirt that had been underfoot and was grateful. At the entrance to the tomb chamber, they stopped and shone their flashlights inside.

The not-quite-bird waited for them. Perched at the head of the lion bed, the creature half opened its wings once. At the moment they stepped into the chamber, it rose from the bed and flew into the wall.

"Where the hell did he go?" They shone their flashlight beams along the edge of the ceiling, rotating to illuminate all four walls.

"Look!" Derek lowered his beam to the picture that took up much of the wall space behind the lion bed. "There he is, in the painting!" He focused his light on the painted animal perched on top of the Balance.

Valerie shook her head. "That's ridiculous. There's got to be a hole in the wall someplace. Something that we missed before." She stepped back, perplexed.

"I don't see any hole, but I do see the Ba thing," Derek insisted. "Right there in the middle of that scene."

"That's the Hall of Judgment scene, in the Duat. But that doesn't explain—"

"Duat? What's that? And why is there a balance?" He stepped closer. "Look, this guy here on the end in a white skirt, he has the same face as the bird. My face. Man, my face is all over the place! What the hell is going on?"

"Slow down. Let me explain," she began, and her shift to the voice of the lecturer had a calming effect on them both. "The Duat is the hereafter, where the heart of the deceased is weighed against the feather of justice. The figure there in the kilt is the deceased or, rather, his Ka spirit. The Ka and the Ba have the same face because they're both the dead man. But put your mind at ease, Derek. It's not you. Look, here's his name, right beside it. Rek-em-heb."

"Rek-em-heb," Derek repeated, as if savoring the strange new sound.

She shone her flashlight again along the juncture between wall and ceiling. The bizarre creature had to have landed someplace. She was determined to find it and the explanation for its existence.

"Yes. Rekemheb. He's about to enter the afterlife, but only if his heart is light. He'll be judged by the forty-two judges all around the Hall." She turned around and shone the light beam on the juncture on

the opposite side of the chamber. “Maybe it has a nest.”

“But why does this Ka guy look so much like me?” Derek persisted, leaning close to the image.

“He’s probably Nubian. Maybe your ancestors were too.”

“How would I know?” He shrugged and pronounced the name again. “Rekemheb.”

Behind Anubis, the painted figure of the Ka opened his eyes.

Valerie took hold of his arm. “Say it again, Derek.”

“Huh? What’s happening?” His voice rose in pitch.

“Say it!” she hissed.

“Rekemheb,” Derek said tentatively.

She squeezed his arm tightly.

“Rekemheb. *Rek-em-heb*!”

The figure brightened, became luminescent, and the fragrance of fruit and flowers wafted over them. They stepped back a pace as the glowing figure turned out of profile and stepped onto the tomb floor before them.

“Rekemheb,” it said.

Chapter IX:
Revelation

Silence. Long moments of stupefied silence. As if dream-paralyzed, Valerie's muscles would not move. The wounded side of her head pounded fiercely, and her disbelieving mind would not compute. Finally fragments of perception filtered through, like insects through a screen, separately, too few to be interpreted. Nubian features. Side lock. White kilt down to the ankles. Sandals. Slowly the particles aggregated to a whole, forcing her to a frightening logic.

He was a living Ka.

She panted through dry lips, waiting for light or rescue to come, to banish the illusion. She could hear her own labored breathing as her thumping heart signaled flight. If there could be a Ka, then there must also be…

Derek's flashlight crashed to the stone floor, startling her and saving her from the terrifying conclusion.

The impossible thing tilted its head in the same way as Derek had moments before and repeated, as if talking to an infant, "*Rek. em. heb*." He laid a shimmering hand on a shimmering chest.

She inhaled deeply. "Val," she croaked. A useless sound that elicited no response. Then she repeated, "*Val. er. ee*," imitating his gesture.

The apparition took no notice, fixing his gaze on the dumbstruck American whose eyes were wider than she had ever seen. The glowing figure reached out a hand to touch him on the shoulder.

He flinched away. His voice barely had tone. "What…is…it?"

Valerie replied in a soft monotone. "I…think it is his Ka. The…uh, spirit of the man entombed here."

"Riiight." His eyes riveted on the spectre, Derek knelt and picked up his flashlight. He held it out, pressing its broken On switch. He pressed it again and again, the dead thing wobbling uselessly in his hand.

The Ka spoke again. Several words. His voice was slightly detached, almost musical, as if on a gramophone record. Slightly staccato sounds, not unpleasant.

Valerie realized suddenly that she understood, and the realization was a comfort. Something about him fit into her science. "He's speaking Middle Egyptian, Derek," she whispered. "For God's sake. I understand him."

"Uh-huh." He was still in a stupor.

"He's talking to you, Derek. I think he said…'Grandchild.'"

The Ka spoke again, slowly, as if taking pains to be understood, and Valerie struggled to separate out the sounds. He repeated himself, giving her time to comprehend.

When she grasped the sense of what she was hearing, she laughed softly. "I should have guessed. He's asking your name. Tell him."

The singer regained his composure. "My name. Yes. Uh…" He pointed at the center of his chest and said, "I am Derek."

The spectre repeated "Ayemderak" and nodded with satisfaction.

"Close enough," Derek murmured.

The spectre continued talking and Valerie listened, frowning in concentration, trying to match sounds to words she had only ever seen written. "I believe he said he is pleased that you are fat."

Derek finally tore his eyes from the spectacle and looked down at himself. "What? He said fat? I'm not fat. Tell him…I am considered handsome."

"I think he means prosperous. But why don't I ask him why he calls you grandchild?" She searched her memory and spoke in short, stiff phrases, recasting ceremonial language she had never heard into small talk.

The Ka listened, frowning slightly, and then replied.

Valerie listened in turn, reversing linguistic direction. "'You are…child of my child…foretold in the…prophecy of the jewel. 'No," she corrected herself. "'Of the amulet. You are the…hundredth generation.'" She realized what she had just translated and turned back

to the glowing entity. "Prophecy? Amulet?"

"The gift of Meremptah." The Ka stepped to the opposite wall and laid his hand on the scene of Pharaoh bestowing an amulet on the kneeling figure. "At the New Year, the Great King made this gift to me."

Valerie nodded, remembering. The amulet. Of course. The only object on the tomb wall painted in gold. Her head throbbed, and she pressed her hand over her ear as she struggled with the unfamiliar words. "Where does your mummy lie?"

The Ka raised both his hands in apparent joy. He reached up to touch the image of the Ba at the top of the Balance. "Here within." The transparent finger tapped on the wall. "Touch here," the Ka said, stepping aside.

Obediently, Valerie stepped forward and studied the human-headed bird. Seeing it close-up, she realized that it bulged slightly from the surface of the wall, like a blister. She tapped on it as the Ka had done. When nothing happened, she pressed harder with two fingers. Suddenly, the image gave way, and within the wall they could hear the gritty sound of a sliding bolt.

With the rumble of stone against stone, the painted image of the mummified Osiris edged outward from the wall like a puzzle piece and slid toward them into the chamber. "Look, the God of the Dead is himself the door! These people had a sense of poetry."

She knelt down as soon as the opening permitted it and shone the flashlight beam into the darkness behind it. The two of them peered in together. Light sparkled back at them from a thousand places, like birds fluttering.

"*Pu…tain,*" she whispered.

The two of them put their shoulders to the Osiris door, forcing it farther outward on its arc. Finally Valerie could press herself through the opening into the burial chamber. She crawled in, setting her flashlight in front of her, then stood up. "Reassure me I'm awake, Derek."

"No," he muttered, crawling in behind her. "I'm sure we're not."

The large pieces were set along the floor: chests and caskets, shrines large and small mounted on sledges, a cow's head in life size, a crouching leopard with agate eyes, seated human figures. Upright against the wall were oars, priestly standards, and fans that clearly once

held feathers.

Two long tables that ran along the walls held rows of bowls, goblets, plates, and vases. At one end sat flasks and unguent jars, in animal shapes. At the other were trumpets, sheathed daggers, sandals, and figurines, and before them in rows, elaborate pectorals, collars, buckles, bracelets, rings. The funeral trappings of a prince.

Valerie sensed the Ka beside her, then saw his soft glow.

"I was favored by His Majesty," he explained, matter-of-factly.

She looked up at the painting on the wall. Ten gods stood on a shore in a row, hands raised as if in horror toward two figures in a river barque. "The Barque of the Sun," she said, "but it is not the way I have seen it before."

"It is the Barque of our dark dreams." the spectre replied mysteriously.

She studied the ancient river craft, curved extravagantly upward at both ends, and searched for meaning. The solar disk that surmounted the boat's central shrine was painted red, and before it at the prow Seth the Defender raised his harpoon. In front of the boat, a huge serpent spiraled upward from the water, its jaws agape. The harpooner took aim at the adversary, but his long camel head uncharacteristically faced into the chamber. It seemed to Valerie that he glowered down at her, and the brightly painted eyes followed her wherever she moved.

"Seth and Apophis are so large. And look, Jehuti has his own text next to him. '*Rekhi renusen. Djedi medjatsen.*' That's not any Egyptian that I know."

"I also do not know them," the Ka replied. "The words were dreamt by my lord Meremptah."

"Meremptah. Of course. I *knew* it was nineteenth dynasty." She directed the light beam toward the great dark object at the center of the chamber and heard her own sudden inhalation.

An undisturbed sarcophagus, the fervent dream of every Egyptologist. And she was the first to set eyes on it, after thousands of years. She shone her light on the four clay jars at its foot, on the carved jar heads of man, baboon, jackal, and hawk. "And the canopic jars are intact too."

They approached the object reverently, and Valerie ran her fingers lightly along the upper edge. It was wood, she noted, finely finished and painted on all sides with the spells of the Coffin Texts.

"You may open it. It was thus prophesied." The Ka directed his reply to the uncomprehending Derek, who stood at the foot of the sarcophagus. Valerie translated for him and set the flashlight down to free both hands.

The sarcophagus lid lifted easily from its base, revealing an inner mummiform coffin. The seam between the upper and lower portions of the coffin was clear, and Valerie inserted her knife blade. "It goes against all my training to break into a coffin this way," she said, tilting the blade gently upward, "but so does talking to a Ka."

The tiny aperture gave forth a faint pffft, and she suddenly smelled a mix of resin, camphor, and mold. Taking hold of the cover with both hands she slid it downward along the axis of the coffin, just enough to expose the head. She expected gauze or a desiccated face and was prepared for the horrors of decomposition. She laughed.

The face of Derek Ragin looked up at them from the coffin with wide kohl-rimmed eyes. Only the painted side lock of braided hair showed that the mask was an Egyptian priest, three thousand years dead. Narrow strips of linen held the mask in place around the head. Wider strips encircled the throat and were wrapped in geometric patterns down to cover the rest of the mummy's body.

Derek looked over her shoulder. "I'm dreaming, for sure, and seeing my own self dead."

The Ka pointed a glowing hand toward the wrapped cadaver. "The prophecy is there, on the king's gift. The words of the Scribe."

Valerie slid the coffin cover a few centimeters farther down and peered inside. Below the Derek-mask a stunning jeweled pectoral lay on the gauze of the mummy's chest.

The Ka clasped his hands, as if to suppress his own excitement. "Take it up. It is for you to read."

She reached down carefully, fumbled for a moment unhooking the chain from around its neck, and raised the heavy gold plaque to the light.

"It is the Judgment Hall scene, the same image as in the painting in the anteroom." Perplexed, she turned the object over. "There are a few hieroglyphs here. '*Djamu nu thau—shet mekhet.*' The hundredth generation. Then, '*nefer renepet.*' The glorious new year." She laid the ornament respectfully back on the mummy, tucking it under a layer of gauze.

The Ka looked from one mortal to the other. "The scribe said I would be taken from my tomb by my descendant." He gestured toward Derek. "That I would witness the Balance, the Book, and the bearing of the Child. Then Aton would rise in the west."

"Balance, Book, Child? What does that mean? How can the sun rise in the west?"

"I do not know more. But Pharaoh knew, for the god had given him the dream. He wrote it on papyrus and told the wrong that must be righted."

She peered again into the sarcophagus, directing her light to the four corners. "I don't see any papyrus."

"It is given to the good gods and lies beneath the Sun God Ra. Apophis is the key. I have read it and it is written in my heart. It tells of the great shame that caused the fall. '*Khetet,*' it says. 'Before my burning eyes, the beasts, the winds and waters, and the hills cried out.'" The Ka paused suddenly and listened, as if detecting some distant sound. "I must go. Cover me again, please. Protect my mummy from the touch of Seth."

The priest lost opacity and began to fade, from the feet up, smiling all the while, until there was only empty space where he had been. In the silence, a small pebble fell from the opening of the chamber and Valerie jumped.

"Oookay." Derek, who had been silent the whole time, finally spoke. "Are you going to tell me what just happened?"

Valerie pressed her hand to her ear. "I'm not sure. In the dark, you know, and in all the dust. You saw it too, right? It said…he said…he had been waiting for you, his descendant." She shone her flashlight again on the four walls, where the images were two-dimensional and motionless. "And that it was all written down on papyrus someplace."

"Do you think anyone is going to believe us?"

"I don't believe it myself. It's just too crazy." She closed her eyes for a moment. "I'm exhausted. I need to get out of here."

Derek looked around. "I…don't know. It seemed real to me. But maybe you're right. There's not enough air. Let's go back up and talk."

They made their way out of the burial chamber to the anteroom. "I think we should keep the burial chamber hidden a while longer. Until we can figure this all out." She pushed the Osiris block back into the

closed position. “Right now I’m having doubts about my own sanity.”

Valerie packed dirt once again into the crack to conceal the separation and moved one of the chests directly in front of it. “If any of the men come down here, they should overlook this. At least for a while. Now let’s get out of here and just think about this.”

They began the ascent, laboriously, toward the entrance. A circle of radiance at the top of the tunnel revealed it had become morning. As they plodded slowly upward, a figure stepped into the light and stood in blurry silhouette. A figure wearing boots and trousers.

“*Putain*,” Valerie muttered.

They stepped together out into the harsh light to face him.

“Dr. Vanderschmitt.”

Chapter X:
Hyena

The pale scientist stood at the top of the narrow channel that had been cut in the desert floor. As the two emerged from the dark, he stepped down onto the ramp and they could see his full lips pressed together, his unshaded eyes half closed. A small dark man, obviously his guide, stood behind him.

"You should not have evaded me, Miss Foret," he said in a quiet monotone. "I might have recommended that you stay with the excavation, perhaps in an administrative capacity. But I am afraid this speaks for your removal from the project." Valerie heard a quiet satisfaction in his voice.

The Arab workmen watched from a distance. Except for Ahmed, none could speak English well enough to follow the stranger's remarks, and Valerie sensed that their silence revealed a single common concern. Who was now in charge?

She glanced around the site for a moment and seemed to consider what to say. She forced herself to smile. "You are right, of course, Dr. Vanderschmitt. I acted hastily. I didn't want you to come out here until we were certain that we really had something." She shot a glance at Derek, whose faint nod reassured her he understood.

"But of course you found your way out on your own. I am pleased to tell you there is indeed a tomb, as you can see, which we have just now opened, and it is full of artifacts. It is a stupendous find the team has made, a great coup for the university. You can be very proud."

She gestured toward the tomb entrance. "Let me show you around." Effecting a smooth transition from adversary to agent, she started down the ramp. The new chairman followed without speaking.

She continued cheerfully in the tunnel, showering him with data, measurements, digging schedules, to keep him from repeating his ultimatum. Finally they were at the antechamber.

He stepped, obviously awestruck, into its center and turned in a circle as Valerie herself had done, sweeping his flashlight over the four walls. She knew exactly what he felt, and for a moment she regretted hating him. They could have shared the discovery as colleagues. Then she remembered it was not hate but fear that he had called up in her. Sharing was the last thing he intended.

"Excellent. Excellent. Yes, indeed. Have you determined whose tomb it is?"

"Well, you can see for yourself." She shone her flashlight onto one of the walls, providing no information. He walked around the tomb, pausing for a moment in front of each group of artifacts. Derek came in silently and stood next to her. Vanderschmitt halted finally before the wooden Barque of the Sun, the obvious centerpiece of the antechamber. "Remarkable," he murmured, delicately touching one of the two figures at the prow with the tip of his finger. It was the figure of Seth. She knew exactly the temptation he felt, the overwhelming urge to pick up the exquisite golden dolls and examine them. She was relieved to see that he did not.

"And have you found the burial chamber?" His glance swept across her like a moving spotlight, to more interesting things.

"No, but we assume it would be here, behind the south wall. I was going to have the men start looking tomorrow. I've been working them pretty hard these last weeks." Her tone remained neutral, cooperative.

Vanderschmitt studied one of the scenes, sweeping his flashlight back and forth over it. "Ah, Pharaoh Bestowing his Gift. Excellent. We can date the tomb by the identity of the king. Have you found his cartouche? Well, here we are. The kneeling man here appears to be the tomb owner."

Valerie did not reply. Every discovery of his was a negation of her own, every gloating word a theft of her achievement. He was a parasite, consuming her.

He leaned in again to study the text while with his free hand he drew a small automatic camera from the case that hung on his shoulder. "Ah, yes. Here it is." He read laboriously. "'Lord of the two lands, beloved of Ra…Meremptah…bestoweth the gift…upon his servant…'"

Vanderschmitt continued to snap photographs until the film ran out and he returned the camera to its case. Without looking at her he said, "I shall inform the university and the Egyptian government immediately, of course. However, you will return with me to Cairo. After we have registered the find with the Department of Antiquities, we will telephone Brussels to discuss the continuation of your assignment." He turned and began to walk up the tunnel toward the surface.

Valerie fell in step with him, and Derek followed close behind. At the entrance she spoke again, unaffected, cheerful. "Yes, of course. But at the same time you will surely want the work to continue. While you are in Cairo, I could start the men searching on the rear wall for the hidden entrance. When you return in a few days, you should have your burial chamber."

The new supervisor squinted out at the desert that he had just crossed, obviously weighing risks, benefits. She could almost hear the questions going back and forth in his head. Could he trust her? She was allowing him to win glory while she did all the work. But did he dare to leave her alone now, after threatening her?

Derek broke the silence, reaching out his hand, man to man, to the academic. "Forgive me, Dr. Vanderschmitt. I am only a guest here and have not yet officially congratulated you." His voice, Valerie noted, was several notes lower than usual. The handshake, she was willing to bet, was equally virile.

Vanderschmitt looked down through bored eyes. "Who, may I ask, are you?"

"Oh, I am sorry. Derek Ragin. I'm a friend of Dr. Foret. I was performing in Cairo and Dr. Foret invited me to assist in preparing the site for your arrival. I already knew of your work in archaeology, but now, well, what a brilliant discovery you have here. Or will have when you open the burial chamber. You must let me know when the time comes to publicize it in the general media. I could even give you the name of my publicist."

Vanderschmitt stood confused for a moment by the flow of words. "Eh, thank you, Mr. Ragin. I quite agree. It is a marvelous thing. I had not thought of a publicist. But perhaps you have a point. And of course the search for the sarcophagus should go on while we are in Cairo."

"Uh, well, yes." Derek scratched a spot at the back of his neck. "But then there is always the risk of theft, isn't there? I mean, I'm sure

these men are honest. They should be, at least. But they are also dirt poor. And they'd be all alone out here." He lowered his voice even more and leaned in discreetly. "With priceless artifacts."

Vanderschmitt looked around at the tattered Arab team which stood, somewhat bewildered, waiting for instructions. "I take your point, Mr. Ragin. Well then, Miss Foret, on second thought, it appears prudent to leave you active for a few more days at the excavation. You speak Arabic to the men, I understand. You can explain the transfer of authority while I am gone. Then, when I return, we can discuss the nature of your future involvement."

Valerie tilted her head in feigned deference, even surprise that he could have doubted her. While he gave orders to his dragoman, she watched him reach into his case for his camera and insert another roll of film. In the open case, she could see a row of film canisters tucked into elastic loops.

He closed the case and said over his shoulder, "Abdullah, I am changing the schedule. But first I need you to come back with me into the tomb. We must create a record of the walls and artifacts."

"Would you like us to assist you, Dr. Vanderschmitt?" Valerie asked**.**

"No. That will not be necessary." The new Head of Excavation waved her away as he descended again into the tomb to have himself photographed**.**

Chapter XI:
Leap of Faith

So, what do we do now?" Derek sat down on one of the cots and watched Valerie move about the tent.

"About getting rid of Vanderschmitt and saving my career?" She poured water from a pitcher into a tin basin.

"Getting rid of Vanderschmitt? Well, that would certainly be my first choice, but I was thinking in more practical terms." He reached for his backpack. "That was a good stall for time out there, by the way."

"Yeah. Thanks for your help, too." She splashed water on her face with a cloth, dabbing carefully around the cut with trembling hands. "But I don't know what to do when he gets back in two days."

"Uh, actually, I meant, what should we do about the mummy?" He drew out a tiny mending kit from his backpack and held it on his lap. "I mean about Rekemheb."

"About that thing." She dried her face with a cloth and sat down on the camp chair, her foot tapping. She folded her towel and then unfolded it. "I don't know, Derek. I…I'm having doubts." She rolled the towel up from one corner.

"Doubts? How can you have doubts? You spoke to him!" He unbuttoned his shirt.

"Well, no. It's possible that I didn't. I fainted yesterday, remember? Just after I had a hallucination. And I have a headache that never goes away. I could have some aftereffect from that blow I got at Giza. Not to mention that we were both exhausted."

"What are you saying? That it never happened?"

"I'm saying that I'm a scientist. I believe in brain damage and hallucinations, but I don't believe in ghosts. I can't accept that I talked to a Ka. And his speech. It was too familiar. It sounded almost like…

well, like Flemish. If I was going to create a linguistic delusion, I might use that one." Her voice trailed off.

"Well, I'm an opera singer, and I have no trouble believing in Kas, angels, ghosts, whatever. If it stands in front of you talking, it's real." He took off his shirt and draped it across his knees.

Valerie stopped rolling her towel. "What are you doing?"

"Mending my shirt. I tore it running after you last night. Why?"

"I just never saw a man with his own sewing kit."

"Valerie, darling. Do you *know* how many times I've had to repair a torn costume, minutes before going onstage?" He broke off a length of thread and drew it through his lips. "Tho, Ba and Ka are the thame perthon?" Squinting, he poked the moistened thread through the eye of the needle.

"Yes, in the mythology, they're the same person. Just different aspects. There are others, too, his shadow and his light, that dwell in the underworld. All of them depend on his mummy, though. If it's destroyed, they disappear too. According to the mythology."

"So, what will happen to them when Vanderschmitt finds the mummy? I mean, how does that work?" He closed the rip in the shirt elbow and began sewing with tiny stitches round and round. "According to the mythology, I mean."

"I…I hadn't thought of that." She chewed her lip.

"What?" He bit off the remaining thread and dropped the needle back in the mending kit. "Hadn't thought of what?"

"Vanderschmitt doesn't usually do excavations. I don't even think he's ever been in the desert before. He's a forensic Egyptologist."

"Which means—" He stood up and put his shirt on again, admiring his work.

"He dissects mummies."

Derek stopped buttoning. "He'd do that to Rekemheb? But he wouldn't if he met him, his Ka, I mean."

"Vanderschmitt is an arrogant bastard, but he's still a scientist. Even if he saw what we saw, he'd say the same thing. There is no Ka. We were suffering from lack of oxygen." She tapped her knuckles on her knee. "And he would dissect the mummy."

"And destroy Rekemheb?" Derek tried to pace, stopped at the tent wall after two steps. "No, no. Out of the question. He asked us to protect him, and we will." He sat down again. "And what about the prophecy? The 'hundredth generation' thing. We haven't even considered that."

She pressed her forehead into her hands. "Prophecies, on top of everything else. Gods. I feel like I'm in some cheesy movie."

Derek reached over to the pan and splashed some of the water on his own face. "At least he doesn't know about the burial chamber yet. That buys us some time."

"Time to do what?" She opened her hands as if waiting to catch something.

"Take Rekemheb out of the tomb. His mummy, I mean. Hide it someplace. The tomb doesn't need it! It's full of gold, for God's sake. Your university will have a spectacular find, and the Egyptian government will have a hoard of treasure. Who's gonna care about one dried-up mummy?"

"Out of the question. Waay out of the question. Moving the mummy without permission is a major offense. A crime. It would end my career."

He sat beside her on the camp bed, which groaned under their combined weights. "Valerie, darling, why are you still trying to be an archaeologist?"

"I *am* still an archaeologist. We uncover mummies for science and history. We don't steal them. It's not like an opera, in which the tenor makes some grand heroic rescue. It would be pillage, pure and simple. It would destroy everything I've worked for. And I told you I don't believe in a hereafter."

"First of all, you obviously don't see much opera. The tenor usually dies. As for ruining your career, I think Mr. Vanderschmitt is pretty much on his way to doing that already. You have *got* to look past your personal ambitions here for a moment." He clasped his hands together. "It's like…like we're the shepherds in the field seeing the Star of Bethlehem, and you're still worried about the sheep. This…" He gestured toward the excavation pit. "This isn't archaeology anymore. It's religion!"

She stood up, took a step, and then spun around. "Religion? I'll tell you what I think about religion. I was in chapel once, at school. I saw one of the boys kneeling on the steps near the altar. He was praying, and a beam of sunlight shone down directly on his head, making his hair glow."

"Oh, how beautiful. Like a blessing."

"Yes, that's what he thought. But it was *not* a blessing. It was sunlight, damn it. Natural sunlight shining through a cleverly placed

window. And the boy knew it too, because he kept sliding along on his knees, staying under the light. I watched him for ten minutes as he slid, staging his own benediction. And then it hit me. That's what religion is. The believer kneeling, praying, begging to a natural thing and calling it God." She turned back and washed her already-clean hands again in the basin.

"I don't know what you're so worked up about, sweetie," Derek said, conciliatory. "I'm not asking you to be baptized again, just to remember that we talked to a ghost. They usually come from somewhere. Down my way, we call that the hereafter."

"I don't accept the hereafter. For me, life is the earth, an oxygen- and water-rich sphere hanging in space. Living things appear, mature, and die. End of story." She threw back the tent flap and stormed out toward the excavation. At the tomb ramp she halted. "What's going on here?"

Across from her, four men paced slowly, pallbearer-like, bearing a wide wooden plank up the narrow steps from the tomb entrance. Tied to the center of the plank, tottering precariously, the Barque of the Sun rose from the tomb into the light of day. Workers standing on both sides murmured as it caught the sunlight.

"Oua'f!" she shouted to the men. "Stop! What the hell are you doing!" She called toward the foreman at the bottom of the ramp. "Ahmed. Who told the men to move the artifacts?"

The men halted, and the tiny god-figures wobbled in their slots along the sides of the barque. Something small and curved fell soundlessly to the ground. The foreman hurried toward her with his hands held out. "I am sorry, Dr. Foret. But the other doctor has ordered this."

"Get on with it!" a voice barked from behind the four men. They continued their slow pacing up the ramp toward a table that had just been set up. Vanderschmitt came up behind them. "Ahmed, go back down and stand guard. I don't want anyone near the gold when I am not there."

Valerie moved toward him, both hands open. "What are you doing? Aren't you concerned that the heat will harm the wood? After three thousand years in a cool, dark place?"

"No need to be hysterical, Miss Foret. It is all in good hands now, and I would appreciate it if you would refrain from countermanding

my orders. An object of this quality has got to be photographed and documented, a fact which you seem to have overlooked. You cannot possibly have expected to leave such priceless artifacts exposed to this class of Arabs."

"This class?" she felt herself begin to sputter. "I know these men, and—"

"You would be of greater use to this project if you would assist in identifying the objects rather than interfering with my efforts to protect them. You might start by getting a camera and taking more pictures." He took up position at the side of the examining table and peered through the lens of his camera, snapping frequently.

"Do you even know the theological value of this artifact? It's an extraordinary portrayal of the gods of incalculable value. Horus is at the prow, with his brother and adversary Seth right next to him. That's unheard of."

"Yes, yes. Horus and Seth. Of course." He held the camera up to his eye and focused the lens, grimacing.

"Not only that, but look at who is attending. These goddesses are Hathor and Isis; behind them are Shu and Tefnut. Then Ma'at and Jehuti, and at the rear the 'two ladies,' Nekhbet and Wadjet."

"Your guesswork is not necessary, Miss Foret." He advanced the film and snapped several more pictures from different perspectives. "We'll leave the research to the graduate students, won't we?"

She fell silent for a moment, absorbing his insult and surveying the faces of the men who had been her workers for nearly half a year. They were paid by the university and had to do what they were told, but she could see they didn't like it. Only Ahmed's young son was animated and cheerful as he crept toward the table from behind the senior scientist. Reaching his small dark arm past Vanderschmitt, he touched something on the deck of the barque.

"Get away from that, you little thief!" Vanderschmitt spun around. Seizing the boy by the shoulder of his galabaya, he yanked him backward. The child toppled back onto the stony ground with a soft "Uh!" Two of the workers helped him to his feet and signaled that he was all right.

Valerie turned back to Vanderschmitt, who had his eye to the camera again. "The boy was not stealing. And besides, you cannot strike them. Not for any reason," she said to his indifferent back. "It's

an offense here, just as it is in Europe."

He held the camera at his chest for a moment and spoke without looking at her. "Miss Foret. These men work for me now, and you will not interfere with my management of them. You've been playing fast and loose with us this entire year. But that is over now. Have I made myself clear?" He resumed snapping pictures, stepping between her and the barque.

She stared at his back for a moment and at his wide hips, speechless with fury. She toyed momentarily with the thought of confronting him further, of even having him beaten up and ejected from the site. The men would do it for her, she knew, and it would almost have been worth it to lose her job over it. "Yes, very clear."

She hurried over to where the boy sat holding his knees to his chest. "I'm sorry, Ibrim," she said in Arabic. "I apologize for the bad manners of this man."

Ibrim looked at the ground. "I did not steal. The little toy fell from the boat, and I tried to put it back."

"The little toy?"

"I was afraid they would step on it." He opened his hand, revealing a miniature bronze snake the length and thickness of his own smallest finger. The snake's head was carved from lapis lazuli, and its tail had been hammered into a square. It hung for a second from the child's moist palm before dropping into her hand.

"Thank you, Ibrim. I promise you, I will tell your father how you did a brave thing, and the other men will tell him too."

She wandered back to the table where Vanderschmitt had reached the end of his film roll and knelt on the ground. While he rewound the film with a rapid, petulant wrist movement, she leaned over the barque and studied the deck, looking for the spot from where the Apophis snake might have fallen.

"I have to get more film," he said crisply. "Keep everyone away from here. I will be back in a moment."

He marched back to his tent, and she strolled in a circle around the golden barque, holding the tiny bronze peg between thumb and forefinger. She looked along the outside, then between the god-figures, then around the periphery of the naos. Finally she saw it. A tiny square hole, scarcely a centimeter in width, had been stamped just behind the naos. She reached over and inserted the peg, pleased to feel the perfect fit. "Apophis is the key," the Ka had said. She smiled at the discovery.

It was a lever.

She pressed it gently backward. Suddenly the entire center part of the barque, the naos and the solar orb it sheltered, lifted up on hidden hinges. She took hold of it with her other hand and tilted it gently back, like the lid of a chest. In the cavity beneath were the ruined remains of what had once been a rolled papyrus.

She dared not touch it, although it would be impossible to rescue in any case. It was already merely a pile of flakes. And so she simply rotated the entire barque to catch the direct light of the sun. It was just bright enough for her to read the fragment of text that ran along the top flake. She translated the fine New Kingdom text and nearly dropped the delicate lid back in place. "'Before my burning eyes, the beasts, the winds and waters—'"

"What's that?" Derek had come up behind her and looked over her shoulder as she closed the lid over the hidden cache.

"Rekemheb's words," she said somberly. "And the death sentence to my career."

"Abdullah and I will leave at dusk tonight, after we have photographed everything." Vanderschmitt had returned, brushing dirt from his sleeves and trousers. "It should not take more than a day to file the papers with Antiquities, contact Brussels, and so forth. In the meantime, I require you to look after things." He paused, letting her appreciate that it was an assignment, not a resumption of authority.

"I will direct the men to continue looking for the burial chamber, as we discussed." She nodded, full of cooperation.

"No. There will be no more digging. I have decided to close the tomb again until I can return with proper security measures. I have got to procure an iron gate, mortar, etc. In the meantime, it is far too dangerous to leave those artifacts exposed. You must seal off and guard the entrance for the next two days. The foreman, whatever his name is, can stand guard at night. I will have made a photographic inventory, so that if anything is missing, you will of course be held responsible."

A voice spoke from behind her with courtesy and warmth. "Of course, Dr. Vanderschmitt. I will block passageway immediately. Is not a problem." Ahmed joined them and stood shoulder to shoulder with Valerie. He inclined his head in a gesture of exaggerated servitude she had never seen before.

"See to it, then." Vanderschmitt resumed photographing as Valerie and Ahmed walked back to the tent. When they were out of earshot of

the other man, the foreman stopped.

"Doctor. How long must we now work for this camel's ass?"

Valerie shook her head. "For a long while, I'm afraid. But you can help me to…cause him a few problems."

"I will do anything you ask, and so will the men." The tone of his voice suggested that "anything" included a great deal.

"You've been bringing Mr. Vanderschmitt his tea, haven't you? He's used to you being in his tent."

"Yes. He drinks a lot of it. Every few hours."

"Good. Try to smuggle out his camera bag the next time he's in the latrine. I need it only for a few moments, and you can carry it back when you fetch the tea glass."

"It is done, Dr. Foret."

❖

It took only a few minutes for Valerie to open the six black canisters and exchange their spent film for unexposed rolls. Replacing the canisters in the same order in the bag, she handed it back to Ahmed, who slipped away again to return it.

"Won't he know what we've done when he has the film developed and it's blank?" Derek asked.

"Probably. But it'll be too late to take new ones."

"And Rekemheb's mummy? Are you ready to save him now? Remember, no one knows it's there. No one but us."

Valerie stared at the ground for a moment, chewing on her lower lip. Then she said quietly, "Yes."

"All right, then. Now, how do we get him out of the camp?"

"Well, Vanderschmitt will leave tonight and be gone for at least two days. We can take the mummy out of the tomb at night and let the men discover an empty sarcophagus the next day. It would be very odd, since the funerary objects are all there, but we might pull it off. The big question, however, is where do we take the mummy?"

"I've been waiting for you to ask." Derek paused theatrically, his small smile fraught with meaning. "He can stay with relatives."

Chapter XII:
Crusaders

Riding eastward with the sun on the horizon behind him, Volker Vanderschmitt buttoned his jacket against the cooling air. Four hours' sleep was not enough for a man before starting out in the desert again, and he was exhausted. It was a hardship he was willing to endure, however. In another twenty-four hours, he'd make history.

He imagined the faces of his colleagues when they got the news. They'd congratulate him, even the ones who didn't like him. He'd be photographed, interviewed, broadcast all over the world. All those years of academic drudgery would finally be rewarded. He would be a star in the archaeological community. He could leave Brussels now for a chairmanship at one of the big universities. He could even return to Cambridge, the old denigration erased by his new glory.

He settled himself on his camel seat, drawing up one leg. Monique should see him now, the spoiled bitch. Monique, who had corrupted him and then lost interest. She had even refused to see him afterward, wouldn't return his calls. Until, recklessly, he had brazened his way into her husband's party. What was the man again, the old fool? Antiques dealer? Vanderschmitt felt his throat tightening as he recalled the confrontation.

All he had wanted was to draw her aside, tell her that she had changed him and could not simply leave him. But she had made a public spectacle of it. Before a room full of his Cambridge colleagues, she had slapped him hard enough to cause a nosebleed. As he stood there, his own blood spotting his white linen jacket, she had whispered, "You are pathetic." Humiliated, he had not replied, but simply walked quietly from the room, seething with a rage that had not left him for thirty years.

He had left Cambridge at the end of the term and spent months unemployed and bitter. She became the symbol of the world that had rejected him, and of a moral and intellectual relativism that he came to despise. There was a Bohemian licentiousness, a sort of anarchy in the disciplines too, where everything was waffling and compromise, and nothing was clear. And the women, with their "alternative" interpretations of everything, were the worst—vessels of inconstancy.

He needed certainty, the sense of an absolute truth at his back and under his feet. A year later, after he had nearly ruined himself in sullen drinking, religion finally gave it to him. Truth had come to him one night while he was sleeping off a binge, in a dream of exquisite clarity. He stood on the prow of a ship sailing toward a shore where wild things lived. The very landscape writhed and surged with them. Behind him, though he could not see it, was some great force, something noble and pure that sought to vanquish them. He had been chosen as its guardian and so was weaponed. Righteousness welled up through his veins and poured into his arms so that he sent a spear glittering toward the monsters. "The earth falls down before him," his dream self cried as the shaft exploded against the foe.

He had awakened, his heart still pounding, his lips mumbling a childhood memory of scripture: "I am the way, the truth, and the light." It was the revelation that saved him, that gave him back the moral clarity of his youth and inspired him to start all over again in Brussels.

It also freed him from women, from wanting to be attractive to them. And so when his body began to soften into androgyny, it did not matter. Monique, his friends had told him, had left England after he did, though they could not say to where—to hell, he hoped.

He shook himself back to the cool, dark present and patted the camera case that hung at his side. Now heaven and hard work had rewarded him. Great things were about to happen.

Valerie sat watching the two figures shrink and fade into obscurity on the eastern side. When they were out of sight, she turned her stool around to face the west.

Derek came up to stand beside her. "Wow. Look at all the colors. Shades of pink not even a drag queen would wear."

"It's beautiful, that glow right on the horizon, but always a little depressing too. At moments like these I understand the Egyptians' dread at seeing the Sun Barque drop into the underworld."

"Hmm. I don't see it myself, Val. But I bet Rekemheb did. It would have been scary, wouldn't it?"

"Yes. Twilight was ominous. But the sky was always full of portents."

At that moment a jet sliced across the red sky. A military plane—its speed gave it away—thundered northeastward, tearing her from her reverie.

"Enough brooding." Derek squeezed her shoulder gently. "Come on. We'd better get started."

She stood up, laying her hand on top of his, trying to dispel her misgivings. "Are all the men in the workers' tent?"

"Yes. Ahmed asked if you needed him, but I said we were going into the tomb to photograph some more and he could go to bed. So, sweetie, it's now or never."

Valerie took a final look at the strip of orange that still smoldered in the west like a distant conflagration. "May the gods be with us. The law certainly will not."

They hurried across the open space and reentered the tomb. Their single flashlight trailed along the tunnel floor as they descended to the first chamber.

Valerie stopped in front of the sun barque that had been returned to its original place among the artifacts. Little pieces of numbered cardboard hung from all of them. She picked up one of them and read the scribbled notation. *Nr. 14. Ivory chest. Vanderschmitt.*

"*Salop*! He's put his name on everything. Well, we'll have to do something about that." She pressed with her clenched fist on the Ba image on the tomb mural, and once again the Osiris door sprang toward them. With their combined effort, they dragged it fully open. The Ka was already sitting on his sarcophagus, as if he had been waiting for hours for visitors.

Valerie startled again at the sight of him.

"See, I knew he was real." Derek couldn't resist saying it.

"Rekemheb." Valerie drew the Ka's attention from his descendant, with whom he seemed obsessed. "I found Pharaoh Meremptah's papyrus. You did not tell me that it was in the Barque of the Sun."

"Did it answer all your questions?"

"No. It had disintegrated. But never mind. We are here for another reason. We must remove your mummy to a safer place."

"Praise to the good gods and to Hathor." The spectre raised both hands. "It has begun, then, the prophecy. I shall be carried in my descendant's arms." He evaporated cheerfully, as if to go and pack his bags.

"Well, that part was easy, at least," Derek remarked as they slid aside the lid. "He must know something we don't."

"Derek, he knows a whole world of things we don't." They lifted off the lid of the inner coffin, and she poked the gauze-covered cadaver in several places on the chest and legs. "His body's solid and well wrapped. It should hold up to being carried. Here, take him around the shoulders, and be sure to support his head."

She held the bundle around the legs while Derek raised the upper end and supported it with his shoulder. Suddenly he jerked violently, nearly dropping his end of the load. "Oh, my God! What the hell was that? Something just slid down inside my shirt. Get it out! Get it *out*!"

"Stay calm." She directed her flashlight at the lumpy shape in his shirt and the length of chain hanging from between his shirt buttons, then breathed a sigh of relief. "It's the amulet. I unhooked the chain, remember? Hang on to him. I'll get it." Balancing her end of the burden carefully, she pulled the wide gold plate out from inside his shirt, slipping it into her own shirt pocket and buttoning the flap.

They bore the mummy of the priest through the chambers of his tomb, setting it down only momentarily in order to close the burial chamber door. When they lifted the remains of the priest again, Valerie felt the precious object weighing in her shirt. Mixed with the other sounds—the trickling of sand from the broken doorways, their panting, and the shuffling of their feet—she seemed to hear a faint buzzing, like the murmuring of an excited crowd on the other side of a wall.

❖

"Dr. Foret?" A voice called softly from behind the tent canvas.

"Ahmed!" Valerie stepped outside into the darkness and drew the tent covering closed behind her.

He stood with his hands clasped in front of him. "You work at such a late hour. Shall I send the men back to assist you?"

"No, no. That's not necessary." She raised a hand. "But listen, Ahmed. My friend and I must leave the excavation tonight. I fear that Mr. Vanderschmitt will do something that will cause problems for the tomb, and I must go to Cairo to prevent it."

He laid his hand over his heart. "I will go with you."

"No, Ahmed. No need. The way is due east, and I have traveled it many times now. But I do need you to get rid of these." She held out six film capsules and dropped them into his hands. "Throw them into the latrine. An excellent insult."

He put the objects in the pocket of his galabaya. "Oh, that will be a great pleasure. We will add camels' insult too." He did not leave, but stood waiting.

Valerie considered for a moment, then took a breath. "Ahmed, when you go back into the tomb tomorrow, you will make a great discovery."

"Discovery? More than yesterday?" He seemed to consider for a moment as well. "Dr. Foret. Do not make me wait another day to take revenge on this dog of a man. Whatever you are doing tonight, please let me help."

Valerie studied the earnest face of the foreman who had worked for months at her side, directing the men with an understanding of both her needs and theirs. He had proven himself a hundred times. "All right, Ahmed. Listen. We've discovered the burial chamber. The sarcophagus is empty, but the chamber is full of artifacts. We must go back and photograph everything so the government has a record."

He pressed his gnarled hands together in front of him, as if in joyous prayer. "Surely, God is great. Oh, Dr. Foret. I am so happy for you. How can I help?"

Valerie loaded film into her camera. "When I'm in Cairo, I'll go to Antiquities and amend the registration to say that you and I have made the discovery. But after we leave tonight, you must close the burial chamber again until someone from Antiquities returns. Do you understand the danger?"

"Yes, and I am honored that you would speak to me so, Dr. Foret. Now let us to stop wasting the time."

❖

Ahmed registered approval. "Ah, you replace the little papers that Dr. Vanderschmitt has put on. This is a good thing."

"Yes, but as far as you are concerned, you know nothing about it, all right?"

"Whatever you say, Doctor. Here, let me take the new pictures of you with treasures. You can give to Egyptian government and to your school."

"That's the plan. But we must do it methodically, according to the numbers we've put on the objects. Start here at the entrance and photograph along the tables and wall, until you've made a full circle. And don't forget the small things on the floor."

She placed the new numbered cards against the artifacts, and he followed, photographing every object from a distance and from up close. For nearly an hour they worked together in the dusty air, the only sound the snap of the shutter and the whirr and click of the automatic advance.

Finally Valerie knelt by the hidden entrance. "And now for the best part, Ahmed. You will be the first Egyptian to see this room in three thousand years." She pulled open the Osiris door and waved him through the narrow opening into the burial chamber.

"*Alhamdulillah*!" he whispered. "This is a great thing. After all your work, Dr. Foret."

"No, it was your work, Ahmed. You and the men had to dig in limestone for so many months. I promise you, I will tell the world your name. But after we photograph everything, you must close it up again until the Council of Antiquities comes to see it."

"Of course. And what should I tell them when they come? Mr. Vanderschmitt will be with them, yes?"

"Tell the truth, or most of it. It'll be easy to remember. Well, you might forget about our changing Mr. Vanderschmitt's little tags. But most importantly, you should say that we discovered this chamber together, you and I. It'll be true enough."

He chuckled, a high, light "hee hee" she had never heard before and that did not match his somber face. And then he touched her elbow, which he had also never done before, and drew her over to the empty sarcophagus to take the first picture.

After two hours they were finished and returned to the tent where Derek had all their bags packed and the mummy concealed in two of

the camp blankets. Before the tent, the boy Ibrim held the reins of two camels.

Ahmed checked the security of the saddle bindings and nodded approvingly. Then he excused himself suddenly. Valerie waited nervously by the tent with a small canvas bag under her arm, wondering if she had misjudged him. She was after all committing a crime, and it must certainly be apparent that she was running away. Had he grasped the grave danger she was putting him in?

After a few moments the foreman returned with something tightly folded held to his chest. When he stood before her, she withdrew a wad of Egyptian pound notes and handed it to him. "This is the money due the men this month. There's some extra too. After you pay them their salaries, you can distribute the rest as you see fit."

Ahmed lowered his eyes, taking the payroll. "Thank you, Doctor, for your trust. I think that you do a good thing tonight." He pressed his cloth bundle into her hands without explanation. "*Ma' as salaamaa*, Doctor," he said, and took his youngest son by the hand. He walked away whispering something to the boy, and neither one of them glanced back.

"*Ma' as salaamaa*," she murmured after them, looking down at the folded material in her hands. It was his good galabaya. Exactly what they needed.

Chapter XIII:
Forth into the World

Scarcely twenty meters out, Valerie felt a twinge of regret and looked back. The tents, the water tank, and the gaping hole of the tomb entrance seemed forlorn in the moonlight.

Something caught her eye. A figure had stepped out from behind the smaller tent. Someone in a dark robe, with loose uncovered hair that fell to the narrow shoulders.

A woman in the camp? Impossible. There were no other women, unless one had followed her out there. Her heart began to pound. "Wait!" Valerie called out suddenly. "I have to go back. Just for a moment."

She turned her camel and nudged it back toward the camp. The figure was no longer visible, but Valerie circled the tent once and then a second time, obsessed.

"Dr. Foret!" The figure stepped out from inside the tent. "I was looking for you."

"Oh! Hamada. I didn't recognize you." She laughed nervously. "I've never seen you without your turban. Why were you looking for me?"

"The men are worried. We do not want to work for this man Vanderschmitt."

"I am sorry, Hamada. I cannot help that he is in charge now. What will happen now I do not know. Please tell the men how much I value their work. I have left money with Ahmed to pay everyone well. I will tell the world your names."

She turned the camel again, first angry at herself, then despondent, and heard the voice behind her say, "*Inshaa'Allah*, Dr. Foret."

She tapped her camel on the flank and caught up with Derek, who had advanced some distance into the desert. Wisely, it appeared.

As she neared, she saw the faintly iridescent form of the Ka hovering beside him and the Ba perched on the camel's rump behind him. Derek sat awkwardly, holding the rigid mummy diagonally in front of him. Ahmed's galabaya hung down over its gauze-wrapped feet, and a *khaffia* covered the masked head. A relief that the foreman was so tall.

"What was that all about?"

"Nothing. Just another of the workers I had to talk to." She changed the subject. "But I see you two are getting to know each other."

"Well, he hasn't said anything yet. He just keeps smiling at me."

The apparition apparently noted the arrival of his interpreter and began to speak. "May you be light of heart, Ayemderak. Whither do you come?"

Valerie dutifully translated as both camels began the journey eastward.

"He's asking where I'm from? That's cute. Just like in a bar." Derek looked over the shoulder of the mummy and said, "From very far away." He shifted on his saddle, trying to find a comfortable position. "Weird, to talk to you this way. I mean over there when I'm holding you dead in my arms right here."

Valerie intermediated between the two, faltering at first, then with greater ease, as long as they spoke of simple things. *And still,* she thought to herself in the silences, *I'm having a conversation with the dead. I'll wake up from this dream soon.*

"Yes, I have become all my parts," Rekemheb explained. "Here I am mummy, Ka, and Ba. In the Duat dwell also my light and my shade and my immortal name. But what of you? Do you have wife and child?"

"Uh. Well, not a wife. Not exactly. But a woman, a dear friend, carries my child." Derek kept his face slightly behind the head of the mummy.

Uncanny, how similar they were, Valerie thought. If the Ka was real, perhaps the kinship claim was true. Impossible. All of it. More likely she was dreaming and lacked the imagination to keep them separate.

"Ah, the Child! Of course." The Ka of Rekemheb clapped his hands. "The birth prophesied by the god. And what is the name of the woman who bears the next son in our line?"

Valerie translated numbly.

"*Our* line?" Derek laughed. "Uh, well, I suppose it is. Her name is Auset."

The Ka raised his hands skyward. "Praise to Ra and Hathor! No woman could be better chosen."

Valerie explained. "He's excited because Auset is one of the names of the Mother Goddess also known as Isis and as Hathor. She's sort of the Egyptian Virgin Mary, without the virgin part."

"Ah, well, that fits Auset," Derek quipped. "But that reminds me. I've got to try to contact her. She's our only hope right now." He extracted a small cell phone from his pocket. "Can you use these things way out here?"

Valerie shrugged. "I think the Egyptian military uses them, or something like them. Give it a try."

With the dexterity of one who did it frequently, Derek dialed a number with his thumb and held the tiny object to his ear. "Ah, ringing. Guess it works," he said, nonchalant, as if he were ordering takeout.

Rekemheb watched intently as Derek spoke into the small dark phone and repeated, "Auset, Auset."

"Does he pray to the goddess through the little stone?"

"Stone? Oh! The cell phone. No, he does not pray. He talks to her who is far away, and she replies. It is not the goddess, but the woman named after her. Well, I will explain later."

She turned to Derek, who had tucked away the cell phone. "That was quick. What did she say?"

"She'll meet us tomorrow in Giza, at the camel stable with a car. She's invited us for lunch."

"Lunch? You talked about lunch? Did you mention Rekemheb? Did you tell her that we need to hide a mummy in her flat?"

"Uh, I told her to come in a company truck, there'd be an…uh… artifact. I just thought that after she's seen Rekemheb's Ka and the little Ba thing, we won't have to convince her that we aren't crazy. Once she sees he's real, she *has* to agree to the rest."

Rekemheb looked back and forth at the two speaking English and seemed to accept that not everything would be explained to him. When they paused in their conversation with each other, he spoke in his clipped, Flemish-sounding Egyptian. "Ayemderak, my grandchild. How do you serve the gods? What is your profession?"

Valerie mediated again.

"I sing," Derek said simply.

"Sing?" The priest repeated the word in English and wafted closer to his descendant. "In the temple, as I do? You too are a lector priest?"

"Yes, I have sung in temples and churches. But not like a lector priest, whatever that is. I usually perform on a stage, before people. We call that a concert."

Valerie translated but the Ka still looked perplexed. "You sing to amuse the people? Like a slave?"

"Oh no, a concert is a like a….a big ceremony, but without God. A singer is greatly valued in this time. Sometimes he wins glory."

The priest seemed relieved.

Derek shifted the mummy so that its head rested on his other shoulder. "There is something I must ask you, Rekemheb. It has been troubling me since I saw you in the tomb. Please do not laugh at me. And not you either, Valerie. I have to know this."

"Know what?" she said. "So ask already."

He exhaled slowly. "Rekemheb…is Jesus there in the afterlife?"

"Ah, yes." Valerie shrugged. "An important question for a Christian. Well, for everyone, actually."

The Ka frowned. "Djesesh? I do not know this name. Perhaps he is in the Duat of the Greeks or the Persians."

"You mean there's more than one hereafter?"

Valerie repeated the question in Egyptian.

The Ka nodded. "Yes, many."

Derek looked up at the stars. "All the religions are true? How can that be? That's impossible. Who's in charge? Which is the real God, the one that looks after us?"

Valerie transmitted the question.

The ancient priest puzzled for a moment, obviously trying to make sense of the question. Finally he spoke. "The gods do not look after us. It is we who look after them."

Ahead of them a three-quarter moon was rising on the horizon, illuminating the travelers bluely. From somewhere overhead a falcon shrieked.

"Horus greets you," the Ka of Rekemheb said cheerfully.

Chapter XIV:
Blessed among Women

There it is." Valerie pointed down a dirt road between broken mud-brick walls. "The stable where we met Ahmed two nights ago. Remember?"

The camels lumbered down the last stretch of dry road to the stable. At the side of the building, she dismounted and drew back the threadbare rug that covered the entrance. The odor of the stabled beasts was strong, yet as Derek came through the doorway, bowing low under the lintel, the half dozen other camels honked in protest at the smell of the mummy.

"What should we do with Rekemheb? We can't let the stable boys see him."

"There's an empty feeding trough over there. We can put him there." She reached up and carefully slid the mummy out of Derek's arms. With more rush than reverence, she laid it in the trough and covered it with a scattering of fresh straw.

"Ahlan wa sahlan, Doktor." A boy of about fifteen came in. The reeking stain on the bottom of his galabaya suggested he had just cleared the night's manure from the stalls.

"Rajab, hello. Look, we'd like to be left alone for a while—to talk business. Can you come back later for the saddles? When we're gone?"

"No broblem," he said cheerfully in Egyptian English, using the phrase every child in Egypt could say but not pronounce. Valerie pressed a few bills into his hand and urged him to the doorway.

Derek looked at his watch. "Eleven forty-five. We're early. Damn." He grimaced, breathing through his mouth. "I sure hope she arrives soon. This place is way more than my nose can handle."

Valerie leaned against the stable wall and fanned away flies with her fedora. “Is Auset usually late?”

“I don’t know.” He shrugged. “I was always later.”

Scarcely had he spoken when a car horn sounded, and they went together to the door of the stable. Ahead of her, Derek drew back the rug.

Over his shoulder, Valerie saw what had just pulled into the stable yard. “Ah, *merde.* What the hell are we going to do now?”

Dust still settled around a blue pickup truck, its rear section uncovered and empty. Al Fakhir, Inc. Exporters was painted on the side in Arabic and English. Auset, visibly pregnant in spite of the loose abaya that covered her, came around from the passenger side of the cab. A moment later the door on the driver’s side opened, and a bulky Arab in western clothing emerged.

“You didn’t mention she had a friend,” Valerie said through closed teeth.

Derek sighed. “I had no idea.”

Auset surveyed the stable surroundings as she walked toward them. She brushed imaginary dirt from her hands, although she had not touched anything. “So, what’s going on here?”

No one answered.

“Oh, sorry. Derek. This is Yussif, our company driver.” She looked back at the man who stood just behind her. “Yussif, this is Derek, the father of my child.”

The swarthy Arab scowled. He was taller and beefier than most Egyptians, and his ample girth would have been better served by a galabaya than by the trousers he wore. The three-day beard growth that Arab men favored emphasized the ferocity of his expression. Auset’s two men nodded coolly at one another, declining to shake hands.

“And this is Valerie, Derek’s archaeologist friend I told you about,” she went on, ignoring the bristling males. Before Valerie could speak, Auset turned back to Derek and demanded, “Now where is this ‘extraordinary artifact’ of yours, and why did you drag us way out here to get it?”

Derek pressed his lips together for a moment, then nodded faintly, as if agreeing with himself. “Auset. You seem to be a very levelheaded person. I think you can recognize a morally complicated situation when you see one. Am I right?”

Auset narrowed her eyes. "What's going on, Derek? What have you done?"

He raised a hand. "No, no. It's nothing that we've done. Well, it is sort of something we've done. Or rather were compelled to do. It's *very* complicated. You must promise to reserve judgment until you know all the facts."

Auset's voice dropped in temperature. "Perhaps you could start by telling us what the hell you're talking about?"

Derek's eyes darted toward the brutal-looking truck driver, and he hesitated.

Auset saw the direction of his glance. "Look, whatever is going on here, if it involves me, it also involves Yussif. So talk." The driver did not comment, but crossed his arms over his large chest.

Derek exhaled, as if he had been holding his breath. "All right. I guess it's truth time. Come in here, both of you. I want you to meet Rekemheb."

"Who?"

The two Egyptians followed him into the last stall of the stable, where the feeding trough hung. Derek lifted away handfuls of straw until a black painted mask smiled up at him. Then he brushed away debris from the rest of the upper body.

Auset put her fists where her waist would have been. "A mummy? Is this a joke?"

"No. I mean, yes, it's a mummy, not a joke. It's my ancestor, I think."

She pressed two fingertips between her eyebrows. "You stole a mummy that you think you're related to?"

Valerie came to her friend's defense. "We didn't steal a mummy. We rescued it. And it isn't *it*. It's *him*." She pointed over Auset's shoulder.

The two Egyptians turned around and flinched simultaneously. Auset took a step backward, and the burly Arab put his arm around her without touching her. Both stared awestruck. In the corner of the stall stood the radiant figure of the Ka.

"Auset, darling." Derek reached out one hand to the woman and the other toward the apparition. "I'd like you to meet my ancient ancestor, Rekemheb, Lector Priest of Hathor in the reign of Pharaoh Meremptah."

The two modern Egyptians said nothing.

"Yes, I know." Valerie's voice was sympathetic. "We reacted the same way. It takes a while to grasp that he's real. It sort of messes up everything else you believe."

His face still registering fear, the husky driver stepped forward and reached out a hand toward the enigma. When his fingers penetrated the surface of the glowing chest he flinched again. "Is true, then. This man is not…like us. If this is one of the dead, God forbid, what does he seek among the living?"

"Well, that's the big question, isn't it? And we've been working on that ourselves. But I'll ask him again in your words," Valerie said, and spoke to the Ka.

"It was the living who came to me, as it was written," the apparition replied.

Valerie translated again and then she added, "He means me, of course. I took him from his tomb. But the bizarre thing is that he was waiting for us."

Auset's scowl increased. "Look, I don't know what's going on here, Derek. If you and your theater friends are pulling a prank, I'm the wrong person for it." She rested a hand on her swelling abdomen. "And this is certainly the wrong time."

Derek and Valerie looked at one another, perturbed. Plan A had failed and they had no Plan B. Derek raised both hands. "Auset, please. Just listen for a minute."

"Auset." A soothing voice repeated the name with a strange accent. All eyes turned again to the apparition, who bowed slightly from the waist. "Great Lady, Justified by Ra, most beloved of the Goddess. Surely, my grandchild has chosen the noblest of women to be the temple of the future."

Valerie translated, carefully selecting superlatives.

Auset looked at the Ka and then at Valerie. "Is he saying that or are you making it up to placate me?"

"No, I swear it is him. Myself, I don't think you're all that noble."

The Ka took a step forward and knelt before Auset, his hand pressed upon his naked chest, his priestly side lock dangling handsomely. "Auset, whose very name is that of the Great Mother, you have been chosen from among all women. All of heaven honors you with this child

and asks only that you shelter the mortal substance of his ancestor."

Valerie repeated the speech, emphasizing the word "honor." Could flattery succeed where reason failed?

Auset looked back and forth between Derek and Valerie. "This can't be real."

"Unfortunately, he seems to be," Valerie replied soothingly. "And we can explain him, but we need to take him someplace safe while we do. We *cannot* stay here."

Auset shook her head. "This is just too weird. Yussif, am I going crazy here?"

The Arab, who had not taken his eyes from the priest, expressed no opinion.

Finally Auset threw up her hands. "This place smells like the toilets of hell. If we're going to discuss that thing, you'll have to bring it out to the truck." She spun around toward the door. "I'm never going to get the smell of camel poop out of my clothes!"

"Wait," Valerie called, stretching out the one-syllable word. "There's another…uh…thing you must see first."

Auset stopped suddenly and closed her eyes. "There's more?"

Derek cleared his throat, clasped his hands, rubbed his palms nervously. "Yes. One more thing. But it's no big deal, really. It's just that feathered creature perched on the edge of the stall. Right over there."

Auset turned and glanced carelessly toward where he pointed. "Is that all? It's just a parr…Oh, my God! It's got a little human head!" She recoiled. "It's grotesque!"

"No, look! It's Rekemheb's face, don't you see?" Derek was talking faster now. "It's his Ba. His soul. It goes along with the Ka, sort of. You just have to get used to it."

Auset leaned forward again to inspect the creature, which half opened its wings and then shivered, rocking back and forth on wrinkled claws. "Ba?" she asked weakly.

Valerie took over the argument. "It's rather like a messenger and…well, it flies around. I always thought of it as a variation on the soul myth, but well, obviously, it's not. A myth, I mean."

Auset had lowered her eyes again. "Is there anything else?" she asked very quietly. "Any other demon, jinni, ghoul, or succubus I should know about?"

"No." Derek shrugged slightly. "That's it, basically."

"Well then…" Auset enunciated carefully, as if to a deranged child. "Ask all your new friends to come along to the truck," she said, and walked out of the stable.

Outside, the truck had baked to a dangerous heat in the noonday sun. Gingerly, Derek and Valerie laid the mummy in the center of the flat bed of the truck and climbed up alongside of it. They crouched, clutching their knees, taking care not to let their skin touch the blistering hot metal. As the truck pulled away from the stable, sunlight struck some shiny object and reflected onto the side of Valerie's face. She covered it with her hand and found the old wound swollen and suppurating.

The Ka, which sat next to his mummy, looked at her. "The sun disk smites you. Have a care."

Chapter XV:
Widening Conspiracy

The transfer of a long and bulky bundle from an export truck to the third floor at 233 Ahmed Sabri Street attracted no particular attention, and when it was done, the four of them came into the living room with glasses of cool water. Valerie threw herself down on the sofa and covered her eyes with her forearm for a moment, as if to avoid dealing with the impossible for a few minutes longer.

Derek stood in the middle of the room and glanced around. "Oh, I love your decor!" He noted the several bedrooms and the carpeted side room that opened to a balcony. "Sort of Ottoman, but eclectic."

Auset did not reply.

Derek coughed. "Okay, I'll get to the point. Would you be able to put us up for a while? At least until we can…you know…figure things out?"

She sat down heavily across from him. "And what might you be trying to figure out? How to get away with this? I can overlook the fact that you've tracked camel dung over my floor and put a cadaver in my guest room, but stealing a mummy is a felony."

Derek opened both hands, presenting his case once again. "Auset, darling, I've told you. He's not just a mummy. He's the ancestor of our baby!"

"Our baby?" She rolled her eyes. "Oh, please." She leaned back and crossed her legs, a movement that required some concentration. "Be reasonable for a moment, Derek. Surely you realize the danger you're putting us in. We could all go to prison. I don't understand why you had to take this mummy out of its tomb. And those other…things. Where are they, by the way?"

"They stay with the mummy," Valerie contributed weakly. "And those 'other things,' the things you can't account for, are the reason for this whole situation."

Valerie dabbed with her cuff at her sore ear. "Auset, you're doing exactly what I did when I first saw them, refusing to accept the Ka and the Ba as real, reasoning around them like a hallucination which you hope will go away." She rested her forehead in her hand for a moment. "I didn't want to accept them either, but if they are real, we have to protect them. Volker Vanderschmitt, whom you've met, would destroy them."

"They can't be real." Auset struggled to her feet again and lumbered into the kitchen. For several moments, they heard only the sound of running water. Then she came back with a damp washcloth carefully folded.

Valerie took it gratefully and held the cool cloth to her cheek. After a moment, she sighed. "So here we are, with a mummy and two supernatural creatures that are challenging our credulity to the utmost," she said. "How much longer do you think we can pretend they're an illusion?"

Auset sighed. "All right, assuming they are real, what exactly do you propose to do about them?"

"Well, to start, we can try to stay out of jail and salvage my career." Valerie drew the film canisters from her shirt pocket. "We can take these pictures to Antiquities and at least claim that the sarcophagus was empty. Pillaged in antiquity and so forth. No one will be looking for a mummy. That would give us a little breathing space to hide him in some other place."

"I have good friend," a thickly accented voice said.

All heads turned toward Yussif. Valerie had almost forgotten him, the sullen stranger in their midst whose closed and bearded face she could not read. The Arab continued unemotionally. "This man is photographer. I can take film to him right away and tell him is emergency. He can make pictures very fast—for tomorrow." He stood up.

Valerie was reminded again of how big he was. Enormous, an unknown factor, a potential—and serious—problem. Nothing in his eyes or in his manner told her otherwise. "Yes, I suppose that would be…good." Reluctantly, she handed over the canisters of film.

"Yes, it would be good," he said impatiently, dropping them into his trouser pocket. As he went to the door, his eyes darted one more time around the room, lingering for a moment on Auset, and then he left.

Valerie closed the door behind him and turned back to the others. "Auset, I'm sorry. I have to ask you this. Can Yussif be trusted? How well do you know him?"

The Egyptian struggled again to her feet. "I know him better than I know you. He's worked for my father's firm for years. In fact, Yussif is the only one here I do trust. What's your problem with him?" she said over her shoulder as she made her second trip into the kitchen. "Is it because he's a Muslim?"

Valerie looked at the washcloth in her hand. "To be honest, yes. This cut on my face is from Muslim fundamentalists. You know they don't like archaeologists. We glorify the old heathen culture, and we're decadent Westerners. So, on top of all my other problems, I don't want to quarrel with Islam."

"Yussif is not a fundamentalist." Auset came back with a fresh bottle of water. "And he isn't a child, either. He will make up his own mind about Rekemheb. So, for that matter, will I. I think you're exaggerating the religious issue here." She filled Derek's empty glass.

"Not if the Ka is real," Valerie countered.

Derek glowered. "The Ka *is* real."

"So why isn't he here explaining himself? This would be a good time for that." Auset turned around, looking up at the corners of the ceiling. "Can you conjure him up whenever you want?"

Derek followed her glance. "You act like he's some sort of party trick or an annoyance. He's from the hereafter, for God's sake. Why isn't anyone getting that?"

"Whatever." Auset sat down finally. "I don't want to argue any longer. You two have been up all night, and frankly you look like hell. Get some rest and we'll talk about everything later. Derek, you'll have to share the room with the mummy, but I take it that's fine with you." She turned. "Valerie, you can camp out in the little room by the terrace. You don't mind sleeping with just a pillow on a carpet, do you? Good. And for now, let's clean that cut with some disinfectant. At least there's one problem I can fix."

❖

Awakening suddenly, Valerie read her wristwatch by moonlight. *One in the morning. Is that all?* She lay fuzzy headed for a while on her mat by the open terrace door, feeling the evening breeze waft over her. Sleep would not return, so she clicked on the lamp at her elbow.

There they were, next to each other on top of her knapsack, the two artifacts that taunted her. She lifted up the palette box and ran her finger over its golden cap. A priceless object, but why had she been given it? Who was the woman who had almost-kissed her?

The amulet was just as puzzling. She picked it up and turned it restlessly in the light, reading the hieroglyphs for the tenth time. Drill, vulture, owl, child and man, and the triple stroke: the word "generation." Then whip, loaf, and curl: "100th." The inscription stirred nothing in her memory of spells and incantations. And the text at the bottom was beyond her altogether. *Rekhi renusen. Djedi medjatsen.* She could pronounce it from the phonetic hieroglyphs but knew no such words, not even in Old Kingdom Egyptian. A pity the philologists would never see the amulet before it went back to its owner.

And what was Rekemheb, the phantom that kept appearing, against all law and logic? Derek had been able to accept him immediately, but then the singer had always had one foot in the fantastic. He would have adapted to a leprechaun or saint, Martian or ghost. But she was not an opera singer; she was a scientist, she reminded herself yet again, and could not adapt, in spite of the arguments she kept making to Auset.

A pettier emotion that had been nibbling at the edge of her consciousness since they had fled the excavation suddenly surfaced. Resentment. She realized she was annoyed, even jealous, that Rekemheb showed no interest in her. After nearly a year of labor, her spectacular discovery had suddenly become Derek's affair. Her life's work was at risk for some inexplicable event that belonged to him and not to her. She loved him like a brother, but she did not care to be a mere actor in someone else's fate.

The ivory palette, at least, was hers, though its relevance was obscure. "It is for you alone," the woman had said, then almost-kissed her. Where had she gone, the woman who had promised to "follow"? She could almost smell the fragrant hair again, almost feel the provocative pressure of the stranger's body leaning lightly against her.

She lay back, tucking her right forearm under her head, and stared up at the ceiling. It was time to visit Jameela again.

Chapter XVI:
Food for the Spirit

The first call to prayer awoke her, as always, and Valerie began the day gratefully with a hot shower. The vigorous scrubbing she gave herself and the sunshine that poured into the bathroom while she toweled herself dry lifted the depression of the night before. The moist, bright air of the bathroom seemed to promise they would find a solution.

When she emerged dressed in nearly clean clothes and squeezing handfuls of her hair in the towel, Derek was slouching by the bathroom door in his boxers. His still-puffy eyes indicated that he too was not yet inclined to conversation. She kissed him quickly on both cheeks, Belgian style, and stepped past him into the kitchen.

Auset was already preparing breakfast. She moved about efficiently in sandals and a blue galabaya, her hair hanging loose down her back. A modern Mary Magdalen, grinding coffee beans.

"I'm sorry if I woke you," Valerie said. "I should have been quieter."

"Oh, no. I always get up early. Hunger, you know. I was about to make breakfast for all of us. You can set the table."

Valerie folded the towel over the back of a chair and opened the glass door to the cupboard. "Hmm. I wonder if we should set a place for the Ka. They eat, you know, according to the mythology."

Auset paused in her work and shook her head. "The Ka? Oh, right. The ghost. I was hoping I'd just been dreaming. But I guess not. Do you suppose he will uh…materialize this morning?"

"Well, I'm a little new at this myself but, supposedly, if you're offering food, he'll appear."

Auset resumed preparations, laying out disks of pita bread. "Well, maybe you could ask him how he likes his eggs."

Valerie chuckled. "That and a few thousand other things."

The door to the bathroom opened and Derek stepped out in a pleasant cloud of steam. Around his hips he had tied a white bath sheet that hung to his ankles. Valerie grinned at the sight of her friend who, but for the absence of a priestly side lock, was suddenly the image of Rekemheb. He came into the kitchen and kissed both women, smelling of soap and toothpaste. "I have to talk to you guys. Something strange happened last night."

"Strange? You don't say!" Auset broke eggs into a bowl.

"No, I mean even stranger than everything else. I was in bed, ready to fall asleep, and Rekemheb came to lie down next to me. I thought, 'Well, that's nice.' But then he touched me with his whole body, and something amazing happened. It was the most powerful, wonderful thing I've ever felt. It was ecstasy, and I had a sort of vision.

"I was a minister, like my stepfather, but instead of a white collar, I wore a linen kilt like Rekemheb's. I was holding his necklace. You know, the one we found on the mummy. All around me there were angels, but they were animals, not people, and they were in a panic because this great ball of fire was coming toward us.

"It shot out a bolt of lightning toward me, so I started singing, I can't remember what. The lightning struck the necklace and everything turned into sparks. They were even coming out of my mouth. I was confused, though. It seemed like I was in heaven, but I couldn't tell what side God was on."

Auset leaned over and watched the flame ignite under a pan. "Isn't a nice Christian boy supposed to know that?"

Derek wrinkled up his face. "There was, well, too much God. I mean, everything was claiming to be God, and I had to save one side from the other."

"Hmm. Sounds to me like a certain opera singer is having delusions of grandeur. All those heroic roles are going to your head," Auset said.

Valerie took silverware from a drawer. "Singing fire, heh? Oookay."

Derek pursed his lips. "I can see I'm not being taken seriously here." Grasping the front of his towel-kilt, he pivoted and returned in

long strides to the guest room.

When the two women were alone again in the kitchen, Auset set down the kettle. "Okay, Valerie. Woman to woman. What's going on here? I promise not to be angry if you tell me it was some kind of trick so I would help you steal a mummy."

"I wish it were. It would be so much easier if it were all a hoax. I wouldn't have to accept that an ancient religion seems to be real. That opens up such a chasm."

Auset clasped her hands in front of her. "Valerie, whatever it is, I am not getting pulled into any religious cult, least of all a primitive one."

"I can assure you I feel the same way. I was tormented by child-hating nuns far too long to ever want religion in my life again." She shook her head. "It's a prison."

"Exactly. I've got religion all around me, and I'm sick of it. My Muslim father and my Jewish mother both come from conservative families, believe it or not. Fortunately, both of them broke away from orthodoxy enough to fall in love with each other. But I probably have relatives on both sides who would gladly stone me to death for getting pregnant by an infidel." She scrambled eggs with vehemence.

"Derek's parents too, I suppose. They're born-again Christians."

"Dogma and politics have become the same thing here. My mother's relatives in Jerusalem are always going on about God's gift of Palestine—all of it—to the Jews. And my father's relatives are equally convinced that the only truth is the Koran. And the killing gets worse and worse. In Egypt, too. I don't know where it will all end."

"Hey, girls. Guess who's coming to dinner." Derek stood in the doorway in clean shirt and tailored pants. A slenderer, bare-chested version stood translucent behind him.

Auset sighed and nudged Valerie with her elbow. "That phantom that we don't believe in? Ask it if it wants breakfast."

Valerie spoke to the apparition. "Rekemheb, will you join us at table?"

The Ka inclined his head decorously. "We have waited long to sit at table in our kinsman's house."

Valerie translated to the others as the two men took their places. The Ba fluttered in behind them, lighting on the back of Rekemheb's

chair.

"Interesting. First he claims my child and then my apartment." Auset walked around the table with the frying pan, ladling yellow-white curds of egg onto each plate.

Rekemheb stared with concentration at his plate. Perched behind him the Ba held the same intense expression on its tiny man face. After a few minutes, the Ka sat back in his chair as if finished dining, and the Ba began to preen his feathers.

Derek looked in disbelief at the untouched plate and then put a forkful of the uneaten egg in his mouth. He grimaced, swallowing reluctantly. "It tastes like…nothing. He ate the flavor!"

Valerie paused in chewing toast. "Ah, that would explain a lot about ancient food offerings."

Auset chuckled. "A man who can eat his cake and still have it. I like that." She stirred her coffee and studied him, seeming to see him for the first time. "Sooo, to what do we owe the pleasure of this… visitation?"

The Ka listened as the question was repeated in Egyptian, folding his hands like a schoolboy on his lap. "The scribe said I should not rest, but be brought forth by a child of my lineage. That the Aton should rise in the west and that, in the hundredth generation, I should witness the Balance and the Book and the bearing of the Child." He smiled down at the swelling between Auset and the breakfast table.

"Well, that's a pretty complicated program. And the 'bearing of the Child,' I take it, is my contribution. Well, I can tell you right now that I am absolutely not—" A knock at the door forestalled the ultimatum. "Oh, that will be Yussif." Auset got up from her chair.

She returned in a moment, and the Arab followed stiffly behind her, carrying a folded newspaper and a manila envelope. He greeted Valerie and Derek, glanced furtively at the glowing Ka and Ba, and sat down at the maximum distance from them. Without introduction, he handed the envelope to Valerie. "I ask my friend to make good ones very large. I hope is okay."

She tore open the envelope and leafed eagerly through the package of photos. "Artifacts…good. Furniture…good. Osiris statue…not too bad. Wall paintings…really good. Oh, look. This is the best." She handed it to Derek.

An earnest young woman stood at a three-quarter angle before the wall of artifacts. Her frayed shirt, its sleeves rolled to the elbow,

revealed the dirt of the day's work. Shoulder-length hair was pulled back carelessly behind her head, and strands of it hung over her ear. Discernible behind the objects was the painting of the Barque of the Sun; a practiced eye could make out the figure of Seth with his hand raised. On the other side of the frame, one end of the sarcophagus could be seen, open and empty.

"This is the one I'll send to Brussels," she said with satisfaction. "This one will bring Misterdoctor Vanderschmitt's hijacking to a screeching halt."

Yussif looked down at his hands on the table. "Maybe not." He slid the newspaper over to her, without glancing up.

"What's this?" Valerie slowly unfolded the *Cairo Times* onto the table.

There were two stories, side by side. The bigger story, four columns wide, grabbed her attention first. Tourists Attacked at Karnak, it read, and she automatically skimmed the first paragraph. A European tour group was set upon by three Sudanese terrorists. Several fatalities among the tourists. Two assassins captured by Luxor security forces; the third escaped.

The story held her interest for a moment, until her eye traveled to the right of the page. In two columns, over the full-faced photograph of Volker Vanderschmitt, a smaller headline declared: Belgian Archaeologist Finds Sealed Tomb.

She exhaled slowly, laying her forehead in her open hand. "He couldn't wait."

"Is more. Please read whole story," Yussif said, his eyes still on the table.

She read on, tapping softly with the knuckles of her tightly clenched fist as she read the details. She read the final paragraph aloud.

"'The Supreme Council of Antiquities Office has called a televised press conference on Tuesday at 11:00 a.m. at which Dr. Vanderschmitt is expected to provide a detailed description and photographs of the discovery.'"

Everyone at the table fell silent while the clock ticked in the living room. Finally Derek reached over and took hold of Valerie's forearm. "Don't do it, please. You're playing with fire."

"*Putain*," she murmured at the newspaper.

Chapter XVII:
A Word too Far

The building on the Sharia Fakhri was as imposing as the name of the organization it housed: The Supreme Council of Antiquities. The long avenue running from the guarded entry gate to the splendid grand portal gave the arriving visitor ample opportunity to appreciate it. Four stories of successive archways in pale stone curving over glass windows suggested enlightened authority that looked back over time.

In the cavernous interior, the four floors were laid out in galleries around a central hall that rose up uninterrupted to the roof. Pale limestone walls and marble balustrades on all sides reminded of both cathedral and fortress and were clearly designed to inspire awe in the beholder.

Valerie was in no mood for awe. She hurried up the marble staircase to the second-floor conference room where a young man in a white uniform checked credentials at the door. With a faculty ID card from the University of Brussels she brazened her way in. Vanderschmitt had just finished his presentation—with drawings only, she noted—and the first question was posed. "When do you expect to find the burial chamber of the tomb?"

Vanderschmitt blanched noticeably as, stepping over video cables, the breathless Valerie joined him at the head of the room. Respectfully, congenially, as if the two colleagues had worked together for years, she turned the microphone toward herself.

"Dr. Vanderschmitt, please forgive me for arriving late. But I will be pleased to answer that question." The chairman placed his hand over the microphone and whispered, "What the hell are you doing?" There was a murmur of confusion in the room.

Ignoring his hand and the pressure of his arm against her shoulder keeping her from the podium, she continued speaking. "Good morning, ladies and gentlemen. I am Dr. Valerie Foret. My colleague Dr. Vanderschmitt has perhaps neglected to mention that I was the archaeologist in charge who made the discovery of the tomb some days before he arrived. I am pleased to announce that in the meantime, while Mr. Vanderschmitt was on his way here, my team has uncovered the burial chamber as well."

There was a buzz of approval; two or three people applauded.

Vanderschmitt's hand slid from the microphone and he stepped back, defeated.

"As we had hoped, the burial chamber also contains a large number of fine funerary objects although, extraordinarily, the sarcophagus was empty."

Hands shot up with questions but Vanderschmitt interrupted, seizing the microphone. "Thank you, Miss Foret, but I have already discussed the artifacts of the tomb and their New Kingdom date."

Valerie walked away from the podium, drawing the cameras and the eyes of the audience along with her. It didn't hurt, she knew, that a young female archaeologist made better copy than a pedantic pear-shaped man. With the voice she was accustomed to using over the clatter of shovels on limestone, she continued her report. "The entrance to the burial chamber was through a mechanically sophisticated device concealed within the tomb wall. This would explain why Dr. Vanderschmitt in his brief visit overlooked it. The importance of this find cannot be overestimated. It not only provides a tomb household comparable to that of Tutankhamun, but also reveals something about New Kingdom technology and engineering."

Vanderschmitt was silent.

Flashbulbs flickered and a voice called out. "How do you account for the empty sarcophagus?"

Valerie continued in the same tone of authority. "The mummy seems to have been removed centuries, if not millennia, ago. While the absence of a mummy is unusual, it is not unheard of and can be attributed to any number of events—dynastic rivalry, local rebellions, etc. In any case, the artifacts, of incalculable value to the Egyptian government and to the world, remain untouched."

A second journalist stood up. "Dr. Foret. Why a single isolated tomb out in the desert and so far from the Valley of the Kings?"

"One ought not to speculate at this early date, but rivalries at court could account for the tomb being set so far away from known tomb areas. Personal enemies could still harm a man after his death by destroying his mummy and thus depriving him of the afterlife."

"Dr. Foret!" another voice called. "Could you identify the tomb owner?"

"Yes. The tomb inscriptions and paintings indicate that the entombed man was a lector priest, that is, a chanting priest—and a Nubian. An unusual combination. More details will of course emerge in the coming weeks. There is a fascinating story here, ladies and gentlemen, right at our fingertips."

Vanderschmitt held a frozen smile.

From the rear of the room a young Saudi in a red *khaffia* stood up. "Given the richness of the tomb, would you say you are this decade's Howard Carter?"

Valerie suppressed a smile of her own. "I would never presume to. However, there is an interesting parallel with Mr. Carter's discovery of Tutankhamun—in that in both cases the initial discovery was made by an Egyptian child. Mr. Carter's water boy Hussein was the first to uncover a stone slab of the tomb, and at my excavation, Ibrim, the son of my foreman Ahmed Nassar, came upon the first limestone step. Unlike Howard Carter, however, I have collaborated with my Egyptian assistant to catalog the artifacts. After all, the treasures belong to the Egyptian people, don't they?"

"And what does that treasure consist of, Dr. Foret?" The Saudi, who looked familiar, seemed to enjoy holding the floor.

"Now we're getting to the point, aren't we?" Valerie held up the manila envelope she had brought in with her. "I have prepared a list of the objects discovered in the burial chamber as well as a series of photographs of both rooms. I will of course leave these at the disposal of the Council of Antiquities along with the names of the Egyptian workers who were indispensable to the discovery." She walked back to the head of the table where the President of the Council sat.

Fuad al Rashidi was a man of about sixty, rotund and balding. A face that probably had once been handsome had become fleshy from age and too many state dinners. No wonder his wife had lost interest in him, she thought.

"Dr. Rashidi. These photographs give you a rough idea of the contents. In addition to the usual funerary items, there is also a splendid

golden sun barque." She handed over the pile of photographs. While Rashidi leafed through them with little grunts of admiration, Valerie allowed herself to glance over his shoulder. The president's wife sat demurely in a cushioned chair against the far wall. Glancing back at her, Madame Rashidi smiled and fondled the end of a necklace that hung over her discreetly covered bosom.

Valerie studied the Saudi journalist who had just spoken and sat down again. Under the precisely trimmed goatee the man's face was youthful and smooth, and it bore a remarkable resemblance to her own.

President Rashidi stood up and took the microphone. "The Council wishes to congratulate Dr. Vanderschmitt and Dr. Flora on their discovery. While the University of Brussels has had our full support in this undertaking, I am pleased to hear our friends confirm that antiquities remain always and ever under the control of the Egyptian people. My position is well known, and the Egyptian government will vigorously enforce this policy so that the pillaging of the previous century will never be repeated." He paused for a moment to look at the top picture of the golden barque.

"Given the obvious value of the newly discovered objects, my office will immediately dispatch a team to secure them. To you journalists I would say feel free to publicize, through this office, the progress of the excavation, but make clear to the world that security will be extremely tight. Access to the site will be permitted only with governmental authority, and any effort to remove objects of any sort will be severely dealt with."

He turned to where Vanderschmitt had been standing and, briefly befuddled at not seeing him, turned back to Valerie. "Once again, Dr. Flora, congratulations." He held out his hand.

"Uh, that's 'Foret.' But I thank you, President Rashidi." She accepted the handshake. "I am sure that Mr. Vanderschmitt would be glad to accompany your team to the excavation site. I myself must return to Brussels for a few days. A…family emergency. But I should be able to return shortly, and I look forward to working with your team. It is my opinion that there are no additional chambers to be discovered, although Mr. Vanderschmitt may wish to determine that himself."

She looked around for Vanderschmitt, but he seemed to no longer be in the room. No one remarked on his absence, and the entire audience

of journalists and governmental officials clustered around the table where the photographs were spread out. She edged through the crowd and eased out of the room.

Just outside the door, she felt a sleek hand take hold of her upper arm, and she looked over her shoulder. "Jameela." A pleasurable warmth spread through her.

"Congratulations!" The president's wife leaned over and placed an ambiguous kiss at the edge of her lips. "But you were here just three days ago. Why didn't you tell me you had found something? And now even your colleague has left without explanation. What was going on in there?"

Madame Rashidi's lips were lipsticked with precision in the color of feverish, swollen flesh. Valerie couldn't take her eyes from them. "Mr. Vanderschmitt's arrival was unexpected. A complication…that I must still deal with." Valerie glanced around, still saw no sign of him. "I have urgent business, but I should be back in a few days, a week at the most. Can I call you?" she added in a quiet voice.

The beautiful lips came together in an *O* of regret. "I am sorry, Valerie. I would so love to celebrate with you, but I am rather tied up right now. You understand." Jameela's glance slipped sideways in the general direction of the conference room where the Saudi journalist was visible.

"Yes, yes. I understand. Of course." Valerie raised a hand in agreement.

At that moment, Fuad Rashidi summoned his wife back into the conference room, and Valerie stood in the empty corridor. It was a good moment to leave. She strode toward the central hall and reached the top of the wide marble staircase.

A familiar white suit blocked her way. Volker Vanderschmitt's face was tight with rage, and his normally thick lips were compressed to pale, thin lines. "What the hell did you think you were doing in there?"

"Doing? You mean, taking credit for the discovery which I and my team had in fact made?" She walked around him and took the first step down.

Hovering over her, he said, "You forget that you and 'your team' work for me. This little mutiny will have repercussions, I can assure you."

"You are threatening me?"

"You cannot remain part of an institution whose authority you defy. The proposal was to dig at Qaret el Dahr, but on your own initiative and without permission you moved the excavation. Such behavior is not professional."

"Discovering the richest tomb in eighty years sounds pretty professional to me. It seems to me that the problem is not my failure, but my success." She took the next step down.

Abruptly he seized her by the arm and spun her back around to face him. "Your success?" His eyes narrowed. "Success is earned, not stumbled upon. You flounce in expecting washing facilities and security while you blunder about, and now when you get lucky, you want sole credit." He snapped his fingers loudly. "You demand your little rights, then bypass all authority. Well, I am the authority here, and you will not bypass me. I have had it with your sort."

She shook her arm free of his grasp. "*My* sort? So this has nothing to do with the excavation, and everything to do with me. A woman has invaded the wilderness of manly men and taken away the mystery. And the prize."

His glance traveled from her face over her canvas jacket and down her field trousers to her boots. "Dressing like a man does not make you one. And stumbling upon a find does not make you a scientist. You are unnatural and a corruption of the profession."

"How charmingly obsolete you are. Claiming to know what is natural and unnatural. Technology is unnatural; so are clothing and medicine. Civilization itself is 'against' nature. Your biblical argument is pathetic and you are pathetic."

His hand shot out suddenly and cracked against the side of her face.

Astonishment and sudden bright pain radiated through her head. For the second time in three days, she held her hand over a ringing wounded ear.

"Thought you were clever, didn't you, sabotaging my film?" he said, unperturbed. "But your own photographs have exposed you."

"What are you talking about?" She tried to conceal her confusion.

"Canopic jars, Miss Foret. You forgot about them. Where there are canopic jars, there is a mummy, and grave robbers take gold, not cadavers." He took a step down and stood eye to eye with her. His long

horse face softened to a smile. "You have the mummy, don't you? And I will bet you have even been foolish enough to bring it back to Cairo." He shook his head slowly.

"Oh, Miss Foret. I have found you out. I don't know your reasons for this folly, but those admiring reporters inside will have to change their headlines now, won't they? And President Rashidi will have his men on you in a minute."

Her mind reeled, mixing rage and fear. "You can go to hell," was all she could manage. She spun away and hurried down the rest of the staircase, feeling his glare like a spear aimed at her back.

He called down the stairs after her. "It's over, Miss Foret. As an archaeologist, you are finished. And shortly I will have you in jail."

She pushed open the door to the street into the blinding heat of the Cairo afternoon, wondering if he would pursue her. He had a reason now and the force of the state behind him. The professional duel had escalated into open warfare.

Chapter XVIII:
Memento Mori

Her ear rang. Madness. Sheer madness to provoke him that way when so much was at stake. What had she been thinking? She had imagined exposure would let her snatch the prize back from him. But it had just made things worse. Vastly worse. And now she had endangered all the others too.

She hurried down the street, indifferent to the crowds that brushed her, the noise and choking air of traffic. She searched her memory to recall if Vanderschmitt would have any way to trace her to her friends. No, he had seen Auset at El Fishawy that one time, but her last name was never mentioned. He had met Derek, but could not connect him to Auset. Yes, the two of them—and the mummy—were safe as long as she did not lead Vanderschmitt back to the apartment.

She quickened her pace until she was almost running, directionless. Where could she go now? Who could help her out of the pit into which she had jumped?

Sammad. Of course. Sammad knew how to get in or out of anything. She looked around and realized she had no idea where she was. No matter.

She flagged down a black-and-white taxi. "Midan Al Hussein," she said, leaning back in the dilapidated seat, breathing heavily. Her head was throbbing. In a few minutes they were at Hussein Square, where she hurried across the pass over the highway into the shabby butcher's souq where tourists were a rarity. In the afternoon heat, the animal odors were pungent, and she winced as she passed the chicken cages piled up just before the cloth-sellers' market.

There it was, at the bend in the alley, one of half a dozen anonymous tiny cafés in the local souq. A young man stood behind

a tiny counter near the brick oven where charcoal smoldered, sipping tea from a glass. He stared toward the far corner, where a television on a high shelf broadcast an Egyptian soap opera at great volume. In spite of the heat, all four tables were populated with men sipping coffee and puffing *sheesha*. Apple-sweet tobacco smoke enveloped her as she stepped through the doorway. "*As salaamu 'alaykum*, Khalil," she said hurriedly. "Is Sammad here today?"

"Yes, miss. In the back. Go on in." His glance sprang back to the television screen, where young lovers quarreled intensely.

She pushed aside the heavy curtain to the rear and stood for a moment, letting her sun-blinded eyes adjust to the darkness.

"Good afternoon, Dr. Foret," a hoarse voice said. The blurry form of a short, paunchy man in a dark galabaya took on clarity. He had a strong presence by virtue of his girth, and his prominent nose, which on a tall man would have been conspicuous, approached the grotesque. It always made her think of a vulture.

"Have you got a few minutes for me, Sammad? I have a business proposition for you."

"Of course, Doctor. Here, sit down." He motioned to the closest of the dozen tables that ringed the room of his "nightclub" and then sat down in front of her with his business smile. Without commenting on her need for it, he took a slightly rumpled handkerchief from his side pocket and offered it to her.

"Thank you, Sammad." She held it to the thin trickle of blood that had formed in front of her ear. "I'll get to the point. I need something smuggled out of Egypt. Something large."

"Smuggled out?" He tapped a pudgy finger on the wooden table. "We are better at 'in' than 'out,' but it can be arranged. How large? A suitcase? A refrigerator? An automobile?" He lit a cigarette, an American cigarette, she noticed. Presumably his own merchandise.

"A mummy."

"*Inti magnoona*?!" His cigarette hand went up in the air. "Do you know what you are asking? Antiquities has inspectors everywhere. No, no. The shape is too difficult to conceal."

"Sammad. You know I'll pay whatever it costs."

His eyelids lowered, covering his instant calculations, and he inhaled again from his cigarette. "Where would you want it shipped, assuming we could manage it?"

"New York. It would have to be New York."

"Oh, perfect. Why don't you simply ask for the head of the Sphinx?"

"I'm desperate, Sammad. Can you do it? I can't pay everything up front. I'll have to do it in installments. But you know you can trust me."

"Do I understand you correctly? You want me to transport an impossible object to an impossible place, and you want me to do it without any money. Dr. Foret, I think you are too used to getting your way in the souq."

"It's an emergency, Sammad. A lot is at stake. I can't explain now, but…"

The businessman suddenly looked past her at the doorway she had come through, and she turned to see what distracted him.

Khalil stood there, holding the curtain closed behind him. "Effendi, the police are here, with a foreigner. They are looking for you, Doctor." His eyes darted toward her and then darted away.

"Damn. That didn't take long." Valerie stood up. "How can I get out?"

With a smooth matter-of-factness, as if hiding clients from the police was a frequent and unavoidable occurrence in his line of business, Sammad tilted his head toward the rear. "Over there. Through the kitchen. Tell the cook you have to go to the carpet shop." With practiced ease, he slid out from behind the table, reignited his business smile, and waited until she was at the door before pulling back the curtain.

Valerie closed the flimsy wooden panel that functioned as a door and ran along a corridor to the kitchen.

A hirsute man stood at a table cutting up a joint of lamb into cubes, a stubby cigarette between his lips. The long ash broke off as he raised his head.

"Sammad said you could show me to the carpet shop," she said breathlessly.

"Carpet shop? Yes. This way." Setting aside his carving knife, he went around the table to the wall. With a single vigorous tug, he pulled back a cabinet set on tiny wheels and revealed an opening in the wall, about a meter high. She scrambled through and felt the cabinet roll back behind her, as muffled voices, sudden and angry, sounded in the

kitchen.

Directly in front of her, a narrow wooden staircase, scarcely more than a ladder, was hammered into place between the two walls. She clambered up the steps to a wide second-story court where women and girls were washing carpets. They glanced up only briefly as she shot up in their midst. One of them, a crone enveloped in chador, pointed a black-draped arm toward cotton bales piled on the opposite side.

"*Shukran.*" Valerie staggered toward the bales, pivoting behind them to an opening identical to the one from which she had emerged. She went down the second ladder in leaps and slipped along the wall of another court, behind a row of drying carpets. At the end, the gate to the street was mercifully open.

She emerged on the wide Sharia el Muizz as, with almost comical precision, a city bus stopped in front of her in the middle of the street. She plunged into the traffic around screeching cars and jumped onto the bus seconds before it moved into the intersection.

Diesel fumes, cigarette smoke, and the smell of oily hair assailed her, and she tried to bury herself in the crowd of passengers. But a dozen sets of eyes stared at her, the men disapprovingly, the women, their faces half-covered by hijab, more discreetly. All the faces said the same thing: what are you doing here?

What the hell *was* she doing? And where the hell was she going? She inhaled deeply, dry mouthed. Her head ached.

Two men stood on the bus steps hanging onto the top of where the door once had been. Between their chests she caught glimpses of the thoroughfare. The bus rumbled past mosque, archway, and madrassa, and each time it stopped more people climbed in, packing ever more tightly around her. The hot bodies breathing the scarce air seemed the embodiment of her fear. Even standing still, she felt her heart pounding, and she was suddenly desperately thirsty.

"*Arafa*," the driver called out finally, and Valerie realized where they had come. She was swept along with the crowd oozing from the bus and kept her eyes on her feet to avoid being stepped on. Finally in the light, she looked up at the medieval gateway to the great southern necropolis, Cairo's city of the dead.

She made a wide circle around the bus to see if any government vehicles had followed. The several dark cars outside the cemetery seemed innocent enough, but she could not be sure. She followed the other passengers as they dispersed along the dusty paths and alleys of

the necropolis. Cairo's main burial site for over a thousand years, she knew, had also become Cairo's most notorious slum, housing thousands of the poor in its labyrinthine paths. Would the authorities follow her here?

Her eyes burned, for she looked westward toward the late-afternoon sun. Chiseled dark against it was a landscape of mausoleums and tombs punctuated by obelisks and minarets. Some were miniature palaces with their own minarets, others simple stone mastabas. On the poorer side, still others were simple mud-brick domes, like bread ovens.

The thought of ovens reminded her of her parched throat. "*Minfadlak*, where can I find water?" she called to a man who walked just ahead of her.

He turned partway around and pressed his lips together, in the midst of a dense black beard. "Go away. You do not belong here."

Valerie stopped, rebuffed, and watched him stride on until a woman and a child came out to greet him. On both sides, other figures emerged like phantoms from the tombs to meet the arriving men. Drawing fingertips across dry lips, Valerie realized how she must look to them, foreign and intrusive. She could not think of what to do.

Then, just in front of her, a figure emerged from a mortuary. Covered in black, like death itself, a woman came to the path and stopped. She turned around, facing her, and seemed to wait. Valerie walked toward her. "*Masaa'il kheer*. Please, is there water here? I need water."

A loose veil covered the woman's head like a hood and, silhouetted against the low afternoon sun, her features were indiscernible. She leaned on a stick, but when she spoke, her voice was robust. "Not here. Our Bishr brings it from a long way. But there is tea. Bishr!" she called out with sudden authority.

At the sound of his name, a small grotesque man came from behind the wall, wiping his hands on baggy pants. A bandy-legged dwarf, his lionlike face surrounded by an unbroken line of hair and beard, panted from the exertion of walking. The woman raised one arm to shoo him back. "Bishr, tell Meskhenet to make more tea. We will have a guest."

The dwarf stopped in his tracks, wiped his hands again, and retreated, rocking back and forth, into the complex.

"Oh, thank you. Tea would be very good." Valerie's voice was hoarse.

"This way," the woman said, and went ahead of her toward a stone pathway leading to an inner court. While behind them the sky still held a pale pink light, inside the mausoleum court it was already dark. The dwarf was lighting a kerosene lantern.

Valerie's eyes were drawn first to the western end of the court where an elaborately carved stone mastaba lay. At the other, under a high archway, a thin, white-haired man sat on the remnants of a rug. "My name is Nira," the woman finally said, "and this is Jehut."

The old man greeted his guest with the solemn courtesy of a caliph and waved her over to him. In front of him, a young girl squatted over a charcoal stove on which a kettle of water steamed. "Meskhenet," the hostess said. "And this is Bishr."

Meskhenet looked up briefly and then returned to pouring boiling water into a copper carafe. The dwarf Bishr waddled over to the old man and dropped down awkwardly next to him. He breathed with obvious difficulty, resting his tongue on his lower jaw like a dog. Then he leaned over to move the lantern nearer to the stove and sat up, placing his stumpy hands on his knees.

Together, the two objects gave off heat and light, and the group sat in a circle as if around a hearth. A bizarre family, Valerie thought, if indeed they were one. The girl could have been a grandchild. As for the dwarf, it was impossible to tell if he was a handicapped offspring of the couple or a wretched creature they had adopted into their household. She wondered how the four of them managed to survive.

Valerie accepted a glass of scalding tea and waited with concentrated patience for it to cool. She licked dry lips. "My name is Valerie, Effendi. I thank you for inviting me into your home." She looked across the court toward a limestone arcade carved with calligraphy. Under the arcade, she could see a sleeping room where pallets had been laid out and baskets held folded clothing or linen.

The patriarch glanced at where she looked. "Here men unfold their carpets next to the bones of sultans and caliphs from every age, and their children play between the tombs."

Valerie sipped the steaming tea, astonished at the refinement of the old man's speech. Like a museum guide or professor of history. How did such a person end up squatting on a rug in a cemetery?

"Yes. It is both the richest and the poorest part of Cairo, isn't it? But who is this resident here?" She pointed toward the sarcophagus at

the lower end of the court. "With whom do you share your home?"

Jehut set aside his tea. "This is the house of Emir Husaam al Noori. He was killed, so the story goes, in the destruction of Jerusalem by the Crusaders. Presumably by one of your Christian ancestors." He gestured toward the sleeping room. "His story lies within. A volume of most beautiful writing."

"Ah, then it is Husaam al Noori whom I should thank for sheltering me in his house," she said lightly.

Jehut smiled, pressing his fingertips together. "No, my dear. This tomb bears only the story of the Emir, not his substance." He looked up at the calligraphed arcade. "This empty monument was created by his scribe and companion, Sharif al Kitab, who is resident, or at least a part of him, in a modest tomb in the rear. His head lies there, and we do not disturb it, although the stone of his sarcophagus is broken." He signaled Meskhenet to offer the guest some of the pita that had been toasting over the charcoal.

"In effect, you are the guest of a scribe."

Valerie took the smallest piece. "A nice way to put it. As a scientist, I do quite a bit of writing myself. Studies, reports, articles. I don't know if that would make me a scribe."

Jehut nodded. "A fine profession."

"I suppose." She glanced toward Nira, who sat on her left. The woman's face was still obscured, and Valerie wondered briefly if it would be impolite to move the lantern closer.

The old man held up something long and thin, like a marsh reed. "Writing conquers time and the death of men. An idea once written down by the ancestor is thought out to its conclusion by his remote descendant, though it be centuries later."

The tea was finally cool enough for her to drink in gulps, and she slaked her thirst. A wave of relief passed through her. "Um, I don't think there's much conquest in my writing. I just tell people about Egypt."

Nira leaned forward to drop a few crumbs into the coals, and the mysterious face was briefly illuminated. It was not so much beautiful, Valerie saw, as…compelling. A moment later, the lean aristocratic Arab face withdrew again into shadow.

"Precisely so." Jehut brought her back to the conversation. "Sharif al Kitab served his master by telling his story. But now it is the voice of

the scribe that lives, and the Emir is held captive in his words. Is not the scribe then the master?" He paused, letting his remark sink in. Then he smiled again. "Perhaps you will one day write about us."

Valerie set down her glass and wiped her fingers delicately across her lips. "Yes, maybe. Right now I am not writing. More like running. The police appear to believe I have stolen something."

The old man raised his hand in some sort of signal. The dwarf got to his feet on one side of him, the young girl on the other. Together they lifted him to his feet.

"I must retire now. If the police come, do not worry. They do not stay long in the city of the dead. Good night." With his hands on the shoulders of the mismatched children, he let himself be led into the sleeping room.

"Good night," Valerie replied to his back. Her thirst finally gone, she began to feel her exhaustion. The pain in her head had subsided to a mild dizziness, and she could easily have stretched out on one of the pallets and gone to sleep.

"Is it the police that trouble you?" Nira slid closer.

In the warm lantern light, Valerie stared at the somber face as long as she dared, studying the exquisite groove that descended from between the nostrils to the bow of the lips. Full, but not voluptuous, the mouth opened slightly at the corners under the swelling of the muscles. They gave the impression of youthful sensuality in a face that otherwise hinted of great age. In fact, she bore an extraordinary resemblance to the woman in the souq. But that made no sense.

"The police? Yes, of course, but that's only a part. You see, a few days ago I was very happy. I had made the discovery of a lifetime. Then I was hit by a stone and suddenly everything fell apart. A vicious man who used to be nothing to me now has power over my life. He is the one who has sent the police after me."

Valerie searched the other woman's face trying to make sense of it. Like Jehut, she did not seem to belong among the misfits of the necropolis. Valerie could not imagine her belonging anywhere. "There are…other things too. Things I can't explain."

Nira moved the last few inches toward her and laid a hand lightly on her back. Under the sleeve of the abaya, Valerie felt sheltered, as if by a wing.

"He is unimportant. You have another story and it is not his."

"Well, yes. We sort of had that out this morning. But I don't even really know what my story is. The life I had and believed in has been snatched away from me and nothing else put in its place."

Nira leaned slightly against her shoulder. "Go away from this man, into the desert, if you must."

"But I've just come from there." Valerie wanted to whine.

Long fingers curled around her hand, and she grasped them back. The ageless face came closer, and the stranger's lips were suddenly over the wounded ear. Valerie could not tell if the other woman was about to whisper or to kiss her, but it scarcely made any difference; Nira held her in a near embrace and she could have stayed in it forever. The woman smelled of cardamom and cedar, and Valerie inhaled the fragrance with closed eyes. She waited for Nira to act and felt the quiet rising and falling of her chest as she breathed.

The night sky lit up suddenly, and Valerie startled. On the other side of the wall, the sound of tires on gravel revealed it was from automobile headlights.

Nira drew back. "I think you must leave now. Come. I will show you where to hide."

A car door slammed and Valerie lunged to her feet. Nira snatched up the lantern and ran ahead of her to the back court. When they turned the corner, Valerie saw with a shudder where she was to hide—in the tomb of Sharif al Kitab. One end of the low stone sarcophagus was broken and lay flat like the lid of a spaghetti box. By the lantern light, Valerie could already see the skull of its inhabitant. She knelt down reluctantly.

Nira knelt in front of her, taking Valerie's face in both hands. "Do not be afraid," she whispered, and suddenly pressed warm lips on Valerie's mouth.

Shock, fear, and sudden arousal set her heart pounding, and Valerie held the kiss, letting dangerous seconds pass. Finally, the sound of footfall and men's voices propelled her into the hollow space. Nira set the stone back in its place at an angle, leaving a crack at the side.

For a moment Valerie felt terror at being immured alive. Then her fingers found the crack, and she understood that she had only to push back the slab to be free. The trickle of air streaming over her cheek reassured her, and the silence outside confirmed she was well hidden. She could endure a few minutes of confinement in darkness and in dust.

Saracen dust, she realized, giddy with exhaustion.

"Sharif al Kitab." She murmured nonsense to herself, to keep the fear at bay. "Is that your head that presses so un-Islamically against my breast? Sorry to intrude in your tomb, poor Yorick. Where do you suppose the rest of you is? Still in Jerusalem, you think?" Pleased with her witticism, she closed her eyes. Or perhaps they were already closed; in the pitch blackness, it was the same. Feeling the cool night air trickle over her face, she tried to imagine she looked out into open space and fell into a light sleep.

An army of Crusaders pursued her, and the grim knight who carried the banner of Christ was Vanderschmitt. She fled before them into Holy Jerusalem and joined the Saracens on the wall. Pierced by an arrow, Husaam al Noori fell into her arms and she held him while he died, his head leaning against her breast. Below the platform, rigid in their righteousness, the Crusaders crashed through the gates with iron battering rams. Over the invading army the noon sun shone fiercely, and the spears and arrows that blazed down on the defenders seemed to fall from vengeful heaven. Suddenly the banner knight stood over her. Helpless where she crouched, she saw his sword curve in an arc and come down on the side of her head.

Valerie awoke into the terrifying darkness. She thrashed in panic, hitting her hands against the stone, and the slab behind her head fell away with a thud. The patch of open night sky, lighter than the tomb, brought a sudden gust of air, and she scrambled toward it.

She struggled to stand up on cramped legs and listened, bewildered. Silence all around; the police must have gone. But why hadn't Nira come to fetch her? By ambient light she could discern the vague forms of walls and gateways, and so she groped her way back to the central court where the family had sat.

No one. Nothing. No charcoal stove or lantern.

"Nira? Jehut?" She called out softly. Then again more loudly. "Nira?" No response. Only the sound of dirt trickling as some night rodent dislodged it from between stones. She remembered her Zippo lighter and took it from her pocket, relieved. She flicked the wheel over the flint, and a sudden dry spark flashed and caught the wick. An inch-long flame appeared, bobbing silently up and down within its metal collar.

Holding the light in front of her, she moved along the arcade to the sleeping room. Still nothing. Only tattered rags, folded under

disintegrated straw. She walked in a circle around the court and then to the spot where they all had sat. But her little flame revealed neither ash nor bread crumb. Where there was dust, it was undisturbed and bore no footprints other than her own.

Shivering, she made her way out to the main road of the cemetery. To the right, farther into the necropolis, she saw the bare-bulb lights of denizens who patched together electrical connections. On the left the tombs were dark, but it was no more than two hundred meters to the cemetery gate through which she had come. Lit by city lights from the other side, it gave off a soft smoky halo. She hurried through it, emerged onto the city street, and shook her head at the comforting banality of half a dozen taxis waiting for business. Patting her trouser pocket to make sure she still had money, she waved to the closest of them. "Zamalek," she said. "Ahmed Sabri Street. And hurry, please."

In the dark backseat of the taxi she pressed fingers to her lips. She was not crazy; someone, something, had kissed her. She wondered what the hell it was.

Chapter XIX:
Flight into Egypt

Where have you been? I've been worried sick! And you're covered in soot! What happened?" Wide-eyed, Derek stepped back and held the door open.

She brushed past him and dropped her knapsack on the floor. "We have to get out of here!" She walked into the living room where Auset watched television.

Derek followed. "We know that already. But what happened to you?"

"Shh!" Auset waved her hand behind her without turning away from the screen. "News report."

"About us?" Valerie asked, alarmed.

"No, Palestine. Suicide bomber. A woman blew up part of a settlement."

Valerie shook her head. "Israel will retaliate soon enough."

"Already has. They're bulldozing the houses in her street right now. Or maybe that's what made her do it in the first place." The three watched the images of collapsing walls, soldiers holding back thrashing women, old men weeping. The coverage turned to the settlement. More of the same.

Stone-faced, Auset turned off the television. "So, what happened to you?" she asked over her shoulder. "Derek was frantic."

"I was so worried that I made Auset call Antiquities," he confirmed.

Valerie looked up, alarmed. "You called them? You didn't tell them your address, did you?"

"Of course not," Auset said. "We just asked when you left, and they said right after the presentation. Although now that you mention it,

they did keep asking who I was. I didn't tell them that either. So are you going to tell us what happened? You're a mess, and look. Your cheek is bleeding again. Derek, be a dear and get us a washrag."

Valerie sat down wearily on the sofa and leaned back with closed eyes. "Vanderschmitt knows we have the mummy. The bastard actually smacked me and then went to fetch the authorities. I got out of there fast, but I spent half the night in the necropolis, some of it in a tomb." She pulled herself upright. "Auset, I'm sorry. It was a mistake to bring Rekemheb to Cairo. We have to get him out of here somehow."

Derek came back with the cloth. Auset folded it expertly and dabbed it against Valerie's inflamed cheek. "We're ahead of you there," she reported. "Yussif has relatives in the Dakhla Oasis. Mango and guava farmers. He called them today, and they agreed to let us use a corner of their land. For a year if necessary. That will give you time to find a more permanent place."

Derek's eyebrows went up. "Was that okay? I mean, I don't want to interfere, but I'm sort of permanently involved in this. I also kind of suspected there would be trouble if you got in Vanderschmitt's face."

Valerie winced, both at the touch of the wet cloth and at the memory. "More like he got in mine. But you did good. Moving Rekemheb is exactly the right thing."

"That's what we thought. Don't worry. Rekemheb understands that he has to stay out of sight when other people are around."

Valerie pushed away the cloth. "That's enough. Thanks. But listen. I'm not sure Yussif should be involved in this. Neither should you, Auset. It's not your problem, and there's no reason to endanger you."

Auset crossed her arms in the narrow valley between her bosom and her belly. "We discussed that. But while you were gone, Rekemheb has been talking to us. Well, trying to. He and Derek have found a way to communicate—in a primitive sort of way. I've gotten used to him, and you know what? You're right. If the Ka is real, then all the rest follows."

"And Yussif? What's his connection?"

"Will you lay off Yussif, please. He came up with the whole idea of El Dakhla. He's the only one who can drive the truck and provide a plausible reason to my father for our going there. Besides, I want him with us." She wiggled to the edge of the sofa and stood up, adamant. "So. We either do this all together, or not at all."

Valerie rubbed her forehead. "I guess it's all together, then."

❖

Yussif returned shortly before midnight, his sleeves rolled up, carpenter-like. He brushed grit or sawdust from his palms and announced, "Everything is fix and truck is ready. We have plenty of water and long box in the back to put grandfather. Plenty of packing cloth to cover him."

Valerie studied the Arab, but he remained inscrutable. His English was too strained, too unsubtle to reveal him, and his thick beard concealed expression.

"'Grandfather.' I like that." Derek laid a hand on the thick shoulder. "Thank you, Yussif. And whatever this trip costs, in supplies… anything…I'll take care of it."

"Is nothing." He looked at the floor and then at Auset. "I leave note to your father to say I drive to Luxor for alabaster. We must to bring some back when we return."

"Yussif, you've thought of everything. I'm not much good at this myself," Auset said, dropping pomegranates into a large paper bag. "I've never smuggled antiquities before."

Valerie looked at the amulet and the ivory scroll box she was wrapping in her shirt. "Smuggling. Yeah. That's what they'll call it, won't they?"

Derek came into the room, carrying the mummy diagonally across his body as if he held a very large baby. "Don't worry, Valerie dear," he soothed. "There are times when you know you're doing the right thing. Yussif, would you get the door for me? Thanks." He looked back over his shoulder as he went out. "It'll be all right in the end. I'm sure."

"That's the trouble with you, Derek. You believe in salvation," Valerie said as the door swung shut. She put on her gun belt, sliding the small pistol around to the back of her hip, under her field jacket. "I don't."

"I know what you mean." Auset added a second bag of fruit to the first. "No matter how hard I try, I can't make him cynical."

Valerie sighed. "Cynical? I stopped being cynical a few hours ago, when I was lying in a grave. Now I just feel like I'm jumping off into empty space. Dark, empty space."

Auset picked up a grocery bag in each arm. "Yeah? Well, imagine what it feels like to jump with a baby on the way."

❖

The truck rumbled southward along the Nile. Slouched in a half-sitting position, Derek fell into a doze. Irritated by the vibration of the truck bed, the breeze that whipped loose strands of hair across her face, and the discomfort of knees pressed against the makeshift casket, Valerie could not sleep. She inventoried the supplies. Gallon bottles of water, bags of nuts, fruit, and dates. Wooden poles wrapped in canvas behind her back—probably a canopy, she thought, for when the sun came up. Packing quilts for pillows, seats, or mattresses. Well done, Yussif.

Then she brooded, her arm thrown across her knapsack where, for lack of an alternative, she kept the artifacts. Two strange women had appeared since she was stone-struck, and one of them had kissed her. Who were they, and why were they doing this to her? She was beginning to long for a simpler time, when she labored fruitlessly at the excavation and came back once a week to the arms of Jameela. Success was proving to be a disaster.

She stared, grainy eyed, at the ribbon of road that curved out behind them, watching the lights of the few vehicles that came on the highway and then turned off again. All but one.

Derek stirred in his half sleep, leaning to one side to tuck another layer of quilting under his right buttock. It did not seem to add to his comfort, and in a few moments he was fully awake. "My booty's numb. Can't feel a thing back there." He peered down at the radiant dial on his wrist. "You can't sleep either, huh?"

Valerie rubbed her knees and shifted again. "Look back there. See those tiny headlights way behind us? They've been following us since Cairo, and they seem to be getting closer. They can't be from a bus, not at this hour, out here in the middle of nowhere. I don't like it."

"Are you sure it's always the same lights?"

"Pretty sure. No, very sure. I've had nothing else to look at for hours now."

"You think it's Vanderschmitt? How can we find out without stopping?" he asked. "That would sort of defeat the purpose of running away, though, wouldn't it?"

Valerie knocked on the window at the back of the truck cab, and Auset slid it open. "Looks like we're being followed," she shouted over

the noise of the wind and the truck motor.

"You think it's the Antiquities people?" Auset called back over her shoulder.

"Whoever they are, they're getting closer. We can't outrun them, and along this road, we can't hide the truck. Any ideas?"

The two in the front conferred. Then Auset twisted around. "Yussif thinks we should stop and let them catch up. There's a village up ahead. You can see the minaret."

Valerie leaned quickly over the side of the truck and saw a cluster of mud-brick houses squatting gloomily by the side of the highway. One or two second-story windows held light. Otherwise the only sign of life in the village was the simple minaret lit up with rings of green neon at its far end. She clambered back to the cab window. "Yeah? Go on."

"You and Derek should take the mummy and hide someplace in the village. We'll let the other car catch up. If it's Vanderschmitt, he'll stop. But there'll just be Yussif and me here, importers on the way to Luxor to buy alabaster, right? When they're gone, you can come back."

Yussif shouted over his shoulder, "You must to do it quickly. Soon they are close enough to see you."

"Okay. Say the word," Valerie yelled, yanking open the lid of the coffin-crate.

"What is the word?" Yussif called back, obviously confused.

"Say anything! Say *Go!*"

"Anything! Go!" The truck lurched to a stop suddenly by the side of the road, just before the first few houses of the village.

"Right!" Derek slipped his arms under the mummy and lifted it easily. As soon as he cleared the crate, Valerie threw in mats and blankets, covered it again, and jumped to the ground behind him. He was already loping toward the village, a graceful dark phantom against the lighter sand.

No streetlights. That was good. They plunged into the first dark street, making as much distance as possible from the road. Soundlessly they crept past crumbled walls and crouched finally behind a wheelbarrow and construction debris. At the sound of another vehicle stopping, Derek peered out from behind the pile. "It's a car, all right, not a bus. Two people are getting out. I can't be sure, but I think one of them is wearing a white uniform."

"*Merde*!" she hissed. "Antiquities. Come on. We've got to get out of here."

They crept out from hiding and ran down another purgatorial alley, ever closer to the center of the village. Impossible to run quietly; someone surely had to have heard them. At the sound of a shutter opening, they crouched again between a wall and a dark mound.

"Oh, great," Derek whispered. "Here we are behind a dung heap in a mud village, in the desert of death. Could it get any worse?"

A dog began to bark.

"Guess it could!" Valerie leapt to her feet. Men's voices became audible and they fled again, around corners, down alleys, trying doors, trying gates. Locked doors everywhere. Locked against what, she wondered.

Finally they stood breathlessly before a large double door. Mercifully, the handle turned, the door creaked open, and they stumbled inside. They stood for a moment, panting, their backs against the wall, hearing footfall approach and then pass by. One minute. Two minutes. No one burst in after them.

Derek shifted his bundle to the other shoulder. "Where are we, I wonder?"

Valerie fumbled in her pockets, pulled out the Zippo lighter again, snapped it open. Holding the flame overhead, she walked forward a few meters and stopped before a crudely plastered wall where a red plastic frame hung on a string. Inside the frame, on yellowed paper, Arabic calligraphy curled. "Uh-oh."

"What?"

She followed along the wall and found the expected alcove the height of a man. On the other side of the alcove a second text hung in another red plastic frame. "'God is great,' it says. Oh, *merde encore*. It's a damned mosque!"

"Watch your language, then. We're in a place of worship," he hissed.

"Well, if the imam comes in here, he won't be worshipping!" she hissed back.

"What's an emom?"

"Shh!" A door creaked.

They pressed themselves against the wall again. As one of the double doors slowly opened, Valerie looked around for another exit but saw only the narrow door on the other side leading almost certainly to

private quarters. They were trapped in a mosque with a stolen mummy, violating two religions. She imagined jail.

"Muuuuuuuh."

Her head snapped toward the sound. Jutting through the crack between the two doors, the white head of a cow turned slowly toward them. The beast blinked at them with bovine serenity, and Valerie exhaled slowly. Out of sight behind the animal's rump, several men cursed. After a few moments of tussling and bumping against the door, the cow looked once more at them with apparent dismay and backed out of the dark interior. An unseen hand pulled the door of the mosque shut.

They stood rigid against the door, listening to the men drag the balking chattel back to its pen. Long minutes of silence followed, broken finally by the soft sound of male chuckling.

Valerie turned angrily to Derek to hush him and saw the faint greenish halo around the mummy. "Rekemheb!" she whispered with quiet annoyance. "Not now!"

The laughter continued. "Have no fear. You are not found. The farmers have withdrawn, and the two men you flee have gone away again in their machine. I have seen it. Your friends search for you now."

"If you could see so much, why didn't you warn us about the cow?" Valerie grumbled.

"That was the goddess who smiled at you. Hathor, looking after her servant."

"Ah, finally!" Derek stepped past her and with his free hand opened the door a crack. "Nobody in sight. I think the coast is clear." He edged the door farther open and cautiously ventured out again into the alley.

Valerie followed him, whispering in the direction of the mummy, into which the Ka had disappeared again. "Hathor? I don't think so. A cow can't smile. There was definitely no smile on that cow."

Chapter XX:
Of Gods and Kings

Valerie dozed fitfully, her eyes shaded by her hat from the glare of the rising sun. The sound of polite coughing woke her, and she lifted the fedora with her thumb. Rekemheb sat on his coffin in front of her, and Derek, stretched out alongside the coffin, snored softly, apparently in deep, untroubled sleep.

Groggy, she uncapped her trail bottle and took a drink of water to remove the foul taste in her mouth and clear her head. It helped only a little, so she poured a bit into her hand and rubbed it over her face. The evaporating water cooled pleasantly. She looked at Rekemheb again.

In the full morning light he was almost opaque, with only a slight translucency, like wax. He sat on his casket, one leg drawn up in front of him, the other folded beneath him. The figure that he made—she smiled inwardly—was the hieroglyph for "priest."

"We go toward Thebes," he said matter-of-factly.

"No. Southwest from there, to an oasis. Don't worry. You will be safe there."

"I do not worry. Not at all. My grandchild Ayemderak has explained this new journey and this…" He gestured toward the truck cab. "This roaring chariot."

"'Roaring chariot.' That's a good one. Wait. You can talk to Derek? In English?" She glanced with admiration at her friend who still slept, his head thrown back and his mouth slightly open.

"N-klesh? Yes, we speak his language and mine, together. It is difficult, but my heart is light to hear his voice. My grandchild told me of this quest which he undertakes for me." He gestured again, this time in the direction they traveled. "Have I understood him correctly?"

Valerie shifted her weight to the opposite hip, which ached slightly less from the rumbling metal truck bed. "Not exactly. It is not only Derek who undertakes this, but all of us. And it is not so much a quest as…well, panicked flight."

A soft frown clouded the priest's face. "Then we flee the followers of Aton? I feared as much."

"I am not sure what you mean by that. The one who dogs us is a sort of religious fanatic, it's true. He follows us for vengeance, but also out of a belief that there is an absolute law about things—and that I have violated it."

Rekemheb gave a wan smile. "You need not explain. I know this sentiment. I saw it in Sethnakht, who stood with others of his sort against our temples. But they were nothing but assassins in the name of their One God."

"Assassination? There's plenty of that going on right now, all over the Middle East. Men of certainty killing each other. Well, some for greed and some for dogma."

The Ka looked out over the desert as if surveying the land. "That is why the gods have sent you to me."

Derek sat up from his rumpled pallet and rubbed circulation back into his face. "I can't believe I finally fell asleep in spite of everything." He looked up at the entity perched on his casket. "Well, good morning. Have you two been chitchatting? What about?"

"The reasons for this trip, Vanderschmitt, fanatics in general. Rekemheb knows them from his time too."

"Did you reassure him that he's safe now?" He reached for his own bottle of water, drinking generously, and then poured some on a handkerchief to rub over his neck.

Valerie shrugged. "I'm not so sure of that myself. He was entombed for over three thousand years, after all. How can we promise him that much protection again?"

Derek reached across the space between them and squeezed her arm. "Stop worrying, girlfriend. We'll find something. Have faith." He reached into the recess of his backpack and drew out a tiny bottle of lotion.

"Faith? Now there's a word that has me reaching for my gun. Faith just means you have no evidence."

"Sorry! I was trying to comfort, but I guess I hit a nerve." He rubbed the lotion over his face and hands, taking particular care around his lips.

Valerie looked at her own dry hands. "And besides, faith in whom? In Jesus? Allah? Jehovah? Faith in what? That we'll all be saved? That Elvis lives?"

The Ka tilted his bright head. "Are these your gods?"

Valerie turned her head suddenly. The Ka had understood her remark without translation.

Derek was unfazed. "Uh, yes. Jesus, Allah, Jehovah are all gods. *Netcheru.* Only Elvis is not." He laughed softly. "He's just a king."

The Ka persisted. "This Elvis. Where is he king?"

Derek suppressed a smile. "Used to be in Memphis."

"Egyptian, then," the Ka concluded, nodding.

"Enough about us, Rekemheb." Valerie leaned forward, her elbows on her knees. "You have told us nothing about yourself."

The Ka returned to pure Egyptian, and Valerie was just as glad. It pleased her to hear the ancient language come alive and reveal its staccato music. Rekemheb laid his open hand over his heart. "Me? There is not much to tell. I was a simple priest, the son of captive Nubians who grew up serving Egyptian gods. When I became a man, I was appointed to the temple of Hathor. This was in the time of Ramses."

"Ramses the Great." She rested her chin on one hand. "A name that rings through history. Did you ever see him? Speak to him?"

"I saw the Great King only at the solemn festivals…and of course at his funeral." The Ka paused for a moment. "That day, filled with solemn grief and fear, is bright in my memory, for I accompanied His Majesty down the Nile to his tomb at Thebes." Rekemheb looked toward the somber west.

"It seemed, but for the beating of the drums, all Egypt had grown silent. On that day the king joined with the sun and became the new Horus. His thirteenth son, Meremptah, became Lord of the Two Lands."

Derek studied the priest while Valerie translated into English. He nodded. "I can just picture it, Rekemheb, and I love the drama, but what has that to do with Valerie and me, and with Auset being pregnant?

What are we all supposed to be doing now?"

Rekemheb opened his hands. "I do not know. The gods will reveal themselves when it suits them. I know only what the scribe spoke. The Balance, the Book, and the Child. These were the gods' hope against the Aton rising in the west."

Valerie shook her head. "That doesn't make sense. Aton is the sun disk."

Derek looked up through his eyebrows. "And the sun rises in the east, right?'

"No, I mean the reference to Aton itself. It shouldn't occur in Meremptah's time. The One God was an innovation of Akhnaton, a century earlier. When he died, the idea died with him." She turned to the priest. "Didn't it?"

"It did not die. The cult of Aton was forbidden at the court, but it continued among the people." His wax-like face darkened slightly as he looked directly at her. "It was their priest who murdered me."

The truck careened around a sudden curve, swinging them to the side, and Valerie exclaimed, "Look up ahead! A military checkpoint. I think we're in trouble."

The truck pulled up to a dilapidated guard station, the paint peeling away from its outside wall. Three soldiers in white uniforms far too large for them came forward with battered automatic rifles.

Yussif leaned out the truck window and chatted cheerfully with two of them, about the condition of the road, about the crazy foreigners who would pay a king's ransom to be taken to Luxor. But, *Alhamdulillah,* it was a way to make a living.

He held out a crumpled pack of French cigarettes, shaking out one for each. Through the window at the back of the cab, Valerie could see that Auset had put on a silk veil that covered all but her eyes. The Muslim wife, silent, pregnant, all but invisible.

A third soldier came around to the back of the truck. "*Sabah al kheer.*" Valerie wished him good morning. The soldier mumbled a reply, glanced briefly at the wooden crate at her feet, and then seemed to take great interest in Derek. "*Gawáaz sáfar*!" he ordered.

Derek looked at him blankly. "*Besport,*" the soldier repeated, trying an alternative.

"He wants to see your passport," Valerie explained.

"Why only mine?" He jerked the document from his pack and handed it over, obviously piqued.

The soldier opened it slowly. "American?" He turned the pages, scrutinizing every stamp and port of entry.

Derek nodded. "Uh-huh."

Another officer came around to the rear of the truck and took the passport, perusing it with the same thoroughness. "Amereekan, heh?"

"Yes. Still." Derek held an unconvincing smile.

The second officer closed the booklet and tapped it several times on his open palm. Then, as if deciding the whole matter had ceased to be interesting, he handed it back and both soldiers walked away.

The truck jerked slightly as Yussif put it into gear, and it pulled slowly away from the guard station.

Derek blew air out slowly in relief. "Wow. That was scary. I wonder how many more times we're going to have to do that." He slid his pass back into his knapsack.

Out of sight of the road station, the truck pulled to the side of the road and stopped. Yussif came around to the rear with a map in his hand.

"What were those soldiers looking for?" Valerie asked. "Why the pass check with Derek?"

"Assassin. They look for him all over, and Derek looks like from Sudan."

"Oh, great. I come all the way to Africa, where I'm a suspect because I'm black."

"Yes. And is worse in south part of Egypt." Yussif looked down the road they were traveling. "This highway has more checkpoints, many more."

"What is the alternative?"

"That is what I come to show." He opened up the ragged map and spread it out on the truck bed. Valerie came over on her knees and looked down on it, trying to read the Arabic place names as Yussif traced the route with his finger.

"We are here. Main road on west side of Nile has military every twenty kilometer. Down here is El Dakhla. I think is much better to

drive on other side."

Valerie turned the map around and traced her finger along the proposed route. "You mean here, past El Amarna. Yes, that's a good idea. It'll also give us an opportunity to stop and look at one of Akhnaton's stelae."

Derek looked up. "Do you really think we should stop for sightseeing?"

"It's not sightseeing. Rekemheb's prophecy speaks of Aton, who was important only during the reign of Akhnaton, over a hundred years before Rekemheb's lifetime. Our route runs past several of Akhnaton's stelae, and they might tell us something."

Derek shrugged. "It's going to be hot walking around at midday."

Yussif scratched the side of his beard. "El Amarna is also Islamist. People do not like foreigners in Middle Egypt. Is maybe not so good for you to walk around."

Valerie tapped a tiny spot on the map. "You can drop us off near the stela right here and then make a rest stop in this village nearby. We won't stay more than an hour."

"As you wish, Dr. Foret." Yussif folded up the road map.

"Don't worry about us," she said to the driver's back as he climbed into the truck cab. "I'm not a dumb tourist. I speak Arabic. I can take care of myself."

Derek pressed his fingertips together. "Please, God. Don't let those become famous last words."

❖

Valerie and Derek dropped from the truck bed with a soft crunch onto the pebbly sand below the cliff.

Valerie walked around to the cab window. "Go on to the village, Yussif. Derek and I have got plenty of water, and we'll be fine. We'll come along in about an hour. You should wait near the village well, wherever that is. In a place that small, there can be only one."

"Less than an hour, I hope." Derek wiped his sleeve across his face as the truck rumbled away. They began the climb up to the stela complex. "So. What's this?"

"We're looking at one of the fifteen stelae that Akhnaton ordered carved on the rocks around this plain. All of them say roughly the same

thing, that Pharaoh dedicates this new capital Akhetaton to the One God, the Sun Disk."

Derek stopped at the foot of the inscribed cliff and leaned over, panting and gripping his knees. He caught his breath finally and stood up. "Wow. I…had…no idea…it would be so big. It's a whole huge wall. So, what do you hope to find on it?"

"Any reference to the Balance, the Book, or the Child. Or to Aton in the west. I don't know. It could be anything."

"It's not going to be easy. Look how the writing has worn away. You'd think they would protect it. With glass or something."

"They do protect it with glass. At least in the tombs. And sometimes in the temples. But not way out here."

He shaded his eyes and looked up at the stela. "Look, there's an illustration at the top. This is the sun disk, obviously, with all its rays ending in little cartoony hands. But whoa! Look at these people here. Long heads, skinny arms, and waay too fat asses."

"Show some respect. That's Akhnaton and Queen Nefertiti, worshipping the Aton." Tilting her fedora forward to shade her eyes, she read the inscription. "'On this day…His Majesty ascended, great in sovereignty…like Aton when he rises…every heart in gladness'… blank blank blank. There's a lot missing, but it still appears to be the usual lauding and praising. Let me skip down a little."

She knelt before the lower register of the inscription and blew sand from the incised figures. "'His captains fell down before him on their faces before his majesty, tasting the ground before his will.'"

Derek laughed softly. "This king had a power thing, didn't he?"

She went on. "Here it says, 'Through me liveth the Good God, Unique Bringer of the Light, Destroyer of Apophis'…blank blank. 'The Aton desires me to make unto him His city, presenting the earth to Him that put him on the throne. I uphold Him, magnifying His name. I smite His enemies. I cause the earth to fall down before the One, in whom liveth all things.'"

Derek wiped his handkerchief across a dry forehead. "Sounds to me pretty much like the same-old same-old. There is no god but Aton, and Akhnaton is his prophet!"

She got to her feet again. "Yes, you're right. Basic militant monotheism. But otherwise there's nothing here to suggest Rekemheb's prophecy. Or us."

"Except for the fact that Mr. Big Tush Akhnaton looks just like your friend Vanderschmitt." He fanned himself with the folded cloth.

Valerie took a step back. "Hey, you're right. Long face, skinny chest, plump hips. Bizarre. It's got to be a coincidence, though."

"After Rekemheb, do you think anything that happens to us now is a coincidence?" His speech blurred on the word "coincidence," and he rubbed the side of his face. "Can we leave now? I'm not feeling very good. Got to lie down someplace. What about that little white house over there by the village? The one with the dome."

"In the *koubba*? That's a shrine, Derek. If there are any local people there, they won't like it."

"I'll chance it. Just get me out of this sun before I stroke."

Half supporting him, she led him stumbling back down the slope to the white brick cube that sat squat and simple on rocky ground. On the north side she found a doorway open to an interior no larger than a tool shed. At its front, a step up from the floor, was a long granite box. Objects were arranged along the step as if left in offering: prayer beads, palm leaves, shards of pottery with words scratched on them.

While he leaned against the outer wall, his face pressed against his forearm, she went in to look for scorpions lurking in the shade. He staggered in afterward, collapsing to his knees.

She sat down on the ground next to him. "Here, lay your head on my lap. It's better than the stone."

Groaning softly, he curled up into the fetal position with the side of his head on her thigh.

"Give me your water bottle," she said. She poured the lukewarm liquid onto his folded handkerchief and smoothed the dripping cloth over his forehead.

"I'm sorry. I should have made you wear a hat. We'll stop at the next village and find a turban for you, like Yussif has. Even better, a *khaffia*. You'll look fabulous."

He laid his long, smooth hand over hers. "Fashion, style, and a good-looking corpse. Oh, you know me so well. Valerie, if I die, promise to make me look dignified."

"Die? Don't be such a drama queen. You've just got heat exhaustion. You'll be fine in a few minutes." She trickled more water over his forehead.

"I've got a killer headache." He winced. "What is this place, anyhow?"

"A mausoleum to some saint. That stone box with the calligraphy will be a sarcophagus."

"A saint, huh? Do you think he can cure my headache? I'll even pray to him if you tell me what to say."

"Why would you pray to a Muslim saint? You don't believe in Islam."

"I believe in everything. Don't you remember? Rekemheb said there was more than one hereafter. If there are Kas, there can be saints."

"Yes, and fairies and werewolves and elves." She trickled more water on the rag.

"Don't be such a cynic, Valerie. You know 'more things in heaven and earth, Horatio…'"

"'…than are dreamt of in my philosophy.' Well, I can't argue with Shakespeare." She lifted his head and shoulders from her thigh. "So, go on. Pray. You can start by praising his god. They like that."

Holding the wet rag over his forehead and eyes, Derek rolled over onto his knees and pressed his face into his hands. "*Allahuakbar. Allahuakbar*. Whoever you are, take pity on me who means no harm to anyone."

Valerie backed away from him toward the entrance. "Tell him… uh!"

Strong arms seized her. Before she could cry out, they yanked her roughly from the shade of the shrine and threw her onto the hot ground outside. She looked up at two men standing over her. "We mean no disrespect," Valerie said in Arabic. Wiry, ferocious in their short, dark beards, they were unarmed. One of them had a long camel face; the other was round, apoplectic. Breathless with rage, neither one replied.

Two other men, shouting, reached through the entrance and jerked Derek up from his crouching position. He did not resist, although their combined weight was scarcely more than his, and allowed himself to be dragged from the shrine. Without stopping, the two men held him by his upper arms and pulled him toward the village.

"Tell them we didn't mean any harm," he called back over his shoulder.

The two other men prodded Valerie from both sides, urging her to follow the first group. “They’re not going to listen,” she called back to him. A few minutes later she added, “It looks like they’re taking us to the mosque.”

“Oh, great. They’re fundamentalists, right? And the penalty for trespassing on a shrine is what?”

Valerie tried to reassure him. “Don’t worry,” she said feebly. “I will explain to the imam—”

The camel-faced one seized her by the shoulder of her shirt and spat in her face.

Chapter XXI:
La Ilaha Ill Alla

The mosque stood at the edge of the village. The simple domed structure was flanked on one side by a concrete wall and on the other by an arcade forming a shaded walkway. Under the arcade, a man poured water into an ablutions urn. The captors prodded their two prisoners into the courtyard, and a crowd of spectators followed them, men at the forefront and some half dozen black-shrouded women at the rear. Valerie could make no sense of their angry murmurs but for the word *agaanib*. Foreigners.

The rumbling of the crowd stopped suddenly as a door opened within the arcade and a man stepped out into the sunlight. Tall, white-bearded, in dark blue galabaya and turban, he projected a somber authority. He stood for a dramatic moment in front of the captives, studying them.

"The imam, right?" Derek muttered.

"Uh-huh."

The four guards backed away from the prisoners, leaving them at the center of a silent, hostile crescent of onlookers. The white-beard turned toward the captors, awaiting explanation. The camel-faced one stepped forward again and began his tirade, gesticulating emphatically. When he paused, the crowd murmured agreement, like a Greek chorus.

The imam listened without expression to the accusation, then turned to Derek. "What were you doing in a Muslim shrine?" His Arabic was surprisingly polished, his speech magisterial, as of a man used to public speaking.

"Val, what's he saying to me? Tell him I don't speak Arabic."

She addressed the cleric, who declined to look at her but stared sullenly at some spot on the ground while she spoke. "Effendi, this man asks me to tell you that he was taken ill and sought relief. He did not mean to give offense."

The imam lifted his eyes suddenly—hard, bright stones. "But you *gave* offense, both of you. Entering a holy shrine for your comfort is a desecration."

She persisted. "My friend was praying for deliverance from an affliction, as do many pilgrims. A saint hears all languages, doesn't he?"

The cleric looked down at Valerie's boots and trousers. "You speak out of place, woman. The prayer of an unbeliever is a blasphemy on the mercy of Allah, in whom all things liveth."

In whom all things liveth. Valerie hesitated, taken aback at the familiar phrase. "My friend's supplication was sincere and respectful. His father is a preacher, an imam in his own church, and this believer kneels before the One. Isn't the god of the Muslims also the god of Jews and Christians?"

The cleric turned to the accuser who still stood with his hands on his hips. "Did you witness this man praying?"

The long face tightened. "He was not praying. He…he was bent over his knees with his face in his hands. He spoke in his own language, but first he said, '*Allah Uakbar*,' to mock us." The witness stepped back, suddenly uncertain, and the crowd murmured again.

The cleric faced his captives. "You come all this way to pray in a foreign language at the shrine of a saint whose name you do not even know."

"You can question our knowledge, Effendi, but not our intentions. This man prayed as a believer, and I am his witness."

"A woman bears weak witness and a foreigner none at all. These men would stone you if I allowed them to, and it would be a just thing, for your desecration. God is not mocked." He paused, touching his beard as if to draw wisdom from it. "But Allah is also merciful, and it is not for me to say what is in a man's heart." He looked down once again at the boots she wore and glanced away.

"By whichever way you came here, you must leave again. Quickly, or these people will do you great harm."

Relieved, Valerie translated the cleric's remarks to Derek and reached out to him.

He withdrew his arm from her grasp. "Ask him why he hates us so much, Valerie. What have we ever done to them? Go ahead. Ask him that for me."

The imam listened, pressing his lips together while she interpreted. Then he looked directly at the American. "Do you know how foreigners appear to us? Everything about you is display, of wealth and power and lasciviousness. Your dress and behavior is a corruption to the eyes of our young, for the foolish among them try to emulate you. You are the people of Satan, and where you go, you bring licentiousness, your idle freedoms, and the disorder of your culture."

He paused, allowing her to translate, and then took up his vituperation once again.

"You disdain the iron law of God and urge our own government to reject it, bending to the will of the West. We feel your contempt for us as you destroy our traditions, and we despise you in return."

Valerie turned to her friend. "He said—"

A gunshot sounded suddenly and the crowd broke apart. From the confines of the courtyard, there was no place to flee but through the gate, and a security truck suddenly blocked it. Armed men jogged in through the gate and laid about them with rifle butts in the crowd of villagers. In a few short moments the compound was littered with the battered and wounded. Two of the soldiers stepped before the imam and took hold of him, dragging him without explanation toward the police truck. A third soldier, an officer, approached and presented himself with a quick military bow. "No need to worry. You are safe now," he said in English.

"Wow. What a coincidence that you were here when we needed you." Derek's eyes darted from the officer to the villagers who were fleeing, some injured and staggering, through the gate into the street.

"No coincidence. Security patrols the historical sites every day to protect the tourists. We are also looking for someone. A Sudanese. Even more dangerous than these people." He turned to Derek. "If you would be so kind to show me your passport, just to be sure, then you can be on your way."

Valerie watched as the soldiers pushed the somber cleric into the rear of the police vehicle and closed the door. "It was just a misunderstanding. We were straightening it all out."

"Well, it was getting a little scary for my taste, and I'm glad you guys showed up. Here's my passport. See? American boy."

The officer took an indifferent look at the document and handed it back. "These fundamentalists are a big problem, especially the imams. We have to teach them a lesson. It would be good for you to go now and let us do our job." The officer bowed once again and returned to his vehicle.

In a moment, the truck and its prisoner pulled away and rumbled out over the desert road, leaving a gray-brown cloud hanging in the street behind it. The onlookers standing on both sides of the street fell back a few paces and covered their mouths from the dust. Their eyes watched, smoldering.

Derek spoke under his breath. "What do we do now?"

"We walk down the street quietly, toward the center where the well should be and, hopefully, our truck. Like this." Eyes straight ahead, she walked unhurried through the gate into the street.

Derek came alongside of her, and they set out through the gauntlet of sullen, bitter faces. No one called out to them, or moved or spoke. The only sound was the gravel crunching under their heavy shoes as they walked. No one followed.

At the end of the street with the crowd far behind them they stopped, uncertain. Several alleys spiraled off from the intersection where they stood, and none gave any indication of leading to a center.

"*Merde*," Valerie muttered. "I do *not* want to wander around in this place any longer. If one more person lays a hand on me, I'm going to finally use this." She patted the hard object in her belt under her jacket.

"What? I was wetting my pants thinking they were going to kill us, and the whole time you had a gun?"

"Do you think one little .22 revolver would have held off the whole crowd? Besides, we're fugitives, dear. The last thing we need is to shoot up a village in Middle Egypt."

"Well, you might have to still, unless we can find our way back to the truck. After all this time you'd think they'd come looking for us."

"Looks like they did, Derek." She pointed up to a terrace that projected over one of the streets, where something birdlike fluttered its wings. Only its head was all wrong.

"Hello, cousin." Derek waved to the Ba of Rekemheb. "It's about time you showed up."

The Ba flew ahead and disappeared, but the truck stood, as agreed, near the village well. Two spindly palm trees cast thin, useless shadows over it. While they waited, Yussif and Auset had put up the tarpaulin over the truck bed, mercifully shading it from the deadly sun. A small crowd of children had gathered around it, eating what appeared to be Auset's pomegranates.

She came toward them. "We were beginning to worry. What did you find out?"

"Nothing, really." Valerie took a long drink from her water bottle. "Akhnaton's monotheism is pretty much like any other. Same pattern: one deity and one spokesman. I've decided I don't like this Aton *or* his chief promoter."

Derek fanned himself with his hat. "Valerie is no doubt soured by the fact that Akhnaton was the spitting image of Volker Vanderschmitt. But geez, Valerie, tell them what happened afterward."

She took another drink. "The politics of religion happened. Derek got a little sunstroke and we took shelter inside a shrine. Some of the villagers saw us and hauled us up before the village imam. You were right, Yussif. It was reckless of us to attract attention in this part of Egypt."

"Val, honey, you're leaving out the best part! There we were, about to be stoned or crucified or something, and suddenly these security guys arrived. Police truck, rifles. They were in full force and they hauled the imam guy away, just like that! It was weird. Here we are on the run from the authorities, and they end up kicking around their own people for us!"

"That's what the imam was complaining about, though, wasn't it? That the government favors foreigners over its own people."

"Right. I didn't think about that."

"In any case, the patrol didn't know who we were, but that won't help us for long. Now we've drawn attention to ourselves. When the report of the whole episode gets back to Cairo, someone will be looking

for us. I suggest we get the hell away from this place."

Yussif opened the door to the truck cab. "Maybe is better to go in desert."

Valerie considered. "What about the military? Aren't they always out there on maneuvers? I'm not keen on explaining us to the nozzle of a tank."

Yussif shook his head. "Not so much tanks in desert. Most of time I see trucks. Army is not police. They bring water when wells are dry. They look for terrorist sometimes, but not for little thief like us."

Unconvinced, Derek looked up at the truck canopy. "But are we equipped for the desert?"

Yussif shrugged. "We carry plenty water and some food. Truck is good."

Valerie gnawed her lip. "We've had one close call last night, and I'm sure word that we're down here will get back eventually. I think I'd rather risk the desert."

"I agree," Yussif confirmed. "I know this place. I think is okay." He stepped up into the cab.

Valerie held her hand out to Derek, who had already climbed up onto the truck bed. With a single tug he hauled her up next to him. They sat down on either side of the coffin, waiting for the breeze of motion to blow off the cooking heat of the steel.

Yussif turned the wheel sharply and the vehicle veered west toward the Nile. After a moment Valerie took off her fedora, letting her sweat-damp hair finally cool.

Across from her, Derek stared into the middle distance. "I have a bad feeling about this, Valerie. We're going out into wasteland. People die out there."

She leaned back against her mat, found a comfortable position, and closed her eyes. "No one is going to die, I promise. Trust me."

He did not reply.

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People die out there. The phrase echoed in her mind as she awoke, parched. It was late afternoon, and they were already far out in the western desert. All that remained of the cultivated land along the river

was a faint gray-green strip in the hazy distance. Derek was staring at the tracks that trailed off endlessly behind them.

"Any idea where we are?" she asked him across the wooden crate.

"Somewhere between hell and oblivion, I think." Derek pointed sideways with his thumb. "And over there is East Nothing. How's your cheek?"

She touched the spot in front of her ear. "Fine. Itches a little. How's your head?"

"Fine. Still don't have a hat, though."

"Are you sorry you got into this, Derek? Do you wish sometimes that you had gone back to your hotel after your opera and been spared this?"

"What? And miss this fabulous trip? No. Besides, I had to come. The prophecy said so. And now I know my ancestor, Rekemheb." He looked down dreamily through long lashes. "It's only been five days since we found him, and already he's like family."

"That's great for you, to have a lineage now. I confess I'm a little jealous. You have the kind of supernatural family I used to fantasize about as a child. Between six and eight, I imagined I was the secret Daughter of Isis. I was a little strange, I guess."

"How did you even know names like that as a child? I was only into comic-book heroes."

"My mother was an archaeologist, or would have been. Our house was filled with Egyptian antiques from my father and souvenirs from my mother's student excavation days: painted papyrus, pottery shards, even little statues of the gods she bought in the souq."

"Why did she quit? What happened?"

"I happened. In those days you couldn't have a baby and a career. Maybe she planned to go back later, but there was no later, only the car crash." She brooded for a moment.

"I wanted to keep my mother's statues with me at the boarding school where I was sent, but the nuns wouldn't let me. You know. Idolatry. So I kept them in my head."

"Poor Valerie." He caressed her hand.

She smiled and ran her hand lightly along the wood of the temporary casket between them. "Can you imagine what it must have

been like?"

"Imagine what?" Derek leaned his head back over the side of the truck, trying to catch some of the wind.

"Rekemheb's entombment." She closed her eyes. "The droning of the priests chanting their spells, the smell of the oil burning in the lamps all along the way, the sound of the coffin as it would have been dragged down the ramp: shish…shish….shish. Pharaoh himself might have entered the tomb to offer the precious objects to the gods." She leaned her cheek back on her hand, feeling the faint soreness and the new scab.

"I would give a lot to have been one of the offering bearers, kneeling at the bottom of the ramp, my head on the ground as the gold-sandaled foot of Pharaoh stepped past me."

"You are *such* a romantic, Valerie Foret," he murmured, drowsing again.

"Yes, I suppose you're right. A romantic scientist. It's an oxymoron, isn't it?" She slid another folded mat under her bottom. Sleep was perhaps the best way after all to endure the heat. She laid her head down on her forearm and felt consciousness slowly swim away.

The bang woke them both instantly.

Chapter XXII:
Desheret

The truck shuddered to a halt, and Valerie stood up to peer over the cab. The driver's door flew open, and Yussif jumped to the ground, wrapping a rag around his hand. He twisted open the latch on the truck hood and threw it open, recoiling from the blast of heat and the smell of scorched metal. "*Kharah!*" he swore into the smoking ruin that had been the engine.

Valerie and Derek leapt from the truck bed and came around to join him at the front. Derek winced and waved uselessly into the shimmering waves of heat. "The engine's damaged, isn't it?"

Yussif nodded bleakly. "I put full of water this morning. I was so careful. Maybe oil leaked. I don't know. It was no warning. *Kharah*," he repeated softly.

Valerie fanned the air with her hat. "Yeah, oil leak will do it, all right. The rod gets loose and bangs around until it goes right through the cylinder."

"Yes. Perhaps." Yussif looked defeated.

Auset struggled out of the truck cab and lumbered toward the others. The four of them stood in a baleful semicircle around the yawning engine compartment fathoming the disaster. Yussif wrapped and unwrapped his hand with the rag.

"Well, come on!" Auset spoke with such abruptness they all looked up. "We can't just stand around in the sun feeling sorry for ourselves, and we can't sit on all that hot metal. We've got to make some shade. Why don't you two men take down the truck canopy and set it up on the sand? Then we can do an inventory of the food and water we have left. Come on, get a move on!"

Derek climbed back onto the truck bed and began to undo the ropes holding the canvas. He stopped suddenly and looked up. "Wait a minute. We're forgetting about Rekemheb!"

Auset returned with another bag of pomegranates. "I don't think we have to worry about him. He's already dead."

"No, I mean his Ba. He came for us at Al Amarna, remember? Maybe he can fly out and get help."

"You mean like Lassie?" Auset was inexplicably cheerful.

Valerie climbed up next to Derek on the truck and began to roll up the canvas roof. "Who would he take a message to? The police? And besides, wouldn't your cell phone be more efficient?"

"Oh, right!" He snatched it out of his pocket and began dialing with this thumb. "Uh, except that it looks like the battery's dead. Damn!"

Auset shrugged. "Dead motor. Dead phone. So much for technology in the desert. But Valerie's right. Who do outlaws call when they need help, anyhow?"

"Well, maybe someone should try to walk to the last village. As opposed to staying here and dying of thirst, I mean. I'm willing to go. What do you think, Yussif?"

The driver shook his head. "Too far for those feet." He glanced down at Derek's oxfords. "And not necessary. Trucks come. Sometimes military. Better to wait."

"Just sit here, huh? How long have we got food for?"

Auset opened and closed various grocery bags. "Two days, if we ration. There's water for drinking, but none for washing. Now let's stop wasting time."

Relieved to be occupied, the group unloaded the truck and dragged their little household up a nearby slope. Yussif dismantled the canopy poles and carried them up the incline as well. It took only a few minutes to dig four holes in the soft sand where he could insert them. Valerie carried over the canvas cover, and together they draped it over the poles, creating a serviceable bivouac.

Derek helped Auset get comfortable among her sacks of food and then settled in next to her. "If you all don't mind, I'll stay in the shade." He rummaged in his pack. "I had one sunstroke already today. Doesn't the heat bother you, Yussif?"

"No, I am Arab, remember?" Standing in full sunlight, he unrolled a length of blue gauze longer than he was tall. "I always keep turban in

truck." He wrapped the long swath around his head with sweeping hand motions, encircled his mouth with the last meter, and tucked the loose end into the folds in the top. Intense dark eyes peered out from between two layers of indigo cloth.

"My, don't you look fierce! Myself, I'm going for something a little more…Old Kingdom. One of those pharaoh head-scarf things that Rekemheb told me about. From my other shirt." He held up his sewing kit. "He said it's called a *nemes*."

Valerie looked at the useless truck, which shimmered in the late afternoon heat, and listened to the others talk about fashion. Nothing, it seemed, could faze them. Derek had obviously forgotten his earlier fear—that people die out there. She had not.

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"Look at them down there, poking at the motor like surgeons." As the sun set and the sky drained of its harsh light, Derek leaned back on his elbow. "But that patient is dead, I'm afraid."

Auset leaned back as well, there being no more household to organize. "Yussif is like that. Responsible down to the bone. If he can't drive the truck back to my father, he will carry it, piece by piece." She watched the dark forms hunched over the engine cavity and the spot of light that flashed intermittently from Yussif's hand. "He's the most honorable man I've ever known."

"Ouch, that hurt. But I guess I deserved it." Derek chewed his lip. "I'm sorry, Auset. I've gotten you into deep trouble. Twice. I'm the worst thing that's ever happened to you, aren't I?"

"Well, I did think that for a while, when I had to tell my parents I was pregnant. But then I remembered that night. It was so strange, like we were in a drunken haze…but we hadn't drunk anything!"

"Yeah. You're right. I was a little dizzy the whole time. I thought it was jet lag."

"No, it was something else that made us both a little crazy. Maybe Rekemheb's gods after all. I don't know. But I can feel the baby now, and that's all that's important." She took his hand and laid it on the side of her swelling. "This is your son, Derek."

He closed his eyes for a moment, then whispered, "This is the best of us, getting another chance." He pressed gently, and the swelling pressed back.

"Auset, I will support this child, from wherever I am. I swear it, on Rekemheb's gods and on mine. I will never let you down."

"I believe you, dear." She patted his hand and smiled wanly.

The metallic crash of the trunk hood falling into place caused the two of them to jump slightly and look below. Obviously defeated, Valerie and Yussif trudged up the slope through the transparent darkness.

"And speaking of Rekemheb…" Auset pointed toward the blue-green luminescence that wafted up behind them from the abandoned truck. "If I had seen that a week ago, I would have thought I was insane. But now…"

Valerie and Yussif sat down, and the arriving Ka stood by them, his feet not quite touching the ground. After a moment, he sat down too. He looked around at the faces that stared at him, and the expression on his face seemed to say, "What?"

"The 'roaring chariot' is useless," Valerie said to him in Egyptian. "Any chance one of your gods can give us a little assistance? Food? Firewood?"

The Ka shook his head. "The gods watch us everywhere, but they have no power or voice. Only in their temples can they reveal their wonder."

Valerie explained and Auset sighed. "What a pity. Here we are—Christian, Jew, Muslim, and scientist—all waiting to meet your gods. If they can't dazzle us with a few miracles, they're not going to catch on." She tossed a dark pebble into the center of the circle. "People sort of expect that from a god."

Derek stretched out lengthwise, resting his head on his palm. "Something I don't understand, Rekemheb. Egypt had so many gods. How did you know which one to serve?"

"The gods come each in their season or their hour, but it was Hathor who chose me." He looked up to the dark sky. "I served her joyously, for she is Isis and the mother of Horus. She is music and the warmth of love, and in her wrath she is the lioness Sekhmet. She has many temperaments, and each temperament has a name."

Yussif bent and picked up the pebble that Auset had thrown down. He twirled it between his fingers and rubbed it absentmindedly on his cheek. "The God of Islam also reveals himself in many ways. He is the Merciful, the Forgiving, the Almighty. But these are all One."

Rekemheb frowned. "Is this One-god also in the wind and sky, in birds and beasts, in sunlight and the moon?"

The Arab paused for a moment. "The pious man feels the presence of God everywhere. But always it is the One God, Allah, the Absolute. He has no forms or face."

"It's kind of the same for Christians," Derek added. "At least that's what my preacher stepfather says. For most of us, He seems to wait outside of things, until we face Him after death. But it may be different for Catholics. Didn't you go to Catholic school, Val?"

Valerie grimaced. "Yes, L'école Sacre Coeur. But Sister Marie-Henriette pretty much ruined God for me. When someone says 'God's will,' I think of the punishment closet. I have never sensed God and never expect to," she grumbled.

The Ka said softly, "I will show you one right now." He raised his open hand over his head, as if offering something to the night sky.

All four heads looked up where he pointed. The air was unusually clear, Valerie noted, and the dense stars did seem to her drowsy eyes to cluster into distinct shapes stretching across the sky. Yes, she could definitely see forms. Long arms reached down to the western horizon, and farther up, she noticed a roundness that could be taken for a head. Directly overhead the stars were dense, and toward the east they seemed to bifurcate again. She looked along the shape several times, her eyes sweeping back and forth, and each time it seemed more to be looking back. A wave of infantile comfort came over her. She could see it now, the sheltering curve of gray light. "The Sky Goddess Nuut," she said out loud.

"Yes," Rekemheb affirmed. "Nuut, daughter of Shu, the air, mother of the Sun God Ra, whom she swallows each evening and gives birth to anew each morning."

"Wow," murmured Derek. "I can actually see it."

Yussif covered his eyes and murmured to himself, "'Consider Lat and Uzza, and Manat, the third, the exalted birds'…No!" His hand closed to a fist. "I do not see it. I see only stars in the heaven which Allah has given to us."

"I have to agree with Yussif," Auset added. "I admit, it sort of has a human shape, but that's just me interpreting the random dots. I don't see any gods."

Valerie passed along the comments to the Ka, who shrugged. "You will see them soon enough, all of you."

Auset yawned, covering her mouth. "I look forward to it. But for now I'd like to see only a nice soft cushion. The seat in the truck cabin

will do for now. As the only one among you who's pregnant, I claim it. I assume no one objects?"

"I'll go with you." Valerie got to her feet, gathering up one of the packing mats. "I'll sleep in the back. You boys can have the tent to yourselves."

The two women walked down to the disabled vehicle. With her flashlight, Valerie did a quick insect inspection of the truck seat for Auset and repeated the ritual for herself on the flat bed of the truck. Then she rolled out her mat alongside the casket and lay down. She was still restless and a bit feverish. The quiet throbbing in the side of her head persisted, like a stranger knocking, politely, but determined to be admitted. Weary, she looked again for the woman-shape in the night sky.

She saw only stars. But they were breathtaking. Stars beyond counting and beyond comprehension formed a bowl that covered the earth; stars sparkled even beneath her feet. The same stars that the priests of Ramses and Meremptah had used to measure the turning of the year. Did they once lie as she did now, on the roofs of their temples, discerning patterns, reading messages of both religion and science?

And one of those priests—she imagined him looking like Rekemheb—keeping bravely to his post one summer night, noticed that the appearance of the star Sirius on the horizon just before dawn coincided with the inundation of the Nile. What pleasure he must have felt at the discovery—that the sky and the earth were in synchrony. And from that discovery, at the beginning of human history, came the 360-day annual calendar.

And yet it was deficient, for the twelve thirty-day months did not bring the stars back to their starting point. They had to wait five more perilous days before Sirius rose and the orderly year could begin anew. When was the New Year, after all? Ah, yes, July 19.

She realized with a shock that it was already the night of July 15. The Egyptian timeless days had just begun, and there were four more days before the world could begin its orderly count again. She turned her head slightly to the right, to touch the mummy's casket with her forehead. She whispered through the casket wall, "I guess that explains why we're homeless tonight, Rekemheb, living and dead alike. How much worse can it get, do you think, in the next four?"

The silence of the mummy spoke volumes.

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The two men were stretched out on their mats on unforgiving ground. Derek made a little tent with his hands over his chest and tapped his fingertips softly against each other. "You must really hate me for getting us into this." He turned his ring around his finger. "If it helps, I feel really rotten about it."

Yussif scratched his chest. "I have not time for hate anybody. I must to fix all problems. How to take care of Auset and all of us."

"Yes, I want to take care of her too. I told her that. But tell me the truth, Yussif. Are we really in danger out here? Could we…like… die?"

"No. I do not think so. Desert looks empty but is busy place. Tomorrow or next day we see army, probably. Then only problem is to explain everything. You must to explain Rekemheb. And I must to bring truck back to Cairo. Somehow."

Derek sat up. "I don't know what a truck costs, Yussif, but I'll pay for it. I mean it. Here, to show you I'm serious, I want you to take this." He drew the heavy silver ring over his knuckle and rolled it once between thumb and finger, feeling the sapphires embedded all around it. "It should cover some of the cost. I'll make up the rest later."

Yussif closed his hand over the object and hefted it. "A rich man's ring. Are you sure?"

"Yes. It was a foolish extravagance, and now it can do some good. Put it on so you don't lose it." Derek patted the other man briefly on the shoulder and then turned away, dropping down onto his mat. "Now I have one less guilt to carry around."

They let a comfortable silence fall again between them. With the burdens of fear and guilt lifted from him, Derek fell into an easy sleep.

Yussif studied the ring, feeling the precious stones, and then slipped it on his little finger. He brushed sand from his mat and then lay down as well, troubled by a surfeit of thought. The truck: how to bring it back to Cairo or surely lose his job? The goddess in the stars: was that not the very thing the Qur'an warned against? The Ka: what, in the name of Allah, was it?

Auset.

He savored inwardly the sound of her strange name: Auset. The son of a village mechanic, he had hungered all his life to win the attention

of a woman like her, and when she walked into her father's Cairo office after finishing university in New York, he was a doomed man. The sight of her long uncovered hair and the sound of her sharp words seized his interest and never let it go. He gave no outward sign of his obsession, but every day of his employment was a day of willing fealty to her.

The shock of learning that the spoiled woman was pregnant—a scandal which in another age or place might have meant her death—rocked his devotion only slightly. He searched his heart and found only anger that she had given a precious gift so lightly. But it seemed she had more time for him now. It seemed he had a chance.

Why look at a woman who had soiled herself, his father had demanded. How could he explain? He could not face the thought of marrying one of the dull, barely literate girls of his own class, who had not a thought in their heads and no desire other than motherhood. The foreign women were perhaps immoral. Yes, one had to accept that. Nor were they obedient. But for all that, they were…interesting. It was the happiest day of his life when Auset, swollen with her sin and unrepentant, had asked him to drive her to the Giza camel barn. Without a second thought he had joined her foreign friends in their crime. With Auset at his side, needing him, he would have driven into hell.

Now, here he was, lying half a meter away from the one who had defiled her. And yet, the man had every other virtue; he was generous with money and with gifts, and pious toward his elder. He had shown Auset every brotherly affection, while making no claim on her. Yussif touched his new ring with the tip of his thumb. How could a man know what was the right way? If Auset had broken *Shari'a* by giving herself before marriage, so he himself had broken it by stealing a dead man from his grave, by giving credence to polytheists, by considering Satanic verses.

She carried the fruit of her sin and could not go back. But neither could he. He was the same pious man as before, but perhaps Allah had other names after all.

Chapter XXIII:
Bádawi

Valerie awoke to the clanking of copper bells and the penetrating smell of goat. She sat up and found the truck an island in a sluggish stream of livestock. Out on the periphery, a dozen men sat on camels; their robes and thick turbans identified them.

Bedouin herdsmen, driving their flocks from one sparse grazing ground to another. She looked around her, fascinated. To the left, grayish brown sheep flowed past, driven by women, an oozing mass of newly shorn backs. Young men carried the new lambs draped over their shoulders or led donkeys carrying immense loads. The nearest one bore a mountain of kindling high over its haunches and goatskins of water on both sides of its forelegs.

The smell of fleece was overpowered by the stronger, viler smell of the goats that jostled by, bleating, on the right. Children walked among them, urging them on with sticks until they stopped to gawk at the spectacle of a woman standing in a pickup truck.

The men on camels seemed in no hurry to talk, although one of them had come close and studied the truck as she studied him. A gray-bearded man in a tan kaftan sat with his right leg hooked around the high horn of the saddle, the toes of his other foot gripping the camel's neck. His beast carried no baggage, but behind him, attached by a cord to the saddle, a wicker cage held a bird much too large for it. The way in which the man barked commands suggested he was the sheikh, or at least someone of authority. Valerie waved at him and called out, "*As salaamu 'alaykum*."

He ignored her, although he had gotten close enough to the truck to hold a conversation.

"*As salaamu 'alaykum,*" a male voice repeated cheerfully, and Yussif waded through the flood of goats toward the rider. Derek followed close behind him. A few of the shepherds edged closer to the sheikh. They looked wild, biblical, in their wide desert robes that spread over their saddles. Yet several, she noted, had wristwatches, and one of the boys on foot wore a baseball cap.

Uninvited to the male discussion which was about to take place, she climbed down to join Auset, who was already making her way toward their little tent. It looked suddenly pathetic before the glance of real Bedouins. Auset glanced back over her shoulder and laughed. "Yeah, come on over here to the harem and let the menfolk take care of business."

Sheikh and driver spoke for a while and, although they were too far away to hear, it seemed that Yussif explained their situation and negotiated for something. Valerie wondered if the custom of desert hospitality applied to reckless foreigners as well. Finally the men returned to the tiny campsite.

"They are tribe of Mahamid who take flocks to Dakhla Oasis," Yussif reported. "Sheikh's name is Janazil. Sheikh says they know nothing of trucks, but will give us food and water. If we want, they will let us walk with them to oasis."

"Well, that beats dying of thirst. How far is it?" Valerie asked.

"Two days' walk, he says."

"Two days on foot in the desert?" Derek looked down at his oxfords, where powdery sand was already embedded in every seam and hole. "What about Auset? Did you mention that one of us is eight months pregnant?"

Yussif's thick beard parted in a smile. "Yes, of course. And I ask to buy camel. Sheikh agree. One camel for one thousand Egypt pounds."

"That sounds like a lot. And besides, one isn't enough." Derek rubbed his back, obviously anticipating the discomfort.

"Yes, I know. So I say two camels for fifteen hundred pounds."

Valerie was beginning to admire the taciturn Arab. "Did he agree?"

"He says fifteen hundred pounds and black man's watch. Then we agree."

"My watch? Oh, great." Derek turned to the two women. "Do we even have fifteen hundred Egyptian pounds between us? All I have are credit cards."

Auset shrugged. "I have about four hundred."

Valerie calculated on her fingers. "I've got eight hundred and change. The rest of my money is in Euros."

Yussif patted his shirt pocket, as if he could count by feeling his wallet. "I have three hundred, for food and gasoline."

Valerie pulled out a wad of bills and added it to the pile in Yussif's hand. "That should be fifteen hundred. And Derek has the watch. I think we have a deal."

The bleating of the goats seemed a comment on the transaction.

Derek sighed as he drew the metal expansion band over his hand. "I hope you appreciate that I'm giving up a fine Bulova, worth about two hundred dollars."

"I will tell him that," Yussif said, patting him on the shoulder. "But is not so bad for you. You will have best camel. Someone must to carry Grandfather."

"You mean like before?"

"No. Is possible to tie box to camel on one side, food, water bottles on other. But I explain about mummy to sheikh and he does not like it. He says you must to ride behind the tribe. Is not allowed to carry dead man near the people. Very bad luck."

"So it would seem," Valerie said.

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"*Y'alla bina!*" The sheikh called for the march to continue, and the tribe of Mahamid resumed its amoebic flow southwestward. At its rear, keeping a discreet distance, the fugitives took their place. The unencumbered ones walked between the two who rode, burdened with coming or departed life. Auset rode the smaller camel cushioned by several packing quilts. Derek sat astride the larger camel which, with stoic dignity, bore the casket tied to its left side and camp supplies dangling on its right.

Valerie marched purposefully, modern muscles slowly learning the ancient rhythmic stride of migration. She glanced at Yussif, who walked alongside of her, and matched her step to his. He had untucked his shirt so that it hung over his trousers to his knees. Turbaned and rough-bearded as he was, he seemed at home among the nomads.

"Strange where fate takes us, isn't it?" Yussif said suddenly in Arabic. "You think you've got an idea of where you're going, and some

hand comes along and sets you down someplace else. The only thing that is constant is the kind of person you are— strong or weak, pious or…" He paused, apparently trying to decide what the opposite of piety would be. "Or lost."

Valerie was taken aback for a moment, for this was the first time he had spoken to her alone and did not need to use English. She was surprised at how intelligent he sounded, at how much he had to say. Language, it seemed, was everything.

"I know what you mean," she said. "But I still resist the idea that some supernatural hand of fate plays with my life. I insist that I have a will. As for the sort of person I am, I'm afraid I stopped being pious as a schoolgirl."

"Did your teachers really lock you in a closet?"

"Yes, all of us, when we were disobedient. And I was disobedient a lot. It was terrifying. We were little children, and they thrashed us first. Then they locked us for the night in a small, dark place. Some of the young ones went in screaming and came out silent, broken. The nuns said it would teach us humility before God." She stared into the distance. "Whatever Rekemheb has to show us, it better have more to offer than brutal authority."

"Rekemheb is the mystery, isn't he? We thought we were carrying him, but I think now he's leading us, or at least his gods are." He scratched his beard. "To what end, I wonder?"

She had no answer to give and strode silently, trying to find a pace that she could maintain for eight hours.

Yussif began again. "The images in the stars we saw last night—"

"The Goddess Nuut?"

He chuckled bitterly. "Muslims called them Lat and Uzza, the goddesses of the moon and stars. The Prophet once recited their names to the people of Mecca, but he was under the influence of Satan. You must realize that from a Muslim standpoint, Rekemheb was revealing something that was long ago refuted." He shook his head. "And yet I saw them both with my own eyes."

"Oh, yes. The Verses of Satan. Sura 53, isn't it? About accepting the goddesses as intermediaries with God? Mohammed named them to win over the polytheists, but later he recanted. Is that what you're afraid of? That Rekemheb is Satan?"

"When you put it that way it sounds foolish."

She blew sand particles from between her lips. "'Sinner' is the name that believers give to those who have the courage to doubt."

"And you are not afraid of doubt?"

"No, not at all. In science, doubt is an excellent beginning. It lets the mind travel to places that are new…" She looked up at Derek on his camel, discovering himself both as father and as scion in an ancient lineage. He was on her eastern side, and his image was blurred by the corona around him from the morning sun. The *nemes* he had devised sat handsomely on his head, and it seemed as if the Falcon-god perched at the back of his neck and hung its wings down, protecting him as in the temple icons it once protected Pharaoh.

"Or very, very old."

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Enveloped in the cloud of dust stirred up by the flocks, Valerie wrapped another layer of cloth around her face. Muffled and dry-mouthed, she wandered silently from one end of the shapeless flowing mass to the other as the hours passed, watching the nomads through squinted, sand-scraped eyes.

She found herself at the periphery where the camels, like moving guard towers, formed the outer line. The beasts were lean, even the camel of the sheikh, although its trappings, as befitted a tribal leader, were striking. The red camel bag hanging down on both sides of his saddle was extravagantly tasseled, and the leather harness was studded in brass. Behind the saddle, the tiny wicker cage once again caught her attention. The bird it held was a hawk. Something to be sold at market in El Dakhla, she supposed. Its wings were tied back cruelly, and the cage itself was so constricting that the poor creature could not move. As she drew closer the hawk twisted its head toward her, wild-eyed and panting through its small curved beak.

She remembered another hawk and knew suddenly why she felt such horror. It was the hawk at Sacre Coeur, one of the family that flew daily over the school grounds, that had become lodged one night in the chimney of her dormitory. Lying in her bed, she had heard its desperate fluttering. It seemed to come from directly behind the crucifix that hung above the mantle. Shivering below it on the hearth, she prayed to the Virgin to set it free or end its suffering. But still it fluttered, hour after hour.

Finally she had fled, sobbing and hysterical in the middle of the night, to the Mother Superior, waking her by pounding on the door, demanding that the creature be freed before the morning fire was lit. But the furious nun had called her insolent and consigned her to the punishment cabinet for the rest of the night. After she was released the next morning and thrashed for her offense, a fire burned indifferently in the dormitory hearth. No one would tell her what had happened to the hawk. She was sick with dread for weeks afterward, tormented by visions of the creature being roasted alive.

"*Shuf! Akhiran, il bi'r*." A man's voice startled her.

The sheikh pointed forward, toward a depression in the land. Of course, Valerie thought. If there's water around, it will be there. And a few hundred meters farther on, she saw it at the center of the dry riverbed, the stone lid of a desert well.

The sheikh dismounted first and strode to the well hole, where he prostrated himself and recited some brief prayers. In a moment other men joined him, and together they removed the covering of rocks and slid aside the heavy stone well cover. Valerie watched as they retrieved the goatskin sack from within. After examining it, they lowered it down the shaft and drew it back with obvious satisfaction. The well was high and contained enough water for both shepherd and flock. The men drank their fill, seemingly in order of age, for the graybeards went first and the young men after. Then the women clustered about the well with their children, wetting the small faces as they drank. Finally, a row of camel skins was laid out in a shallow trough, and the flocks were watered.

Derek blew powder from parched lips. "Man, I haven't even got enough saliva to spit out sand."

As if she had heard him, a Bedouin covered from head to toe in black cloth, with only her eyes visible, stepped away from the goats and beckoned the two women toward the well. Auset tapped her camel to kneel and heaved herself from the saddle to join Valerie. Together they walked to where the shepherd stood, a dark apparition on the bright sand. The blackness of her clothing was broken only by a string of gold and silver coins that hung from the left side of her head scarf. Henna-painted hands appeared from under black cloth and offered the dripping goatskin.

"*Shukran.*" Auset tipped her head back, letting the water pour into her mouth in a long thin stream that caught the sunlight. She passed the skin on to Valerie, who drank less skillfully, splashing water on her

chin and shirt. Against the heated air the underground water cooled deliciously.

"May I share the water with the others?" Auset asked, and the veiled Bedouin nodded, refilling the skin from the well before handing it over. "Thank you. I will bring it back in a moment," she said, and lumbered back up the slope to the men.

Valerie waited awkwardly by the well, wondering if conversation was in order. It was difficult to chat with someone so anonymous.

"How goes your journey?" the Bedouin asked unexpectedly, in the pleasant, soft voice of a mature woman. "The red land is harsh to those who do not know it."

Desheret, she had said. The red land. In Egyptian, not Arabic.

"We thought we had prepared well for our trip, but the desert surprised us. We are grateful for your help."

The woman did not reply, but unhooked the embroidered panel that covered the lower half of her face, and Valerie startled. Once again, eyes looked back at her that were so black they revealed no character, only endless depth.

"Nira!" Valerie's heart leapt. She stepped forward to touch the other woman on the arm.

"My name is Nekhbet," the Bedouin said coolly.

Valerie stepped back again, confused. Could she be mistaken? It had been dark in the necropolis, after all. On both sides of her, goats bleated. "I'm sorry. It's just that—"

As if she had not heard, the woman pointed toward the slope above the wadi. "You should make your camp over there, above the slope. Someone will bring you fuel for your fire." Her voice was without warmth, disinterested. And yet she stared unashamedly for a long moment, as if studying a curiosity. Then, bowing her head so that the coins on her veil tinkled, she walked away.

Valerie watched her disappear among the other black-clad women in the camp, and for the first time in years, she felt like crying.

Chapter XXIV:
The Bargain

Boy, it gets cold fast out here." Above the Bedouin camp, Derek sat down next to Valerie and Auset, who leaned against the casket of Rekemheb. Shivering, he drew his knees up to his chest and wrapped his long arms around them. "Makes me wish I had one of those long robe things."

Together they watched the Bedouin women, silhouetted against the flamboyant orange sky, setting up the goat-hair tents. Young boys drove the flocks into a natural pocket in the rocks below them. Toward the west, the men couched their camels, tying up one of the animals' legs so that they could not rise. At the center of the camp, girls prepared the cooking fire, their high voices carrying over to the strangers in the warm sound of lifelong custom.

"These people are so much friendlier than those in that village yesterday," he added. "I wonder why."

"We're not desecrating their shrine, for one thing," Valerie said. "And the Bedouins have a tradition of hospitality. But we shouldn't push it."

Auset shook sand out of her hair. "What did that woman at the well say to you? Will they invite us down to eat with them?"

Derek cocked his head. "We'll soon find out. There's someone coming now."

A small figure, with features impossible to make out in the twilight, clambered up the slope and stopped a short distance from the group. Yussif shone the flashlight on it, and in the light column an adolescent boy with wild hair shaded his eyes with his hand. Yussif turned the harsh beam down to the ground, and in the half-light, the boy carried out his recitation. It was a dialect Valerie could scarcely follow.

Yussif answered the boy and turned to the two foreigners. "His father Sheikh Janazil bin Mahamed invites us to receive from his hand things to carry away for our comfort this night."

"Carry away for our comfort." Valerie chuckled. "Sounds like we aren't invited in for dinner, but only for uh…take-away."

Auset pulled her scarf up against the evening chill. "I kind of expected that. We're carrying a corpse, after all. And the sheikh knows our guy is way past his expiration date."

Derek clutched his blanket around him. "That's fine with me. If we had to socialize, I wouldn't understand a word anyway. How about just you two go and leave Auset and me here. Uh…and the flashlight too, if that's okay."

Yussif spoke again and laid his hand on the boy's shoulder. The child nodded and led the two emissaries down the slope.

As they came into the Bedouin camp, the young men greeted Yussif familiarly. The sense of tribe in the camp was palpable, as each person was engaged in a long-familiar task. Women prepared food or tended the fire with infants in slings behind them, while older children carried bundles from tent to tent. None but the youngest babies was idle. In the course of an hour, a sort of village had sprung up.

Valerie glanced around at the clusters of women, searching for the shepherd from the well. It was impossible to distinguish one from another.

The boy stopped suddenly before a tent slightly larger than the others. A camel saddle, sacks of grain, and the hawk's cage were piled up at its front. As the guests arrived, a male figure bent low through the opening and came toward them. "*As salaamu'alaykum.*"

"*Wa 'alaykum as salaam*," the guests replied in unison.

Deprived of his camel and its trappings, Janazil bin Mahamed was an unimposing sheikh. The kaftan that had draped so regally around him on his saddle was soiled and shabby. His mottled beard was sparse, and one of his two front teeth was broken in half. His manner was nonetheless authoritative, and he had grown sons—or kinsmen—to lend him presence. But it was obvious that he was poor. They all were poor. Valerie realized she was looking at what was probably the last generation of desert nomads in Egypt.

Janazil bin Mahamed registered the briefest surprise at the presence of the foreign woman and then addressed himself to Yussif. "I regret I cannot serve you coffee. You understand." Both guests nodded politely.

"But no man shall say that the Mahamed are inhospitable."

He snapped his fingers, and two girls who had obviously been watching came from the women's section in the rear of the tent. One handed a goatskin and a pile of pita bread to Valerie without raising her eyes, and the other laid a burlap sack of what appeared to be kindling at Yussif's feet. "Milk from our camels, bread from our fire, and fuel for your own. You are our guests, even on your hillside. Is there anything else you are lacking?"

"No, *Sayyid.* And we thank you for your kindness." Yussif took up the bundle and made the formal courtesies to depart.

Valerie held him by his arm and addressed the sheikh. "The Mahamed are well known for their generosity and for their skill in hunting."

The sheikh's brow wrinkled slightly. He had obviously not heard about the hunting part.

"We are grateful to benefit from it." She gestured toward the cage. "However, the hawk that your hunters have captured—surely it is an inconvenience. Would it not be more profitable to exchange it for some useful object?"

The Bedouin half closed his eyes. "Exchange? For what sort of object?"

"Well, I would take him. For my wristwatch. Worth as much as the one which bought our camel." She pulled back her sleeve to display the timepiece. The worn leather band, she realized, weakened her argument considerably.

The sheikh raised open hands. "Alas, I already have a watch, as you can see, and not much need to observe the hour. But you have something of value that I do not have." He pointed to the object tucked—discreetly, she had thought—in her belt behind her hip.

She patted the side of her jacket, feeling the rigid form beneath. "My pistol? Ah, no, that is not possible."

Yussif cleared his throat. "Perhaps something else. Our blankets. Jewelry. We have other objects of value, I am sure."

Janazil bin Mahamed clasped his hands together behind his back. "I am afraid I would only consider the pistol."

Valerie looked over at the cage where the captive hawk cocked its head, seeming to attend to every word. It no longer panted, but its small eyes caught the light from the nearby fire and glowed like tiny distant suns. Though its wings were tied back, inside the cage, she seemed

to hear the sound of desperate fluttering. Her stomach tightened. "All right. One thing of value for another."

She unhooked the holster from her belt, avoiding Yussif's eyes, and handed it over. One of the sheikh's men lifted the cage and set it into her hands. It was surprisingly heavy.

The two paid their respects again and walked unguided back through the camp. Valerie shifted the cage to her hip. "Do you think I have done something foolish? Or that I have insulted the sheikh?"

"No, he was not insulted, I am sure. Only surprised. I doubt that he has ever seen a woman with a gun."

"Well, now I am a woman with a bird."

"It suits you better than a gun."

A slight movement caught Valerie's attention, and she turned her head. Yussif continued a few paces before stopping.

A single dark figure stood at the edge of the camp, watching. A woman, veiled and somber. A string of gold and silver coins hung from the left side of her veil. She stood, immobile. The breeze of the cooling desert blew around her, pressing her black abaya against her, revealing the faint outline of legs and hips. As if she had caught sight of something she should not have seen, Valerie looked away. The two of them continued on their way up the slope, the hawk rocking back and forth within its cage.

❖

Derek opened the sack and shone the flashlight inside. "Okay, this is kindling, but what are these? Looks like big oatmeal cookies." He pulled out a large crumbly disk, brought it to his nose for a fraction of a second, dropped it again. "Eeewww! That's disgusting!"

"Of course they're disgusting. They're camel chips. Good desert fuel, though. Give it here." Valerie took the sack of twigs and camel dung from him. "I've done this a few times on excavation." She made a pit in the sand and placed a handful of fine straw at the center, covering it with a teepee of the coarser straw. Over it she erected another cone of twigs and surrounded it with walls of camel chips. She clicked open the lid of her Zippo and held the flame under the tiny structure. The straw caught first, then the twigs, and finally the dung ignited into a satisfying pyre of yellow and blue flames.

"What's this? Dinner?" Auset had discovered the caged bird.

"Nothing of the sort." She opened the cage, and the hawk fluttered out with bound wings and tumbled across the ground. "Hold him, Derek, while I untie him."

He grasped the creature gently under its feathery breast. Miraculously, it did not thrash or bite while Valerie cut the crippling cord. Then it shot forward, tumbled again once over its own outspread wings, and lifted off the ground.

Auset watched it disappear into the night sky. "I bet it would have tasted just like chicken."

Exhaling, as if a great weight had been lifted from her back, Valerie sat down by the fire and poked the bluish flames with a piece of kindling. "You'd better not let Rekemheb hear you talk that way. I'm sure he considers the hawk to be a god."

At the mention of his name, the Ka of the priest appeared without speaking and sat down, as always, next to his descendant. The tiny fire gave out a hemisphere of light that illuminated Derek's face from below, casting eerie shadows above his cheeks. Rekemheb, insubstantial and with his own luminescence, looked as he did in daylight—waxen and shadowless. Valerie wondered if he could see himself in the mirror or if, like the vampires of legend, he cast no reflection.

Auset shifted restlessly, obviously searching for the position that would accommodate her aching limbs and the protuberance of her passenger. "I wonder how the Bedouin women manage this," she muttered. "I feel like such a cow."

The Ka's face seemed to brighten. "My own wife was two times cow-blessed, with son and daughter."

Valerie laughed. "Listen to you, Rekemheb. Your English is really getting good!"

"I listen even when you do not see me, and I learn much from my grandchild."

Derek seemed pleased. "It's true! We talk all the time now. What else have we got to do out here all day?"

"Cow-blessed?" Auset repeated. "What is that supposed to mean?"

"The cow is Hathor, the mother of Horus, the mother of a god. She is…" He struggled for a word. "…your Ka."

Auset rubbed the small of her back with her free hand. "That's good to know, Rekemheb. Please put in a good word for me with Hathor, when I am in labor."

Yussif, who had been silent, suddenly raised a hand. "Forgive me, but I have walked many miles today and I must sleep." He gathered up his mat and withdrew a few paces from the fire where he lay down again, his wide back turned toward the group.

Auset watched him for a moment. "He doesn't want to hear about the gods. I don't think he's ready for all this paganism."

Valerie brushed sand from her mat. "And you are?"

Auset shrugged. "If Hathor can make having a baby any easier, then I want to hear about her."

"This little Christian boy does too, as long as I can stay awake." Derek turned his head toward the spectre. "For starters, I'd like to know how you worshipped Hathor. I mean, did you pray, like we do?"

The Ka lifted his hands, as if to present a sermon. "In the daily service, I sang the hymn during the food offerings. In the great New Year festivals, when she was carried in procession, I went before her singing the anthems."

Derek took off his shoes and set them upside down on the sand. "Sounds just like the processions I've seen in Italy when they carry the statue of the Madonna through the streets."

"You sing to the Mother Goddess too." Rekemheb beamed.

Derek puzzled for a moment. "Mother? No, not really. In my…uh temple, we sing mostly about Christ."

Valerie explained to the priest, "Jesus Christ is the Son of God who is murdered and then resurrected. The Christian Osiris."

"Really?" Derek massaged his feet. "I never realized I was singing to Osiris, but I guess it's all the same thing. He's still our Savior."

The Ka looked perplexed. "Save your? From what enemy are you saved?"

"No, not from an enemy." Derek frowned. "More like from our own sin."

Valerie searched for a translation. "You can't say 'sin' in Egyptian. It's a Judeo-Christian concept."

"Really? The gods didn't tell men how not to be evil? Then what do they do?"

The Ka continued. "Osiris gives life. From his own body he sends the inundation and the divine Horus."

"Guiltless procreation." Auset had finally found a suitable position and curled up on her side. Closing her eyes, she gave her final opinion. "I think I like Rekemheb's Son of God more than I like yours, Derek."

He stretched out on his blanket, crooking his arm back to support his head. "No original sin. No forgiveness. Mmm. Gonna have to think about that." His voice was already blurring with drowsiness. "So much to figure out. So much…changing…" As he fell asleep, his closed hand slid from his chest to the ground and the fingers curled gently outward. The Ka moved over to sit next to him, laying his insubstantial hand in the solid palm of his kinsman.

"Yes, so much," Valerie repeated, leaning toward the ashes of the fire that no longer gave light but still a bit of warmth. While the others fell asleep, she looked out in the direction the hawk had flown, studying the panorama of plain and black hills under the star-peppered sky. On the one side, where the Bedouin fire still flickered, the land around it muted to obscurity. But on the other, where no spark broke the sleeping landscape, the plain of sand captured starlight and gave it back in gentle luminescence. Something caught her eye.

Clearly delineated, like a bird, with black wings spread over the sand, one tent stood apart from all the others. As she watched, a single figure emerged from it. Valerie stared awhile, bemused, and then realized what she saw.

"Someone waits for you, Valerie," the Ka said softly.

She looked at him, confused. He had never spoken her name before.

"She waits," he repeated. "Go on."

She stood up, her heart pounding. Pebbles rolled in front of her as she descended the slope, stepping gingerly over blurry obstacles. At the bottom she stopped, suddenly in doubt. Then she started forward again, step by step, until she stood at last before the sinister shape.

"Nekhbet."

Chapter XXV:
The Kiss

The dark form lifted the tent flap and motioned her inside. Crouching, Valerie took a step into the interior and sat down, drawing up her knees.

The other woman came in with a tinkling of coins and earrings and sat down across from her on the carpet. A brass lamp hung on a chain from a tent pole near her shoulder but gave scant light, its wick too deep in oil.

Suddenly reticent, Valerie looked around. Some five meters square, the room was simplicity itself. Six tent poles, the tallest in the center, supported woven goat-hair roof and walls. The only furnishings were a camel saddle that functioned as a backrest and a brass-studded wooden chest. A tasseled woven bag hanging from the center pole held household articles. A smaller one on the floor held grain.

To the side, embers still smoldered in a shallow pit. The woman added charcoal with brass tongs, pressed a tiny bellows several times, and set a battered kettle on the glowing coals.

"It is very peaceful here," Valerie said. "I sometimes think I could live as the Bádawi do, uncorrupted."

"Nature is broken here too, and full of sorrow, but it can be made whole again." Nekhbet shook something dark and gritty into a spouted copper pot. The scent of ground coffee and cardamom filled the tent. "That is why you came, isn't it?"

Valerie watched the other woman's hands, dark fingers with milky white nails. "To save the environment? That needs to be done, of course. But no, I'm afraid I was more selfish. I came simply to uncover a bit of Egyptian history, to add a piece to the puzzle. What I found was not a piece, though. It was, in a way, the whole thing." She stared into the

gray-brown circle under the veil, trying in the dim light to make out the woman's features. "Some great drama is happening and the piece, as it turns out, is me."

Nekhbet set out a tray with glasses and a dish of rock sugar. She poured heated water into the serving pot and closed the domed lid. Fragrant steam curled up from the long, curved spout. "The drama is the old one. The battles are the same ones your ancestors fought." Her glance fell on the new scar on Valerie's cheek. "They have left their marks on you." She poured the steaming liquid into the glasses and handed one to her guest, along with the rock sugar.

Valerie took a piece of it in her mouth and sipped the hot coffee over it. The caffeine and the sugar together brought a sudden euphoria. "My ancestors? No, that's another part of the problem." She sipped her coffee again. She felt foolish, reciting her doubts to a stranger in a tent, as if in a confessional. "The ancestors that have shown up are not mine, but those of my friend." Valerie sighed. "I am wandering in the desert, acting out some sort of prophecy that doesn't even concern me. I have sacrificed a career for someone else's drama."

The Bedouin seemed to measure her words. "It may be that there is still much that you do not know about this drama. Perhaps when you have seen more."

"I have already been seeing more than I can handle. I came to Egypt as a scientist, but what I have seen so far contradicts that science and, worse, has made criminal my entire life's work." She shrugged weakly. "I don't know what to do."

The Bedouin held up her glass on the tips of slender fingers, the pale nails stark against the black coffee. "What did you do before?"

"Before?" Valerie drank slowly, reflecting. "Excavated, studied, wrote. My whole life was writing about Egypt."

The woman drew her knees up and leaned her arms on them. Her bare feet came out from under her abaya. "Those who write are as gods, for they name the things and make them live."

"Is that what we do?" Valerie glanced down at the well-formed brown feet, at the dusty soles and the rings of silver around both ankles. "Well, I can't write anything at all until this ordeal is over." She set her glass down on the tray and turned it nervously with her fingers.

"It will never be over," Nekhbet said softly.

Valerie looked up again. The Bedouin woman had drawn back her head scarf. Silken black hair that had been hidden hung in a curve over

her shoulder. It had a faint sheen from the light of the oil lamp and, astonishingly, the fragrance of cedar.

Cedar. That was it. Impulsively, Valerie reached up to the oil lamp and turned the tiny wheel on its side, lengthening the wick. Suddenly the flame flared up, illuminating the unveiled face.

Valerie heard her own inhalation. The same solemnity, the same dark eyes, deep as history, that had mesmerized her in the souq and in the necropolis looked into her now. The same soft channel descended from between the nostrils to the bow of the lips. There was the same suggestive upward curving at the corners of the mouth. The mouth that had kissed her.

A silver earring poked through strands of hair. A bird of prey of some sort, with wings that hung down like arms. The ornament swayed tantalizingly, catching the light for a moment and glowing dully. Valerie watched it, hypnotized. Both seemed to hold her, the woman and the bird, hinting at protection and gratification. "It's you, isn't it?" she said. "You have followed me after all."

Nekhbet blinked slowly in the faintest hint of confirmation.

Valerie felt her hand lift from the carpet. With a separate will her fingers reached out, crossing a vast distance before they touched, at the very limit of sensation, the tiny earring. With half-closed eyes and pounding heart she saw her hand move down slowly along the forbidden hair and come to rest, lightly, on the shoulder.

In the appalling silence, the wick sputtered once in its oil, and Valerie leaned forward toward the slightly opened lips.

"Do not…"

Valerie's hand sprang back, as if from a flame, hung for an awkward moment in the air, and then dropped onto the coffee tray. Her empty glass fell sideways and clattered across the metal tray to the edge.

"Do not falter, as your mother did," the Bedouin continued, unperturbed, and rose up on her knees.

"My mother? What are you—"

Then warm lips were on her mouth. Astonished, Valerie opened her eyes. The woman was slightly above her, for she knelt while Valerie still sat, paralyzed. One slender, strong hand held her behind her head; the other lay along her fevered cheek, soothing it. She tasted bitter coffee, cardamom, felt the hint of moist flesh behind the dry lips. Breathless and aroused, she clutched at black cloth to pull the other woman closer.

It began as all other amorous kisses she had known, touching and withdrawing, teasing between breaths with tongue and teeth, each light touch increasing desire. Craving contact through so much cloth, Valerie slid her hand upward along the folds of the abaya, searching for form and flesh.

Then the Bedouin grasped her by the shoulders and urged her down onto the rug beneath her.

Surprised, Valerie gave way and felt the woman's form spread over her and the black-draped leg slide between her thighs. Heat rushed through her, beginning in her sex and moving down her legs. Then something happened in the center of her brain. Ardor gave way to confusion as something alien and vast broke over her like a wave. She thrashed for a moment, moaned through lips still locked in the predatory kiss, and slipped into unconsciousness.

Her dream mind soared on wide wings, over the Giza Plateau. Below, the pyramids of Khufu, Khefren, and Menkaur stood majestic, their faces gleaming with white limestone from the desert floor. At their tops, the tiny golden pyramidions caught the sun and sparkled. Before them the Sphinx crouched, its haunches toward the great tombs, its Khefren face, unbroken, brooding toward the Nile. Then all began to crumble. Her hovering spirit watched in wonderment as they were violated, despoiled, abandoned, and finally swept over by shifting dunes.

Gliding south, she saw the swelling and contracting of the Nile, as if it pulsed, through countless inundations. Millennia of storms blew over the landscape, interspersed with droughts, and through them came an endless ebb and flow of migrations and invasions. Towns sprang up, flourished, and disintegrated; were in turn Persian, Greek, Roman, Byzantine, and finally Arab. And as each conquest came, she saw it also reached up to the gods.

She was over Thebes. At the end of an alley of ram-sphinxes, majestic Karnak rose to meet her. She saw the scores of temples simultaneously in their glory and in their decay, heard phantom priests drone incantations while invaders, soldiers, and chattering tourists flickered among them like locusts, and centuries of sand flowed in and out. Then time halted and she cringed at what she saw. Amun, Mut, Khonsu, Ptah, Hathor. Through the pylons and columns of their precincts and from their graven images on the walls, she heard them shrieking as Coptic zealots chiseled away their faces and smashed their hands and feet. Mutilated, blinded, effaced from the

eyes and minds of men, the gods of Egypt finally fell silent.

Overhead the ferocious sun disk hovered, and nature withered beneath its desiccating wrath. Standing guard before the light, the silhouette of a man with a camel's head raised its arm and loosed a spear at her. It struck her but did not pierce, shattering instead to sparks that swarmed around her head. Her mouth filled with their fire, and she spat them out, crying, "*Khetet! Rekhi renusen. Djedi medjatsen.*"

She fled, wheeling in a circle westward over the desert toward a high ridge marked by a familiar pattern of shadows. She lit upon it for a moment, her oath echoing in her mind, and then she plummeted to its foot. Ā ere, behind a wall of dry brush, she found herself at the entrance to a cave, and in the depth of the cave, she knew, something waited.

Chapter XXVI:
Dream Map

Oh, finally you're awake. Are you okay?"

Valerie lifted her head from her blanket and stared blankly for a moment toward the source of a familiar sound. She closed her eyes and then opened them again, as if to give them a second chance to make sense. Then she sat up abruptly. "What am I doing back here?"

On the other side of the campfire ashes, Derek shook sand out of his ruined shoes. "Back? I didn't know you went anyplace. But just before dawn I saw you staggering around with your hand over your face. When I asked what was wrong, you mumbled something and curled up on the ground and fell back asleep. I covered you up."

"I was with Nekhbet—the Bedouin woman who gave us water. I…I fell asleep in her tent."

"Oh?" Derek's eyebrows went up.

"It wasn't like that. I mean…I don't know what I mean," she muttered, rubbing her face. "This is all getting far too weird."

He laughed. "There's something *more* weird now than what's been happening all along?" He rubbed sand out of his cap of tight curls.

She shook her head. "I mean what just happened to me. I was in the Bedouin tent. That woman kissed me—well, it started as a kiss, a pretty forceful one. But then I passed out and had a strange dream. Really vivid. I was flying along the Nile watching…it seemed like all of history. But it ended with a kind of slaughter and me shouting something in Egyptian. I think it was the words from the amulet, the ones I don't understand. And then I woke up here."

"Yeah, tell me about it! I've been having dreams like that ever since I spent that night with Rekemheb. Scenes like out of a Hollywood spectacular." He finished tying neat double bows in his battered shoes.

"They always end in some disaster."

She looked around, puzzled again. "Where are the others?"

"At the well, getting water for today's march." He tied on his *nemes* again and smoothed the wings down over his shoulder. "So what do you think? Of the dreams, I mean? It almost seems like they're coming from someplace." He looked heavenward. "Like a message that we're just not getting."

"You mean like Pharaoh's dream of the fat and lean cows?" She ran her fingers through tangled brown hair. Impatiently she pulled it back with both hands, resnapped the clip around it, and covered it with her fedora. She felt the usual strands pull loose immediately and fall in spirals over her ears. "I don't think so."

Derek had stood up and was folding his blanket. He stopped. "Yes, exactly like that. You don't think there can be messages in dreams? Why don't you get off your 'I'm-a-scientist' high horse and accept that there's a world out there you know nothing about?"

She bit her lip. "I've been off that high horse for a while now, Derek. And you're right. These dreams were definitely different from any I've had before."

"Mine too. Now we just need a Joseph to interpret them."

Valerie got to her feet and began to roll up her sleeves. A faint and agreeable smell came from them—the smell of cedar.

"I think we have one."

Valerie looked toward the spot where the Bedouin woman's tent had stood the night before. It was gone. Of course. Hit and run seemed to be the pattern. Valerie went down to the center of the wadi, where the tribe was far along in its preparations for the day's march. Women were rolling up the tent panels into tight cylinders and loading them onto camels. They nodded in greeting but did not stop working. Several very young girls, no more than six or seven, tied pots together on a cord. She marveled again at their intense bright faces under wild hair.

Bemused, Valerie climbed a rocky elevation and looked below to where the tribe's flocks were being driven together into a tight circle. Shading her eyes with her hand, she gazed back eastward the way the tribe had come. It looked rather much the same as the way they had still to go. "*Plus ça change*," she thought. No progress or purpose.

"Do you still fear the red land now?"

She spun around toward the familiar voice. Blood rushed to her face.

The mysterious Bedouin stood a meter away, unveiled. The severe and stunning face held her glance again. Valerie felt a wave of affection, desire, anger. "Last night. What did you do to me?"

"I did what you wanted."

"What? To be knocked unconscious?" Valerie frowned. "It was the coffee, wasn't it? You put something in the coffee."

"You needed to sleep. You were troubled, exhausted."

"I was expecting something else. I mean, you did kiss me." Valerie heard a whine creep into her voice and was annoyed with herself. She was not going to grovel.

An expression flickered over Nekhbet's face, concern perhaps, or even affection. Valerie could not tell. Then it passed and the air between them grew cold. Nothing more embarrassing than the morning after, Valerie thought.

"You dreamt, didn't you?" Nekhbet stepped closer. "Strong, violent dreams, and now you want to know what they mean."

Valerie would have preferred to talk about their embrace, but the subject was dreams. "Yes, I guess so. But I don't like it that someone is playing with my mind."

"No one plays. The dreams are your own, from all the old memories. You dream the things you know, what your ancestors knew." Warmth had crept into her voice again.

"But I spoke words I don't know. How could I do that?" She touched the cloth of the abaya that fluttered in the slight morning breeze.

Nekhbet looked down at the hand. "You also dreamt of a cave."

"Yes, how did you know?" Valerie closed her eyes, trying to visualize the scene again. "It was at the base of a cliff. The ridge over the cave had odd markings. Like this."

She knelt down on one knee, and with her penknife she scratched a simple drawing in the sand. "There were three long vertical fissures, like so, and odd curves on both sides."

Nekhbet knelt beside her. "Yes, the cave is close by, in that direction." She pointed westward. "But you remember the image crudely." She rubbed away the lines that Valerie had cut in the sand and redrew it with her finger. "At midday, when the sun is highest, it looks like this."

She drew three descending lines connected by a bar across the top. The two outer lines dropped three-quarters of the way and ended

in narrow isosceles triangles with concave bases. The archaeologist recognized the image in an instant. "A balance."

"You must see it at midday, for these lines are shadows, and they reveal themselves only then."

They got to their feet. Valerie looked in the direction of the ridge. "How do you know all of this? What I dreamt, where the cave is? Who are you? Did Rekemheb send you?"

Nekhbet laughed, a strange sound that seemed foreign to her. "You ask small questions when the great ones wait to be answered." She touched Valerie's face lightly, letting her fingers linger for a moment over the fresh scar. "It is half a day's walk, and you must hurry. If you arrive after midday, the shadows will be gone."

Valerie looked back toward the Bedouin tribe. The families were beginning to flow westward. "Will you continue on to El Dakhla? I mean, when I come back."

"The shepherds stay at El Dakhla for the summer. But you have your own concerns. See?" She raised her hand to the side. "Your friends are also already on their camels and wait for you."

"I will come to El Dakhla," Valerie said with finality. She embraced the shepherd woman and closed her eyes for a moment. Then she kissed the dark cheek near the lips, ambiguously, as Jameela had kissed her. "I will look for you."

Nekhbet nodded wordlessly and gently pushed Valerie away, her tattooed hands lingering for the briefest moment on her forearms.

Valerie turned and walked away, feeling the dark eyes on her back like a protective cloak.

❖

Four mortals and a spectre stopped before the cliff wall. Derek cupped one hand over his eyebrows. "There are cracks all along this ridge, Valerie. Big ones, little ones. How are we supposed to know what to look for?"

Perched on her camel, Auset made a little tent over her head with her scarf. "I don't know about this, Valerie. Shadows pointing to a hidden tomb. This sounds much riskier than Yussif's farm at Al Dahkla. This may be a wild-goose chase."

"If it is, it's my fault," Derek said. "I'm the one who's been hammering at Valerie to give the supernatural a chance. Let's just go as

far with this as we can."

Valerie fanned herself with her fedora and looked at her watch. "This *is* as far as we can go. It's noon. More or less. If we don't find it fast, we'll have to go back to El Dakhla after all."

"Look!" Yussif pointed toward two horizontal lines that slowly sharpened as the sun reached its zenith. As they crossed the three vertical cracks, the image of a huge balance came into view.

Valerie exhaled as if she had been holding her breath and set her hat back on. "She was right. Now let's go see if there's a cave under there." She hurried the remaining distance, pulling Auset's camel after her.

Yussif stayed beside her, with the reins of Derek's camel. The two riders dismounted at the foot of the cliff, and Yussif staked the camels.

Valerie pulled aside the desiccated brush that had once sprouted and then withered at the base of the ridge. "There's something here, all right, but hardly big enough for a lizard." She gripped a small boulder at the side and it fell away suddenly, causing a small rock slide. The dust settled gradually, revealing an opening to a tunnel. "It looks good. I think we have our cave."

"Gods, I hope so," Derek answered and began to untie the battered casket from its high perch. As he carried it on one shoulder toward his friends, the Ka appeared. "Hey, Rek. It looks like we've got something. Can you go in ahead and see what's in there? I mean, nothing bad can happen to you, right?"

"Let us see if it pleases the gods to give me a new resting place." Rekemheb appraised the cliff face like a new home owner and floated into the tunnel.

Behind him, Valerie took the first step into the darkness. She stood for a moment, letting her eyes adapt, and then clicked on the flashlight.

Yussif helped Auset into the tunnel, then stopped behind her. "Is very quiet here. I do not like this place."

"You're right." Valerie directed the light beam at their feet. "No echoes. It must be the silt we're walking on. Absorbs the sound."

Derek hefted the crate onto his shoulder and came in behind them. "Less talk and more walk, please. This thing is cutting into my neck."

The four crept down the tunnel, by the light of the single flashlight. Valerie's boot shattered something with a muffled snap, and she shone the light downward. "Pottery shards."

"Grave robbers, you think?"

"Only if it's a grave."

The tunnel ended suddenly. A stone lintel showed where a doorway had stood, but the space below was filled with dirt and rocks to within a few centimeters of the ceiling. From the other side came the sound of a voice, unintelligible.

"A shovel would be good right now, wouldn't it?" Valerie kicked the pile. "It seems to be soft. Maybe we can move it away with our hands."

The four of them covered their faces against the dust and set to work. In a short while they opened a channel. Valerie shone the light into a chamber and stepped into it. She stopped short.

In the midst of broken pottery and splintered wooden chests, Rekemheb knelt over a low sarcophagus, his forehead pressed against its rim and his arms stretched over the lid. In the quiet tomb all could hear that he wept.

Chapter XXVII:
Reckoning

Derek hurried to the priest's side. "What is it? Have we done something wrong?"

The Ka raised his head. His eyes glistened in the flashlight beam, the only part of him that reflected light. "Not wrong, dear child. Rather a great right. Look where you have brought us." He lifted his hand from the lid of the stone sarcophagus. An inscription ran down the center of it in two lines, lacking only a single hieroglyph where the stone had been broken in two.

"It is the *Hotep di nesu* invocation," Valerie said. "'The King has given an offering to Osiris, lord of Abydos, and to Hathor, Lady of Dendara, that they may bestow such offerings of bread and beer, oxen and fowl, alabaster and raiment to the Ka of the revered, the justified servant and priest of Hathor…Hator-em-heb.'"

She looked again at the Ka, who had stood up. "Why do you weep for a priest of Hathor?"

"This priest of Hathor…Hator-em-heb…was my son."

"Omigod!" Derek bent over the sarcophagus. "Another ancestor. But why isn't his Ka here? Or is it?" He looked up at the dark ceiling.

Rekemheb shook his head. "He was only a child when I was taken, a boy of gentle nature, his sister only a year older. I waited for them in the afterlife, Hator-em-heb and my daughter Merut-tot, but the Kas of my children never came to the Duat. It can only be because their mummies were destroyed."

Valerie nodded toward the broken stone, the unmistakable sign of pillaging.

"This tomb held him once." The Ka raised his hand. "There is our story."

Valerie directed the light where he pointed high on the wall behind the sarcophagus. Cut in low relief and painted in still-bright pigments, the Barque of the Sun seemed suspended over the chamber. Ten gods, faceless but elaborately clothed and ornamented, stood decorously in two lines along the sides, attending the orb of Ra. Before the barque two figures knelt, one behind the other, their hands raised in adoration.

"The gods in glory circling the world," Valerie confirmed. "The icon of perfect harmony. Even Apophis is harmless here at the bottom." She pointed beneath the boat where a snake curled, distinguishable only by its color from the river itself.

"But the gods are ruined," Yussif said somberly.

"Yes, every face but one is hacked away." Valerie moved the light beam along the barque to the prow. "All but Seth."

"Who would do such a thing?" Derek asked.

"Coptic Christians, maybe. Or some other sect that hated the old religion. They did it in the temples too, to 'kill' the gods." Valerie walked around the sarcophagus to the wall. "Look at what they did to Seth standing there next to Horus. Whoever smashed the gods and spared Seth also erased his original arm. See? Someone painted in the new one hurling a spear, not at Apophis, but at the men."

Auset shifted her weight impatiently. "I don't get it."

"It is our story," Rekemheb repeated. "See, the cartouches hold our names." The Ka pointed toward the newly painted spear that plunged into the first kneeling figure. "It was thus that I was murdered by Sethnakht. As for my son, and my daughter too, I do not know their fates."

"Isn't he here, in this grave?" Derek set his shoulder against the lid at the corner of the stone. Yussif leaned against the opposite corner, and together they slid the stone slab diagonally, opening the sarcophagus. Valerie pointed the light beam down inside.

"Oh no," Derek whispered.

The Ka stepped toward the opening and looked down at the disintegrated wrappings, the smashed skull, and the tatters of brown leathery flesh stretched over shattered bones.

"I have known for centuries that I was the last of my line to reach the Duat," he murmured. "My children's souls were destroyed, but the line of their offspring was not."

He laid a hand on the shoulder of his descendant. "It seems that was the bargain."

"I am so sorry, Rekemheb."

"Do not be. The gods have let me share his resting place. This is a great comfort. Entomb me here over the mummy of my son in his sarcophagus."

Derek carried the wooden casket into the last chamber and pried open the lid. He lifted the covering blanket from the cadaver and folded it in three, making a sort of pallet. Then he rolled the second blanket up into a loose cylinder and laid both pallet and pillow into the sarcophagus over the ruins of the son. He paused. "Hator-em-heb. Tell me about him."

The Ka assumed a softness of expression Valerie had not seen in him before. "He was much in your likeness, Ayemderak. He spoke with your same sweet voice, and to make a point, he always set his fist upon his hip."

"So that's where he gets it from." Auset laughed softly. "I thought it was acting class."

"And your daughter?" Valerie asked.

"Merut-tot was my eldest. She was not given to temple service, but to words. It was her wish to be a scribe. Of her life and fate I also know nothing."

Derek lifted the mummy from its flimsy casket and placed it gently in the stone sarcophagus. Elevated upon the makeshift pillow, the gauze-wrapped Hathor-priest lay with ecclesiastical dignity.

Valerie drew out the golden amulet from her knapsack and set it gently on the gauze wrappings of the mummy's chest. "Rekemheb, this should stay with you."

"No, it should not." The Ka reached past her with a translucent arm to retrieve the plaque by its chain and then laid it with solemnity over Derek's head. "This is the prophecy, the scribe said, and you must hold fast to it, Ayemderak, just as I did."

He turned to the others with a wan smile. "You who have brought me to this place with such great labor, you are my family and my friends. Even in the underworld, I wait with you for the gods to reveal themselves."

His speech ended, the Ka's form disintegrated. His blue-green light seemed to glow for a moment under the gauze wrappings of his mummy before fading out.

Derek's eyebrows made a little chevron. "They always say they'll call."

"He'll call," Auset said. "He'll come back for the birth of our baby. It's part of the prophecy, isn't it? So can we go now? I'm not so fond of being in a tomb."

"She's right," Valerie said. "We've been here long enough, and we haven't even talked about where to go now. I think El Dakhla. We can get some road transportation back to Cairo."

"That's right. We're safe now, aren't we? Without the mummy, the corpus delicti, so to speak, they can't charge us with anything." Derek grunted as he helped the others slide the stone cover of the sarcophagus back in place. "I can't believe we've actually pulled this off."

The shuffling feet caused them to turn around. Valerie's flashlight sliced along the stone wall and stopped. A cold Akhnaton face leered back at them.

"No, Miss Foret, you have not 'pulled it off,'" the velvety voice said.

"Volker Vanderschmitt," Valerie said wearily. "You just won't leave us alone."

Something moved behind him in the dark, and she shifted the light beam to the side. A figure swathed in black stood there; its fathomless dark eyes looked back at her without expression. Valerie inhaled sharply and whispered. "Nekhbet."

It was then that she saw he held a gun in one hand. With the other he drew a flashlight from his belt and clicked it on. The two light beams confronted each other. "Is that her name? I never bothered to ask. Well, even with my ten words of Arabic, it was easy enough to convince her I was part of your team and get her to bring me here. You must thank her for me."

"I don't understand."

"How I was able to track you down? Oh, Miss Foret. You are as poor a thief as you are an archaeologist. You left a very vivid trail—in Amarna and with the Bedouins. Everyone remembered you, of course."

Her eyes fell on the gun in his hand, and the realization struck her like a stone. It was her own.

He waved it, taunting her. "You made quite an impression on the Bedouins particularly, Miss Foret. The headman was very proud of his new acquisition, but not so proud that he wouldn't part with it for a good price."

Derek interrupted. "There's no need to threaten us with a gun, Dr. Vanderschmitt. Things are going on here you don't understand. If you knew—"

"I know all I need to know, Mr. Ragin. I know that the four of you have committed a very serious crime, and you will do what I say or I will hand you over to the authorities. I cannot imagine that an Egyptian jail would be a very nice place to live in." He glanced over at Auset. "Or give birth in."

Valerie darted glances back and forth between the gunman and Nekhbet, still silent in the semidarkness. What was going on? How had the woman who seemed to know so much fallen into the hands of this demented man? Was she after all just a clever Bedouin who had made some lucky guesses? Or were Rekemheb's mysterious friends so inept that they could be thwarted by one revenge-obsessed academic? None of it made any sense. "Just what do you want, then?"

Vanderschmitt's thick lips formed a slight pucker as he tilted his head back slightly, and he spoke deliberately, as if he had rehearsed his speech beforehand. "Here is the way I see the story unfolding. You will go quietly back to Brussels and resign from the department. You can explain your resignation with some womanly weakness: physical exhaustion, emotional breakdown. You'll think of something. For my part, I will return the mummy to its original location and, more importantly, refrain from reporting this theft. I suggest you accept my offer and thus avoid imprisonment."

Derek stepped into the light. "We have a counteroffer, Dr. Vanderschmitt," he said, unfazed by the muzzle of the pistol a few inches from his chest. He drew the gold chain over his head and held it out. The jeweled pectoral sparkled in the light beam. "We will give you the amulet if you simply leave us—and the mummy—alone. Valerie returns to her position at the university, and all returns to normal. Except of course for the fame the entire university will enjoy for the discovery. I am sure you will see your face often enough in the papers to satisfy you."

Vanderschmitt chuckled. "Ah, yes. The amulet of Meremptah. You see, I also read the tomb texts and discovered its existence. And I noticed that you omitted it from your official list of artifacts, Miss Foret." He took the golden plaque and appraised it in the light. "Magnificent. I can see why you were willing to risk your career for it."

He hefted the amulet, then dropped it into his shirt pocket. His mouth tightened into a triumphant smile for a moment and then sagged into astonishment.

"What…is that?"

Valerie glanced over her right shoulder to see the ghostly Ka of Rekemheb, his otherwise serene visage darkened by anger. In two paces he was before Vanderschmitt, reaching toward the necklace. The otherworldly voice spoke in a deadly monotone, and Valerie recognized the ancient curses.

Vanderschmitt backed away from the spectre. "No…no. Impossible." He shook his head. "No such thing."

The shimmering finger touched him and he flinched. At that moment, the Bedouin hurled herself sideways against her captor. In the same instant, both men lunged toward him, knocking the light from Valerie's hand. Both flashlights crashed on the ground, plunging the tomb into pitch blackness.

The gunshots were deafening.

Chapter XXVIII:
Slouching toward Thebes

God *damn* it!" Volker Vanderschmitt threw the jeep into gear and the vehicle lurched forward. The heat radiating from the steel hood blew across him in waves.

He looked down at the pistol on the passenger seat where he had tossed it. What the hell had gone wrong? He had been so careful, so diligent, even after the fools from Antiquities had dropped the case. Even the Arab woman had proven surprisingly easy to single out from the tribe and to bribe, with minimal communication, to lead him to the fugitives. It should have been a nice clean confrontation, with him, however it turned out, as the hero of the day.

And what was that thing he saw? An impossibility. Already he was certain it was a hallucination. Or a half-naked guide he had not seen riding with the fugitives. Yes, that was probably it. And together with that native woman, they had attacked him. Three times he tried to knock them away with the pistol, and three times it had gone off. If anyone had been injured in the scuffle, they were to blame for it.

He patted the object in his shirt pocket. It was just too bad that he would have to hand over the amulet. But maybe not. There was no mention of it in the report, no photograph, only her word against his. And she was a thief. In a way, you could see it as a just reward for a long and difficult job that no one else was willing to do.

He had been a good detective after all, tracking them down, and without help from the damned Egyptians. Sometimes he wondered why he bothered with them; they were so corrupt. One couldn't tell the authorities from the thieves. "The people that dwelleth in the darkness." The words of Isaiah came to him with a sudden clarity. There had always been that kind of darkness, and it was men like him who brought the

light. Stalwart men who were willing to set aside ambition and comfort to fight in a righteous cause.

And that was it, when you got down to it, was it not? One was either of the party of God or the party of evil, a crusader or a heathen. That was surely what was behind the dreams he kept having—of standing guard and sensing the great light at his back.

He took the amulet out of his pocket and pulled the chain with one hand over his head. The golden image slid heavily down inside his shirt and dangled between the soft swellings over his pectoral muscles.

A calm came over him, and he relaxed his foot on the gas pedal. The jeep slowed perceptibly, and he found himself nodding as he reflected. It all made sense now. That was why he had been named chairman at precisely the time the splendid tomb was discovered. He had been chosen to prevent the theft, to set things right. It had been exhausting, dangerous even, but he accepted the sacrifice because that was the kind of man he was. A crusader. Yes. He liked that.

The three fugitives struggled eastward. Two of them, wounded, held on to the swaying camel seat while the third one walked. Footprints of man and beast stretched out for kilometers behind them.

Derek shook himself out of his stupor and brushed away the insect that adhered to the sticky crust on his neck. The bleeding had stopped finally, and the *nemes* that he had pulled down over the top of his ear at least covered the open flesh. The wound, it turned out, was slight, but the pain persisted. "Are you sure this is the shortest way?"

"Yes. Yes." Plodding forward and holding the camel's rein, Yussif checked Valerie's compass again. "Luxor is over there, east, always east. We are maybe halfway now. It will be okay."

"Of course." Derek tightened his grip on Auset, riding in front of him. With hands pressed together over the emergency bandage on her swollen abdomen, she leaned, feverish, against him. He held the water bottle in front of her mouth, and she drank from it obediently, without saying anything. He could sense her fear; it was his fear too. That the baby was already dead and the rest of them would die in the desert.

"You hear that, sweetie? It's not far. Yussif knows the way to Luxor. Just hold on a little longer." For the first time in the journey, Auset was silent.

Derek wanted to talk, to be reassured. Things looked very bad, and he hadn't even told them his passport was gone. Left in the tomb, probably, or at the Bedouin camp; he had no idea. But now that was the least of their worries. "I can't believe he pulled the trigger," he rambled. "He already had everything he wanted—his damned tomb and the amulet too. And now he's killed someone."

No one responded. Hot wind ruffled the wings of his *nemes* and seemed to sharpen the sound of Yussif's shoes crunching on sand. "Where are they, those gods? You'd think they'd look after us a little better."

Derek squinted toward the direction they traveled, where the harsh sunlight was less piercing. Too difficult to look elsewhere, least of all behind them toward the afternoon sun. High overhead vultures made a wide arc and seemed to circle back toward them. "Oh, great," he muttered. "Death by cliché."

"How much longer?" Auset rasped.

She still held her hands over the baby's mound, and Derek saw with alarm the bright red moisture seeping through her fingers. "Not much," he lied. "Just a few hours. Try to sleep. Yussif and I will take care of you. What more could a girl ask for, right?"

His eyes were so tired, his damaged ear rang endlessly, and the torn ear lobe throbbed. He closed his eyes and concentrated on the sounds, grateful not to be the one walking. Insects still buzzed, and the plodding footfall of both Yussif and the camel in different rhythms made a curious kind of syncopation. In the background he heard a soft rumbling.

Auset moaned again, and he jerked out of his trance. "Yussif, can we go any faster?"

The Arab looked back over his shoulder. "I am sorry, my friend. We cannot run. Maybe you ask your ancestor's gods to give us nice truck."

Derek moved his head around, stretching the muscles in his neck. He blinked in disbelief. "Uh…you mean like those over there?" He pointed off behind them where the harsh sun had kept them from looking. A small convoy of armored vehicles rumbled toward them.

Yussif stopped in his tracks, tugging downward on the reins. The camel honked furiously. "Egyptian army, Frontier Corps, I think."

The convoy spotted the wanderers at the same time, and one of the covered jeeps veered away from the line. In a few moments it pulled up

next to the group. The passenger, an officer, set one foot on the ground, but before he could stand, Yussif ran toward the jeep. He spoke rapidly, but it was clear from his gestures that he was asking for help. The one officer nodded and spoke into a handheld radio.

"What did he say?" Derek asked anxiously.

"Is good news. This convoy has medical officer. They are on way to Dakhla, but we are closer to Luxor so they will take Auset to hospital there."

"Thank God!" Derek said softly, and then spoke into Auset's ear. "You see? Everything's going to be all right."

In a few moments a personnel carrier pulled up alongside the jeep. The wide red crescent painted on its roof identified it as a medical vehicle. A tall, angular man got out of it, and the crescent insignia at the top of his sleeve identified him as well. Yussif tapped the camel on the flank, and it kneeled for the dismount. The officer leaned over and did a cursory exam of the feverish woman while two men came directly behind him with a canvas stretcher.

"She has a gunshot wound," Derek said to the officer in English, and Yussif translated. "You'll be all right now," Derek repeated to Auset, releasing her.

She said something unintelligible and fell limply into the arms of the medics. They laid her out efficiently, if not gently, on the narrow military stretcher and set off at a brisk walk.

Derek slid off the camel and stood uncertain as soldiers carried the mother of his child away from him. He could not even appeal to Yussif, who stood outside the vehicle in conversation with the medical officer.

The officer climbed into the van next to the stretcher and looked out, obviously waiting for something to be clarified or settled. Outside, Yussif argued with another man who had just arrived, also apparently an officer. This one seemed angry, and he kept his hand resting on his sidearm.

Finally, Yussif threw up his hands, and the two men walked back to where Derek stood bewildered. Yussif was agitated. He kept looking back at the van where, in the open door, the medical officer still called out to him. Something was going wrong. Very wrong.

The officer stopped in front of him. Shorter and beefier than the medic, he had sagging pockmarked cheeks that accentuated his scowl. His desert camouflage uniform was ill-fitting, and the shirt strained at its buttons over his midsection. Derek braced himself.

Yussif said, "He asks who you are and why you are in the desert. I tell him you are tourist traveling with us, but he does not believe. Or does not want to. He looks for Sudanese assassin."

"The assassin again? Did you tell him I'm an American?"

"Of course. But you are not dressed like American, so he wants to see identification. Show him your passport, quickly, so we can go."

"I…I don't have it. It's lost. Explain to them, Yussif. You know what to say."

The driver of the medical vehicle started his motor, and Yussif began backing toward it. He raised both hands and called out to Derek, "Please, my friend. Auset is in great danger and maybe die. Someone must to take care of her on the way. We have to go and you must to explain yourself."

Then he seemed to change his mind and came back again, unwrapping the long blue turban from around his head. He draped it around Derek's neck and clasped his hands in front of him, as if in prayer. "Forgive me, my friend. I *must* go. You will explain to these men and come later to Luxor. Everything to be okay. *Inshaa' allah*."

Yussif turned again and ran toward the medical truck. Without looking back, he climbed into the passenger side and pulled the door closed. In a moment it drove off eastward, spreading a low wake of dust behind and to the side.

Derek still stood before the pockmarked officer, who in the meantime had waved two soldiers over to join him. "Do you speak English?" he asked anxiously. "Does anyone speak English?"

"I speak English." The officer drew his pistol. "You are under arrest."

Chapter XXIX:
Pyrrhic Defeat

The failing flashlight on the lid of the sarcophagus sent a weak cone of light across the chamber. Beneath it, crouching against the stone side, Valerie held the limp form of Nekhbet in her arms. The satiny hair, still smelling of cedar, brushed against her chin.

The yellow light grew smaller, browner, and finally faded out, and she was once again in the black punishment closet, in stifling punitive darkness. She gave herself to it, remembering the strange violent kiss and the delirium afterward. What had happened?

She pressed her lips to the cooling flesh of the woman's forehead. She had been puzzling so long that her reason had collapsed, like a muscle worked to the point of failure. Now the many questions that crowded in on one another cancelled each other out and left her with only emotion. Regret, longing, and an overwhelming sense of guilt.

She buried her face again in the thick hair. Whoever the strange woman was, she had lain in Valerie's arms and had been mortal after all.

"You must not linger here. There is a prophecy to fulfill."

She opened her eyes to the dull luminescence hovering in the darkness. She was no longer impressed. "Get the hell away from me," she hissed. "Take your damned prophecy elsewhere."

"No, you must take your mourning elsewhere." He folded himself up next to her, illuminating her from the side in a dull blue-green light. "You cannot weaken in this fashion. You are chosen to accomplish a great thing."

"No, you've got it wrong. I don't belong to this 'chosen' lineage, although I threw away my career for it for some myth of the gods."

"No myth. The gods were real and will be real again."

"I can't tell anymore what's real or unreal, what's my world or your world. I only know that this woman seemed to care for me. Now, because of us, she's dead. If she was working for you, it didn't do her much good. Now I've got to take her back to her people and try to explain why she's dead. I don't even know why myself."

"You foolish child. You have given up after only a few days and a single death, when I lost everything and yet waited thousands of years." His tone became gentle. "Did you think there would be no sacrifice to save the world?"

"Save the world? Is that what we're trying to do? Well, we aren't doing very well, are we?"

The Ka dimmed and brightened again, as if with faltering current. "No. We are not doing well. And that is why you must confront this murderer before you give in to personal sorrow. He is important. If you will not pursue him for my amulet, you must bring him to justice for this woman's death. It is better for your heart to do this than to carry her back to the shepherds, who will not thank you for it."

"Pursue Vanderschmitt? Perhaps you haven't noticed that he's in a jeep while I have a camel?"

"Many things will stop a machine that will not stop a camel. Are you afraid?"

She felt the dead woman's breast pressed against her own in the intimate embrace that death allowed and was ashamed. Infatuation did not cease as abruptly as life did. "Yes. Of course I'm afraid. He has my gun, after all. You know what a gun is, don't you? That's the thing that killed her and hurt Auset and Derek. My gun." She closed her eyes at the irony, which was unbearable.

"You have a weapon he does not have—the desert gods."

"Desert gods? They've been pretty useless so far, haven't they?"

"Do not speak disrespectfully of these gods which one day may speak for you."

"I'm sorry." She sighed. "But what's the point? I can't catch up with him."

"My Ba has seen him. He travels confidently, with your weapon far from his hand. Shu will delay him. And when you face this man, you will flatter him. He has a high opinion of himself, but he is not strong. This is a thing you cannot let pass."

She again pressed her forehead against the face of the dead woman. Then she laid the body gently down beside the sarcophagus. For a moment she knelt, studying the dark form, and then she kissed the cold, slightly open lips. "No, it will not pass."

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The ferocious afternoon sun beat down on her back, baking away precious moisture, and she took another drink of water from the goatskin. When she recorked it she saw the lines of red-brown stain around her nails. She had blood on her hands. As much as he did.

His wheel tracks in the sand were clear and led in the direction they had come a few hours before. But he was way ahead of her, increasing the distance every minute. How in hell was she going to catch up with him on a camel?

She looked northeastward and saw the creeping ridge of gray. Wind, stirring up sand. "Shu, God of Wind," she said into the air. "Do you know a Ka named Rekemheb? He seems to know you. Or a Bedouin woman named Nekhbet? I am doing this for them. For an amulet and for justice. So if you can help me out somehow…"

The sandstorm was still far away, could go in any direction. She drew a checkered scarf from her pack to cover her face and urged the camel into a trot.

Then she saw them, spots in the distance. Was it a mirage? Her weary eyes burned from staring at lines in the sand. No. She recognized the objects—and the location. It was the wadi that held the Bedouin well, and the larger spot was a jeep. She rode closer, eyes riveted on the second moving spot until she could make it out clearly.

A man in trousers with something white around his hips knelt facing away from her. Her camel padded closer, and she gradually made sense of the scene. Tools lay on the ground near the rear wheel; he must have had to change the tire. It would have been an awful job in the heat. His kneeling made sense; he had tied his shirt around his waist and was washing himself at the well. Then he stood up, still facing away, his back bare to the waist.

He must have finally heard her, for he turned around and she saw the glitter on his chest. Of course. His trophy. Well, she had something better to offer, but she would have to make her proposal quickly. She

took the ivory case out of her knapsack and hung it on her shoulder by the leather strap.

"Stop right there," he called out when she was a dozen meters away.

She did not reply and let the camel drift closer, puzzled. She had never seen him shirtless, and she guessed he took pains never to be seen that way. His upper body was almost womanly; his arms were soft, unmuscled, and his pectorals swelled like breasts. Below his waist, his torso widened into plump hips. The belt of his trousers had dropped below his swollen belly, and the shirt tied around his hips rendered them even more pronounced. There was something distastefully familiar in his long face and his pear-shaped body wrapped in white cloth.

She stared for a moment, as if he were a puzzle piece she held, until it came to her. He was the image, complete with white kilt and royal ornament, of the monotheist Akhnaton. Derek had been right.

"You are persistent, Miss Foret. I will grant you that. Not unlike myself."

She was above him, still mounted, and on the slope above the wadi. He had to look up, and he tilted his head a fraction, grudging respect. "But what do you hope to achieve by pursuing me? Whatever happened back in that cave is on your head." He untied the twisted sleeves from around his waist and drew his shirt on again, but the amulet chain was still visible, and the Akhnaton image still spooked from him.

She lowered the camel for the awkward dismount. "You needn't have run away, you know. Nothing much happened in the cave but a lot of noise," she lied. "Well, you did take a nasty slice out of Derek's ear. They're all on their way to El Dakhla now. You scared the hell out of us."

"You deserved scaring." He rolled up his right sleeve in precise turns of each cuff, over and over, to his elbow.

She kept her tone bright. "You know, if you hadn't escalated our little disagreement so quickly, you would have seen there are things we can agree on. I found the tomb and the world knows it, but my resignation will not help you nearly as much as my cooperation. You can be another Howard Carter, if I go along with it. And I would…for the mummy."

"Why this obsession with a mummy? What's so special about it? If it's the jewels you wanted, you could have simply taken the necklace out of its coffin and left."

His question took her off guard. Should she tell him? "You think this whole thing was about the amulet?" She shook her head. "It's nothing like that." She paused again while he rolled up the second sleeve. "You know what a Ka is, don't you? Well, this mummy has a Ka—that's what you saw in the tomb."

"What are you talking about?" He squinted at her for a long moment, as if studying her face for clues. "You mean to tell me you have been carrying around a corpse because you think it has a ghost? The heat has gotten to you, Miss Foret."

"I thought I was crazy too, at first." She sauntered closer to the jeep. Out of the corner of her eye she saw the pistol on the passenger seat. "But he's real, I can assure you. If you talked to him, he would tell you amazing things. Things that would change everything you ever believed in."

"Oh, really." He snorted. "You call yourself a scientist, but you stand there with a straight face and propose a myth that twenty centuries of Christianity has laid to rest." He shook his head. "The ever-hysterical female. I should have expected that."

"Well, perhaps you will let me keep my illusions," she said, changing tack. She stood between him and the jeep. "But I'm willing to give you another artifact in exchange for the amulet." She laid her hand on the ivory and gold case that hung on her shoulder. "A scribe kit, in ivory and gold, from the court of Meremptah." She held the scroll case up for him to see.

He stared at the artifact without touching it, appraising its authenticity. She had his attention.

"You know, we're a lot alike, Dr. Vanderschmitt." She let go of the scroll case, letting it simply hang from her shoulder where he could see it. "We're both good archaeologists, and I think at the end of the day, we want the same thing."

"You have no idea what I want, and we are not at all alike." His eyes moved to her face. "But you *are* just like a woman I once knew. I saw through her, however, just as I see through you."

She was in front of him then, and when he lifted his right hand to take the scroll case from her shoulder, she reached behind her into the jeep and snatched the pistol from the seat.

He reacted instantly, seizing her hand and forcing it skyward. In defense she pounded upward with her other fist against his nose. Something seemed to give with a faint snap. He grunted in sudden pain,

and his thick lips went white. Bubbles of blood appeared at his nostrils as he exhaled, and when they burst, blood streamed over his lips and dripped onto his shirt. He leaned against her, forcing her up against the jeep and knocking her hat into the backseat. The pistol fired once into the air, causing them both to flinch.

The pain of his nose seemed to stun him, while the adrenaline of rage pumped through her, and she managed to force him a step backward. "Murderer," she snarled. "You are pathetic."

"What?" His eyes brightened at the word, and the skin of his face increased in color. His grip tightened on her wrist, and he twisted her hand back until the gun barrel pointed down at her.

"Corruption," he grunted, his breathing audible and wet. Panting, he forced his thumb into the space over her finger and pressed down. "An offense to men and God."

A white-hot bolt plunged through her. She gasped as agonizing nausea erupted upward to her lungs and downward to her groin. Dropping the pistol, she stood frozen in disbelief, pressing both hands over the spreading stain above her belt. She crumpled to her knees.

He watched her gasping, and for the briefest moment he understood her helpless outrage, recalled his own a lifetime ago. Before he had found God. Then lucidity returned and he realized he had finally made his point. He stepped back and pulled a folded handkerchief from his pocket. Pressing it to his throbbing, bloody nose, he bent over and retrieved the pistol from the ground. "You see what you've done?" he said almost ruefully. "If you had only left well enough alone."

Dust swirled around him as he turned away. Without looking back, he climbed back into the jeep, driving off northeastward, the wind-driven sand hissing against his windshield.

Valerie still knelt. Her viscera a glowing mass that swelled with every heartbeat, she watched him with dimming vision. The increasing wind tangled her long hair and coated her face with the light brown powder of the desert. Slowly, pain faded along with consciousness. As if in Muslim prayer, she curled forward onto the sand, and life seeped away through her limp hands.

❖

He drove as fast as he dared on the rough ground, careening around rocks that could puncture his remaining tires, trying to outrun the storm. All the while, thoughts pounded in his head like drums of every volume and pitch. All right. He had killed her, just like in the dream, but it was self-defense, that was clear. She had stolen the mummy and the amulet, had chased him into the desert. For God's sake, she had broken his nose and then drawn a gun on him. He dabbed again at the blood that still trickled from both nostrils.

That damned gun! He reached over his shoulder and tossed it onto the backseat. What would he tell the police? Would he have to even admit finding her? He should have buried her. Maybe the sandstorm would cover her. What about the others? What lies would they tell?

The prickling wind blew off his hat. He peered through nearly shut eyes to keep the powdery particles from blinding him as they spun in the back draft behind the windshield. Soon they filled the air, forming a crust over his bloody upper lip and searing his nose with every inhalation. Slowing the jeep enough to free both hands, he opened his blood-soaked handkerchief. Quickly, clumsily, he tied the handkerchief in a triangle over his mouth and grabbed hold of the wheel again.

He could hear the sand blowing into the radiator; the engine was overheating, and the thick brown air was like a wall in front of him. With a deafening bang, the engine seized up and the jeep rolled to a halt.

The searing wind tore at him, scouring his upper face and ears. He pressed his eyes shut against the agonizing sting but could not keep the sand from collecting in lumps in the moist corners. They burned unbearably and so he untied the handkerchief and, holding his breath, wiped them clear.

The relentless wind caused the handkerchief to flutter and twist in his hand, then snatched it and sent it flying away from him. He pulled his shirt up over his mouth and climbed over to the passenger side. If he could just get his face out of the wind. He curled up on the floor of the jeep, pressing his face between his knees and covering his head with his arms.

There was more sand than air now; he felt it filling his hair, trickling down inside of his shirt, lacerating his forehead. Powdery sand, tiny particles of the desert, crept along his nose and throat, minute soldiers breaching his defenses. He could not breathe slowly enough

to keep them out. When the first tiny, sharp pieces entered his lungs he began to cough. Each wracking cough required an inhalation, and each inhalation brought more cutting sand to tear him from within.

The spasms became more violent, the burning in his chest more agonizing. The bloody mucus he began to expel trickled down his chin, hardening quickly into lumps of brownish grit. As the suffocation began, he thrashed in wild paroxysms in the steel chamber of his jeep, smashing his head on the underside of the dash. Harder and harder he thrashed, inhaling fire, coughing out pieces of his lungs, until the desert finally stilled him.

The sand continued hissing around the jeep, filling its interior, fixing him in place for the scavengers of the red land.

Chapter XXX:
Orpheus in the Desert

The officer planted himself in front of Derek, one hand resting on his holster. But his short slender body, his narrow belly swelling out over his gun belt like an early pregnancy, severely undermined his posture of authority.

"Arrest? This is insane. I'm an American. I don't even look Sudanese, and I don't speak…whatever they speak down there. That woman in the car is…my wife."

"Your wife?" The officer sucked air noisily through tobacco-brown teeth. "Your friend say is *his* wife. I think American guy does not dress like this." He reached over to pull off Derek's *nemes* and held it up in the air between them. "Maybe you want to change story." He let the cloth drop. "You go to Luxor, yes. You get passport to show you are okay, we let you go. To wife or anyplace."

He was joined by a second man, who was at once menacing and comical. His teeth protruded slightly, and when he did not press his lips together, the middle two slid out between them, rodent-like.

A third soldier joined them, moustached and scowling.

Derek replied to the first officer. "My friend told you. My passport is lost. We were attacked by a gunman. You can see I was wounded too." He tilted his head to show the scab-encrusted ear. "I must have lost it then."

"You explain this to Luxor police." The officer produced a length of cord and wrapped it around Derek's wrists in front of him. He barked orders in Arabic, and the other two soldiers walked their prisoner forcefully toward a military personnel carrier.

"What is it with you guys and foreigners?" Derek twisted in their grasp. "This is the second time in three days I've been yanked around

this way."

Ignoring him, the two pressed him into the back of the vehicle. It smelled of old sweat and cigarette smoke. Tooth-man, who seemed to know no English, started the motor while moustache-man got in on the passenger side and lit up a cigarette.

The driver took the car around in a wide curve and drove eastward away from the convoy. From his seat in the rear Derek looked between the shoulders of the two soldiers onto the road, searching for the medical van, but it was already out of sight.

"You guys gonna tell me what's going on here? I mean you can't really think I'm Sudanese. Uh…do either of you speak English?"

Neither man replied, although moustache-man raised his open hand to signal "silence."

Derek stared sullenly down at the cord that tied his hands together. An amateurish job. Or maybe the officer had simply gone through the motions of securing him and didn't care. He clenched his fists, stretching the cord, and then relaxed them. Yes, that would do it. He flexed again.

The terrain had grown rougher. Boulders and rocky ridges rose on the landscape, and the straight desert road began to curve left and right around them. He could not be sure, but he reckoned they still headed eastward toward Luxor. Then the driver suddenly spun the wheel and took the car off the road.

"Where are you going? This can't be the way to Luxor."

The soldiers ignored him and began talking between themselves, glancing at him occasionally through the center mirror. He was certain he heard the words "*fuloos*" and "*agnabee.*" His vocabulary in Arabic was miniscule, but he had certainly learned the words for money and foreigner. If they were talking about his money, it was not a good sign.

Staring with feigned indifference out the side window, he worked more urgently on his bindings, clenching and relaxing, until he could force a thumb under one of the cords. With a minimum of movement, he unraveled the rope and then wrapped it back around loosely, grasping it so it looked the same as before.

Then he leaned forward again, studying the road for any indication of where they were taking him. Nothing but rock and sand. Moustache-man tapped another cigarette from a crumpled package and lit it with a slender Bic lighter.

Derek turned his head away as the man exhaled a long stream of smoke. Coughing, he stared sullenly through the side window. Something caught his eye—a band of gray dust on the horizon. It was the movement that made it ominous, for as he watched, the band wavered and swelled at the center. "Hey. I think there's a sandstorm over there. That's not good, right?"

"What you think, American boy?" The smoker laughed and picked a speck of tobacco from his tongue. "This is stupid tourist car? No. Egyptian army is good. Military motor is protect from sand."

American boy? Derek glanced down at his hands again. The alarm that had been buzzing softly at the back of his brain suddenly clanged. They knew he wasn't the Sudanese. It wasn't an arrest, at least not anymore; it was a kidnapping.

He forced calm on his face while he considered every possibility. It didn't look good. They had every advantage. What did he have other than free hands? They were armed soldiers and he was—an actor.

They were approaching a rocky outcropping. Flat, slightly bigger than a theater stage. And the sandstorm was getting closer. It was showtime. "Hey, guys. I have to go to the bathroom. You know. *Hammam*. *Toilette*."

Moustache-man said something in Arabic, and the driver abruptly stopped the car. "Open door and piss."

"Uh, it's not that. It's the other. Really bad. Diarrhea." He rocked slightly, forward and back, suggesting urgency, dire consequences. "You know? Tourist's sickness."

"Okay. Go and make shit." The soldier winced disgust. "You have one minute."

Derek opened his door with bound hands and walked toward the rocky slope as far as he dared. The driver leaned through his window pointing his pistol at him.

"One minute, yeah, sure. Okay." Derek looked around. The sandstorm was almost upon them. It was his only chance.

"More fast!" The soldier got out of the passenger side and stood with his pistol aimed over the hood of the car. "Shit or come back to car!"

With his back turned, Derek hunched over, pretending to undo his trousers. The thickening air hissed around him. From a crouching position, he threw the cord from his wrists and broke into a run.

The soldier's gun roared, and the bullet zinged off the rock beside him. He spun around to the other side of the outcropping, heard two more gunshots. The air was suddenly dense and biting wherever it touched skin. As he ran, he wrapped Yussif's turban around his head and face, leaving only a tiny slit for vision. Over the slit he wrapped a single layer of the turban and tucked the ends of it deep under the folds so it would not unravel. With faint, gauzy vision he groped his way along the rocky formation. A fourth gunshot sounded; a bullet struck close to his foot.

The irregular rock table afforded narrow footholds, and desperation drove him like a spider up to the top of it. The wind was full of needles, and he shut his eyes as he scrabbled along on hands and knees. Finally he felt the opposite edge. His pursuers had goggles, he knew, but by now they too were useless, for the air was opaque with sand. The blind pursued the blind.

And sightless, he had an advantage. On the rock table that was his little stage, he knew exactly where he was. Fifteen years of singing with spotlights scorching his eyes had taught him spatial memory. After a moment's glimpse, his perfect inner compass could point to every object. He let himself slide down on the other side over the rough stones that tore his shirt and abraded his skin. He felt the desert floor again, then stood for a fraction of a second, his back pressed against the stone. Sand whirled around him, and he forced himself to breathe in shallow breaths through the four layers of cloth. The car he judged was…stage right…there, where the standing basses of the orchestra would have been. He groped his way sightlessly forward in the roiling dust.

"Oof!" He felt his knee bang into metal. He had misjudged slightly and hit the rear of the vehicle. He groped his way forward. In a moment he had found the door handle, and he threw himself into the car, ripping off his turban. Miraculously, the key was in the ignition, and at the first rush of the engine, he slammed the motor into gear and lurched forward.

He drove wildly into the gray and yellow maelstrom, praying there were no rocks in the way, but the desert floor stayed smooth. Finally, when the sound of gunfire seemed distant enough to be harmless, he stopped. His heart pounding, he pressed trembling fingers to the sides of his head.

Now what? How long did a sandstorm last, he wondered, and could he ever find the road again afterward? How long could he hold out sitting in the Land Rover? He looked around inside.

A walkie-talkie lay on the dashboard. He chuckled, imagining himself using it to inform the Egyptian army that he had hijacked one of their vehicles. He leaned over toward the passenger side. A wooden box on the floor held ammunition for the soldiers' sidearms. In the side pocket he found a manual in Arabic, metal tools whose purpose he could not guess, a map in Arabic, and a flashlight.

The air brightened in front of him. An avenue seemed to open, inviting him forward. At first he did not budge, fearing to wander aimlessly following a fickle wind until he ran out of gas. But the wind behind him became stronger, the crash of swirling sand more violent, piling up on the rear window. To avoid being engulfed, he drove forward, red-eyed, toward calmer air.

Urged forward in fits and starts, he had time to think. He agonized first about himself and then about the others. Auset, dangerously wounded, and the baby—his baby—in mortal danger. He clenched the steering wheel with dusty hands. And Valerie, who had insisted on staying with the dying Bedouin woman. Where was she now? Had the Bedouins thanked her for bringing back one of their own—murdered? It was unlikely.

He drove toward nothing but vague light, until finally the storm dissipated. When the air cleared he saw nothing but more desert and, in the distance, a spot of vibrating blackness. He drove toward it, apprehension turning to dread. When he grasped what he was seeing, his stomach lurched.

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He stopped next to the jeep. "Oh, my God," he whispered as the roiling mass of black feathers and bobbing leathery heads broke apart and the smaller scavengers fluttered away. The larger birds, fearless, hulked close by, waiting. He forced himself out of his vehicle.

There he was, or the grotesque remains of him, crouching on the passenger side half packed in sand. The vultures had eaten all they could reach, from the face and neck and downward into the chest; only

the shirt had slowed their penetration. Below the rolled-up sleeves, the forearms were picked meatless and one of the hands was torn off. The shredded shirt was still buttoned over the half-devoured chest. On the car seat, near his knee, its chain obviously broken, was the amulet. It confirmed the identity of the faceless carcass which that morning had been a man.

Derek snatched the object and then, leaning on the rear of the sand-scoured vehicle, he retched.

He wiped his face with his sleeve and tried to get his bearings. How much longer could he last before he died of thirst? Keeping his head turned away from the grisly corpse, he looked into the rear of the jeep for water, for anything. Then he saw it and whispered, "Oh Jesus."

Her fedora lay on the backseat. He plunged his arm into the piles of sand feeling for anything solid, dreading to find a part of her. His hand struck something hard, and he pulled it out. Her revolver. He blew off the gritty powder, opened the chamber, and emptied the cylinder into his hand. Five empty shells and a loaded one.

He thought back; it had fired only three times in the cave. The other two must have been in the desert. But who had shot whom?

He turned slowly, his eyes sweeping the barren land. There was something in the distance. Vultures…no…a single large vulture lighted on something and fluttered its wings. Another carcass? He got behind the wheel again and rumbled toward it, the word "carcass" tightening his stomach again. "Please, Jesus, Hathor, Mary," he murmured, "please let it be a dead animal."

When he saw the familiar boot protruding from the sand, he burst into tears. He dropped to his knees, pushed away the sand that half covered her, and lifted her up into his arms. He held her against him and pressed his cheek against her cold forehead.

The scavenger had not flown away, but watched him from a short distance. He threw sand at it, cursing.

Bereft, he stood up and carried the limp form to the car, setting it gently in the passenger seat. He went around to the other side and got in beside her, gently brushing the sand away from her hair. He let his hand rest awhile on her cheek and cried again. It was like a part of him at the end of his arm had been rendered dead.

Something thumped and he jumped violently. The vulture had leapt to the hood of the vehicle and stared at him through the windshield. The long neck was covered with a soft down, and a ring of white feathers formed a sort of collar at the base. The ferocious beak that could penetrate leather and rip out organs was slightly open as the bird panted. Its eyes, ageless and black, peered at him. Then the creature turned, extended vast wings with foot-long black plumes at the end. The wings wafted once, twice, and the heavy body lifted on feather-trousered legs from the car.

Derek followed it with his eyes as it rose from the desert floor into the air and swept gracefully toward a ridge. A high ridge with three vertical fissures. It was too late in the day to see the shadows that would identify the cave entrance, but he would find it again, damn it, no matter how long it took. He would take her to Rekemheb, who traveled between the worlds, who knew both the living and the dead. He started the car.

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He puzzled for a moment about how he could hold the flashlight while carrying her body with both arms. Then it occurred to him that he could wrap the long cloth of the turban around him diagonally and anchor the light with it on his shoulder. It wobbled with every step but stayed in place.

Thus equipped, he lifted her limp body again and carried it down the silt-softened tunnel. In the burial chamber the body of the Bedouin woman still lay near the sarcophagus, and he knelt down to carefully place Valerie alongside of her. Two innocent women dead. And in Luxor maybe a third. It was more than he could bear.

He pounded with both fists on the stone. “Rekemheb! Come back. Come up. Come from wherever the hell you are and help me!”

The Ka appeared over the two women as if he had been present all along, startling him.

“Look what we’ve done to her,” Derek sobbed. “You never said this would happen.”

“Be comforted, grandchild. The amulet has already shown it to you.”

"This thing?" Derek yanked the object from his shirt pocket. "If this is what she died for, I don't want it any longer," he said, and threw it onto the lid of the sarcophagus. The chain clattered as it slid over the stone.

"All this time you had this and you never looked at it." The Ka took up the pectoral from where it lay and tilted it before the face of the flashlight. "You see? This is her own Ka that stands before the Balance. I have witnessed this. Thus the prophecy begins."

"Don't tell me that!" Derek leaned toward the priest, both hands on the sarcophagus. "Nothing in the prophecy said anyone had to die. If I had known that, I wouldn't have gone along with this. I want her back, Rekemheb. You can do that. I'm sure you can. You can go into the underworld."

"No one can bring her back. She has been summoned to carry out her part, just as you have. The gods have chosen you both."

"You're telling me Valerie was 'chosen' to die, and I was 'chosen' to abandon her body to go and play husband to a woman I don't love? Or has Auset been 'chosen' to die too?"

"No. She is well. She will be called to the temple of Hathor when her time comes, and you will too."

"Oh, will I? Commanded to appear? And what if I refuse?" Derek paced the short width of the chamber. "You never mentioned that we could get killed doing this. What sort of gods are these who can't protect their 'chosen ones' from one petty tyrant with a gun?"

"There are those who would seize power among the gods too." Rekemheb frowned. "It is the same conflict, both here and there. That is why your friend has been called to the Duat." The Ka laid gentle hands on his descendant's shoulders. "But your role is given here, as father of the child. Go to Dendara."

"The child is dead, and for all I know, Auset is too!" Derek knocked the spectre's hand from his shoulder and leaned his forehead against the stone wall of the cave. "Besides, if the gods were trying to make a 'holy family,' they got it all wrong. Yussif is the one who loves Auset. He should have been the father. Valerie is…was…a scientist who didn't believe in God at all. And me?" He fingered the turban that was still draped across his chest. "I just liked the costumes."

"Auset lives and needs you. The gods of Egypt need you too." Rekemheb pressed his palms together as if in prayer. "Do not weaken, son of my sons. It is a great advent, whose hour has come. Do not fail

it."

Derek turned his back to the Ka and knelt down between the bodies of the two women. He adjusted the cloth covering the Bedouin's face and murmured, "If your spirit still hears me, forgive us for causing your death." Then he bent over the body of his friend, taking her cold hand in his. Tears streamed down his face again.

"Valerie Marie Ghislaine. Who would have thought we would find ourselves here in a tomb together, Radames and Aida, in the middle of the grandest opera of all? You can almost hear the orchestra getting ready for the final act." He entwined his fingers with hers, while with the other hand he drew her pistol from his belt. He closed his eyes. "Forgive me, Jesus," he said weakly, and fired into his own heart.

Chapter XXXI:
Duat

Valerie Foret awoke in terror. Armless, legless, incorporeal, she sensed suffocating confinement. Her whole mind a single wail of fear, she labored, writhed, twisted upward from some dark narrow place and at last broke free.

Tendrils of thought curled outward to sensation of something that was self. Appendages. She urged her will into them like blood and felt them open awkwardly. She fluttered, tumbled, fluttered again, and felt herself lift up. Exultant, she ascended, higher and higher, then turned to circle over the fearsome place that had just released her. "Oh, gods."

The body of Valerie Foret lay below her on the desert floor; the mortal lips from which she had broken free were still open.

The Ba shot upward, fleeing her cadaver. High overhead she hovered, panting, sensing the roundness that was her chest swell and contract painfully.

Below her she saw the riverbank and the familiar crossing barque; a slender ferryman in a linen kilt stood at its stern. She spiraled downward again to water and saw the bird form reflected. She recoiled at the confirmation and then, exhausted, let the wind carry her to shore.

The ferryman turned slowly toward her and beckoned. She wondered if there were other passengers, and then she saw what lay on a bier along the ferry's center. Black and without dimension, it was the shadow of herself. Behind it, another figure crouched, and as she approached, it too turned and smiled at her with her own face. Understanding leapt into all the entities at once.

Suddenly she could see herself perched on a stone. She studied the parrot-like creature that had no beak but only her face in miniature and felt the reciprocal perceptions of her several selves. Her thoughts came

in disparate tones from three directions: timorous and hysterical in the Ba, thick and plodding in the shade, and finally focused into words within her Ka. Her Ka-self said to the ferryman, "Take me across."

The man leaned on his oar, pushing the ferry from the shore and urging it in gentle surges toward the other side.

She shifted perspective and studied her Ka form, translucent and yet familiar. Even the ivory scroll case she had with her at the moment of her death still hung on her shoulder, not quite substantial. Questions rushed uselessly into her mind, like clowns crowding in a doorway. What waited, in what form, and who else would be there? What were the gods like in their own kingdom?

Something bumped the boat suddenly, and the ferryman stopped his rowing.

"What's that?" she asked, alarmed, but she already knew.

"Apophis," he replied somberly, hunching over his oar.

She stared over the side and saw a dark mass slide by just below the surface of the water. Like a whale, it curved downward, as if to dive, but no fluke broke the surface; only a seemingly endless length of mottled gray slid past. He must have been enormous.

The tomb portrayals had been correct. The monster lurked within the water of the underworld, ever threatening the barque that crossed.

"Does he ever…succeed?" she whispered as the dark creature thumped again against the craft. "I mean, what happens then?"

"He consumes the Ka, undoing its creation. All the Duat must stand guard against him."

The monster seemed to lose interest and remained below. The ferryman, seeming relieved, rowed more vigorously toward the opposite shore.

She noted that, while the departure side was flat, with gentle palm-studded banks, the side toward which they sailed was more uneven. It rose in places to rocky elevations and descended again to beach and marsh.

Then she saw him, a figure waiting on the other shore. He was unmistakable. Anubis, the Opener of the Way, stood stiffly, his arms hanging motionless at his side. Valerie's momentary fright gave way to the scientist's amazement at how perfectly his man's body was joined with the long jackal head and high pointed ears. He stepped toward the water as the ferry neared in pulses. Finally, they beached on the dark bank, and the three parts of her gathered before the Jackal-god.

She waited for his pronouncements, but the Jackal-god's greeting was only a silent nod and a sweep of the hand to indicate direction. "Hurry," he said, and turned away.

"This way to customs, eh?" she muttered as she followed him, trying to dispel the persistent fear. What was the rush, she wondered. The canine deity led her several selves at a rapid pace along a rising path. On both sides, fields of reeds dropped to marshes with pools of silvery water. Rising above the lowland, the winding path approached a great edifice fronted by pylons. A palace, right at the waterfront, as splendid a structure as she had ever seen, surpassing even Karnak. A row of guards stood before it, each man holding a spear taller than himself.

"What do they guard against?" she asked the ferryman.

He spoke brusquely, glancing over his shoulder at her. "Against Apophis, the undoer, eater of words." He raised his hand in signal. The line of guards broke in half and, between them, great bronze doors swung open to the vast chamber.

Awestruck, she started to follow him through the portal, but at that moment, she saw the flinch of one of the guards behind her. She looked back in time to see the great snake, with a diameter the size of a train, rise up above the surface of the water. It swayed for a moment, terrifying to behold, before it sank again. Valerie hurried after the Jackal-god, relieved to hear the sound of the great doors closing behind her.

The Hall of Judgment was breathtaking. How little justice was done to it in the tomb paintings and on papyri, for it was vast. Its stone pillars reached high overhead, dwarfing those at Karnak and disappearing into mist. On each side of the Hall, the judges sat in rows. She did not need to count to know there were twenty-one on each side. The Messengers of Osiris.

At the center of the Hall, brass scales the size of a house caught the light of the torches in the Hall. She had not expected it to be so beautiful. Yet, crouching below the scales, waiting to consume her if her heart was found wanting, the Devourer drooled menacingly from crocodile jaws.

Osiris sat mummy-wrapped before the scales on a simple block throne of gold. Green hands protruded from the wrappings, holding a king's crook and flail. On his unwrapped boyish face were the false beard and the kohled eyes of a king, and on his head the crown of Upper Egypt.

Anubis drew her Ka forward and she bowed. “Lord Osiris,” she said.

The mummy did not move, but the god’s eyes sparkled recognition.

Anubis motioned her toward the center of the Great Balance. In the one scale she saw her heart, bloodless and quiescent. In the other scale, the Ma’at feather of truth and justice stood upright.

Her Ba flew to its place at the top of the scales, and she stood for a moment, awaiting instructions. None came. Forty-two pairs of eyes looked down on her from galleries around the Hall. Then she realized what they waited for: the Negative Confessions. Fragments of them came to her, bits and pieces of the more lyrical oaths. But she had no hope of reciting them all from memory.

She clapped her hand to her side. Yes! She smiled into the air. The ivory case had passed with her into the afterworld, and it held the list of invocations.

She raised both her hands to the galleries. “Hail to you, Great God, and to you, Lords of Justice. I know you and I know your names. You live on truth and gulp down truth. Behold, I have brought you truth as well.” She turned around the room, sweeping with a grand open-armed gesture past the faces of all forty-two judges. “I have come to you without falsehood, and no one testifies against me.”

An approving murmur arose from the judges. So far so good, she thought, and drew the papyrus from the scroll case. There they were, in formal temple hieroglyphs, as bright as the day they were painted.

She made another respectful rotation with uplifted hand and then began to read. “‘O Far-Strider of Heliopolis, I have committed no falsehood against men. O Fire-Embracer, I have not robbed. O Swallower of Shades, I have not stolen. O Twofold Lion, I have not destroyed food. O Green of Flame, I have not stolen the god’s offerings. I have not impoverished my neighbors. I have done no wrong in the Place of Truth. I have not encroached on cultivated land or deprived the orphan of his property.’”

She stopped for a breath. The eyes of Osiris sparkled as before. Anubis nodded encouragement.

Valerie continued, addressing each judge with a declamation. “‘I have not driven animals from their pasturage. I have not diverted the water in its season or built a dam against its free flow. I have not tampered with the balance-plumb. I have not caused any to labor in

excess of what was due. I have not made hungry or to weep. I have not betrayed the servant to his master. I—'"

"Abomination!"

She stopped in her recitation. A figure came from behind the Great Balance, unlike the other gods. A narrow camel-like skull curved downward to a snout. Rectangular ears that stood upright atop his head recalled no animal at all. But she knew this god.

"Seth, Great of Strength, speak your thoughts," the God of the Underworld said.

The feral lips opened over clenched teeth. "These confessions carry no weight, for this mortal is a nonbeliever. She has desecrated tombs, exposed their mummies, and extinguished the light of the justified." He turned to face her, his eyes bright with rectitude.

She knew what he said was true. With every mummy she had excavated and sent to a museum or—worse—to a laboratory, she had severed the ties between spirit and flesh. One by one, year after year, she had murdered the dead.

At that moment the heart scale on the Balance sank with a crash. On the other side, the delicate Ma'at feather flew upward and wafted to the floor.

The voice of Osiris, God of the Dead, sounded throughout the Hall. "If this is so, and none speak for her, she must be condemned."

The Devourer beast padded forward panting and with fetid breath clamped its wide jaws around her leg. She felt the pressure of its teeth and wondered if the dead could still feel pain.

Chapter XXXII:
The Story That You Tell

At the back of the Hall a door thundered open, and the heads of the judges turned. Down the center aisle of the Hall a male figure strode—virile, rapacious, hawk-headed. He stopped halfway to the Balance, but his piercing voice carried the length of the chamber. "Horus speaks for her." His eyes darted around the Hall, defying contradiction.

"This mortal came upon me in captivity among the wandering people, and she bought me free. Even as a child, she heard my suffering and wept for me. My brother Seth misspeaks. This Ka is true of voice."

Around the Hall, the judges murmured acknowledgment.

From the side, a female form drifted in, her very substance twinkling stars. "She has lain beneath me in the wilderness and spoken my name when others saw me not." Sparks effervesced from her hand as she gestured toward the accused. "Let her heart be light, for the Goddess Nuut speaks for her."

The judges murmured again.

From across the Great Hall a robust figure stood up. A single plume grew upright from his head and fluttered in the tiny tempest that swirled around him. "This woman has called upon me in the desert. I have avenged her, and I have guided her companion back to her. Before the messengers of Osiris, the Wind-God Shu speaks for her."

"Ahh." The sound repeated itself all along the gallery of judges.

From the same great portal where the Falcon-god had stood, a goddess entered. Her cow's head held tall horns that curved around a ball of orange light. A melody of flutes followed her where she walked, and a familiar figure attended her carrying a golden stool. Rekemheb

maintained the formal bearing of a priest in service, but he glanced to the side conspiratorially. A hint of smile played over his face, as if to say, "See? We are here together at the Balance, after all."

The goddess glanced contemptuously at Seth. "I have seen her taking refuge in a village mosque while she rescued my priest. I speak for her." The light between her horns seemed to increase in brightness.

The judges said together, "We hear the words of the Great Mother Hathor."

The sound of metal scraping on metal drew all eyes back to the Great Balance. The heart dish had risen slightly from the floor, but it still trembled below the other dish where the Ma'at feather once again lay.

Seth leaned toward the accused, his snout glistening. "These testimonies carry no weight, for she offends my father the Aton, in whom all things live. As His light shineth, so am I the thunder in the sky." He extended his whole arm toward the new Ka, nearly touching her. "I am His voice and His right hand, and I condemn her."

The heart dish dropped a millimeter and the Hall fell silent with uncertainty, rendering audible the tap of the goddess's golden stool as Rekemheb set it down. Valerie looked over toward the two, waiting for rescue, but neither had more to say.

Then Rekemheb's face brightened, and he inclined his head in deference as another figure appeared suddenly beside him.

The new god wore a simple snow-white kilt that hung to his knees and a wide collar of turquoise beads across his chest. At the top of the collar, a slender neck ended in the small white head and long curved beak of an ibis. Peering through round bird's eyes, the Scribe-god looked myopic and professorial. He held his stylus over what looked for all the world like a clipboard. In three small steps, the god walked toward the Balance and turned around.

At that moment the long beak evaporated upward, and the bird face metamorphosed into the face of a white-haired man. A man who had served her tea.

"Jehut!" Valerie exclaimed.

"I am called Jehuti here," he said, with the same John Gielgud voice he had used in the necropolis. He glanced at Seth, who stood wide-legged and hostile before the center of the Balance. "You overstate your complaint, Son of Aton." He looked up at the judges on the left and on the right. "The Son of Aton, who loves not his brother, nor any of us in

this place, shall not accuse her. Do you not recognize this mortal? She is one of the chosen, and my palette and reed have been given to her."

The God of the Dead nodded stiffly in agreement, his greenish hand lifting his crook and bringing it down again on his knee.

The Scribe wrote on his tablet. "She is justified," he declared, and held the tablet up to display the all-important hieroglyphs: the platform and the oar.

The judges did not speak, but forty-two staffs began to tap, each one a heartbeat after the other, circling the Hall like distant thunder. At the final tap, the heart dish slowly rose, the feather dish sank, and the forty-two judges said in unison, "*Ma' heru!*"

"True of voice," Osiris repeated, before his eyes glazed over. At the same instant, the divine witnesses faded from sight, and the ring of judges froze to form a frieze of stone around the empty Hall.

"That's it?"

Fear had ebbed to annoyance, and the newly acquitted Valerie-Ka turned to her rescuer. The Scribe-god was already halfway through the portal. She hurried after him.

Outside the Hall it was twilight, though whether it was dawn or dusk she could not tell. Against a faintly orange sky the objects on the landscape were still black. A path descended to a field of reeds, and as she scurried along behind the god, she sensed herself as well among the Ba-birds gliding overhead. *Yes, here I am*, the two parts of her thought, surveying the green landscape from above and from below. She searched in her mind for a sensation of her shadow, which had not followed from the Hall. She detected it finally, somnambulant among others of its sort, soundless anchors among the dead.

The god had stopped before a river, not the dismal water that the ferry had crossed, she noted, but a stream so wide she could not see the other bank.

"That's all there is?" she repeated. "You've judged my immortal soul and that's the end of the story?"

"Ah, no. It is rather the beginning. Listen well, Valerie Foret. You are newborn to the afterlife and know as little as you did when you were newborn into the world." He swept his hand downward the length of her in the air. "Behold. Bereft of your earthly ties, this is the essence of yourself."

Her initial fears dispelled, she realized she had paid little attention to her new self. She looked down at her chest, examined her arms. In the

twilight, she saw she was translucent as Rekemheb had been, though of a slightly bluer cast. She held her hand up to her face and found she could render it invisible. Like flexing a muscle, she willed her arms to fade but, horrified at the sight of her armless self, she brought them back again. She wondered whether the laws of physics were suspended in the afterlife, or if laws existed that science had simply overlooked. "And my Ba?" she felt her bird-soul think.

"Your Ba has the same ability, if less need to conceal herself from the living. But you should stop playing now and set yourself to the task the gods have given you." A low table, such as a scribe would use, appeared before them on the ground, and he motioned her toward it. "Sit down."

She hesitated for a second and then lowered herself to the sand. The god sat down across from her, as he had done under the calligraphed arcade of the Emir Sharif al Kitab. His face was still kind, avuncular, but it confused her to see the soft-spoken Arab she had met in rags now bare-chested and in the ornaments of a god.

"This is it, then? This is where all the world's souls come?" She looked around, making no effort to conceal her disappointment. "What happens to the billions of nonbelievers?"

Jehuti took his palette and scroll case from her shoulder and laid them across his lap, then leaned his elbows on his knees. "Every creature has its story, and at death, each one goes to its own hereafter."

She frowned. "Rekemheb told us that in the desert, but I never quite believed him. I still can't get my mind around it."

"No? Yet your Christian Book of the Dead proclaims, 'In the Beginning was the Word, and the Word was God.' You are surely familiar with that truth."

"You mean the Bible? Yes, I suppose so, but I always assumed those words were just mumbo jumbo. What have words got to do with life after death?"

"Do not doubt the spirit, which is everlasting, for it lives in you as understanding. Even the scientist must agree to that."

She nodded cautiously.

"And what else is understanding but words, the words you use to interpret the experience of life and to tell yourself all things. It is through words that you comprehend death as well as life."

She nodded again, frowning as she struggled to grasp what he said. He added, "It is in these selfsame words and images that the spirit

lives on."

"The spirit lives in its own story, you mean. So that the hereafter we 'understand' is the one that we experience?"

"Yes. The story that you tell is the story that tells you."

The sky overhead seemed to lighten imperceptibly while they spoke, revealing that the half-light they sat in was in fact dawn.

"That is your creation story, then?"

"Before the Scribe there was no story, only the Light and the Darkness. But then the Light gave rise to me, and I spoke forth the rest." He laid a bony hand on his upper chest.

"You are the Creator, then?" Valerie asked, awestruck.

He shook his head. "I am the Words of Ra. I am that which spoke 'water' and it came to be. I told the names of things: 'papyrus,' 'lotus,' 'sparrow,' and they took form."

In the increasing light Valerie looked at the objects he pointed toward, and as he named them they seemed to take on sharper outline. It was as if he had spread form over some other formless thing, something vibrant and vast and yet that needed him.

"Then Ra is the Creator."

"As water is the creator of the wave. Ra is the force that enlivens the lion and the jackal, the river and the wind, and we are the forms of his divinity. This was understood by men until the Aton appeared."

"The Sun Disk? But how is the Aton different from the Sun God Ra?"

"He is an aberration of Ra, a demented form of him which claims all power."

"Then why is the Sun Disk guarded by Seth?"

"Seth does not guard the Aton so much as represent it and in his story is its herald. But he has his place in our story as well. The strength of Seth holds back Apophis, which is the enemy of all. Apophis is the emptiness which swallows up my words and so undoes them."

"Then Seth serves a good purpose. Chaos must not reign."

"Neither must the single will. For the light of the world is not one but many, and some of the light is darkness."

"Interesting way of putting it. But what has all that got to do with me?"

"It is you who must tell the world of the first crime, when the Aton silenced the gods and declared omnipotence."

"With Pharaoh Akhnaton, you mean?"

"Clever girl, to have puzzled that out. It was but the usurper's first appearance, and soon he came with other names, offering men an irresistible inducement. In exchange for obedience to his single voice, he freed men from service to nature and gave them dominion over it."

"What was he called?"

"In each nation he came forth with a different name but always with the same blandishment, that god's image mirrored that of men. Oh, excellent of flatteries. 'Inasmuch as you abjure nature and worship me, your God, so you shall be like me.' But the One-god has not done well by His believers. He has failed to keep them from each other's throats or from the despoilment of the earth." The god reached over and with a slender finger touched the small fresh scar between ear and cheekbone. "See how he chides the disobedient?"

Valerie listened, her lips pressed against her knuckles. He spoke of nature's silence and yet, as the light neared, she could sense nothing but its vitality. The wide river had begun to glisten, wrinkling under the morning breeze. Birds and insects crisscrossed in the air. Seed and blossom, worm and burrowing animal began to stir, and she felt their every wakening.

The god continued. "Ra reigns with the other gods here in the Duat, but the Aton reigns in the land of the living. Foreseeing this, I gave to Pharaoh Meremptah a dream of the crime and of the man whose lineage could one day undo it. I gave the dream to you as well."

"The dream of flying came from you? Then maybe you can explain it. It ended with sparks springing from my mouth and turning into words. Words that even as I said them I couldn't understand."

Jehuti chuckled softly. "They are older than the languages you know. For you, unfathomably old."

"The first word, '*Khetet*'? What is that?" At the moment that she asked, she sensed a vast benevolence approaching from the east, and her mind yearned toward it.

"The opposite of that which stirs in you now."

"What do you me—" Then all around her palm and lotus, bird and beetle began to give off melodies, and every object shimmered with color and perfume. Creatures under the water and in the ground, desert creatures in the vast distance called out to her in every hue and timbre, and each new voice seemed to increase her.

In the onrush of sensation, she could scarcely see or hear the god as he handed back the scroll case. "Tell our story, child of Rekemheb,

as you see it with your heart. Write it with my reeds and ink which were given you. Do it quickly, for disaster hastens, and every word that floweth forth herefrom will live forever."

"Child of Rekemheb?" she murmured. She felt her own light increase as she joined the crescendo of greeting for the majestic light that neared. She beheld it through closed lids, euphoric, as if she stood within a vast chorus of rejoicing. Then the Barque of Ra was upon her, and she gave herself over to the rapture of its passage. Horus suffused her first in his taut virility, and she felt him in every fiber of herself. In a moment his aggressive maleness gave way to the voluptuous femaleness of Hathor and Isis. Then Ra itself ignited in her, in a single outburst. She soared on the hissing winds of Shu, rippling desert sand, and was cooled by the moisture of Tefnut. Ma'at enveloped her then with harmony for a moment before the sharp wit of Jehuti focused her inner vision. Finally she felt the ancient ladies course through her, the savage protection of Nekhbet and Wadjet.

The passing sun barque warmed her face, and she held her eyes shut, prolonging the joy and peace. Then, through closed lids, she sensed a shadow come across her face, and she heard the soft crunch of sandals stepping on sand.

Chapter XXXIII:
Che Farò Senza Euridice

So, you have fallen for their little spectacle, then," she heard him snort. "You will tire of it soon enough."

Valerie opened her eyes to the figure that stood before her with the sun at his back. He remained motionless, except for his long upright ears, which twitched slightly. "You do not belong in this place," the figure added.

She tilted her head back. "Seth. Haven't you heard? I am justified. There is nothing you can do now." She shifted out of his shade and then, blinded by the light that radiated behind him, she shifted back. "If you were trying to keep me out of the Duat, then you have lost."

"If I have lost, then you might consider what you have won." He looked around, drawing her glance to the empty landscape. "It's quiet, isn't it? You haven't asked yet where the other Kas are."

She followed his glance, dread beginning to increase again.

The camel mouth widened in the hint of a smile. "They're all gone, all but a few tenacious ones, and they will pass soon enough. The mummies are all found, you see, or disintegrated." He looked around again. "As hereafters go, this one is a wasteland. Even the gods are barely hanging on."

"I don't believe you. The gods were in the Hall of Judgment, and I felt them passing in the sun barque. And you yourself are here."

"Oh, but I've gotten out. I serve the One God and live as He does, in your world. I've been through most of your history. It's a much better story than this one."

"I don't know what you are talking about." Hating to be on the ground looking up at him, she struggled to her feet and stood as if bracing for a physical attack.

He went on, lightly. "Oh yes. I've been all over your world. I've been looking out for you too. But you would have your way, wouldn't you, and it got you shot."

"What? That was you, who made Vanderschmitt pull the trigger?" Unconsciously she touched the spot just under her heart where her life's blood had poured out.

"No, it was you who made him shoot. What possessed you to pursue him when you knew he was desperate—and had a weapon?"

"I went because Rekemheb…" She stopped, appalled. "Are you saying that he engineered my death?"

This time the smile was unmistakable. "Yes, my dear. You have been tricked. Jehuti has brought you here to write his Book and resurrect a dead religion. Do you fancy yourself a Moses, or Mohammed, able to formulate the central gospel of a religion? What message do you have, anyhow?"

She could think of nothing to say and looked around. Where was Jehuti, to make his case?

Seth pressed his argument. "He has torn you away from life and your friends and set you working for them. If I were you, I would give thought to getting out of here."

Her hands went to her hips. "Why? I just went through an ordeal getting in here."

"But you died for nothing." He blinked slowly, and she saw for the first time that he had long, rather beautiful, eyelashes. "The Bedouin woman still lives."

"Nekhbet is not dead?"

"No, she is not. But you are, aren't you? And all for nothing. And your Ka will last only as long as your cadaver. Did you think they had changed the rules for you? Jehuti is gambling everything on you, on your writing his chronicle quickly, before your Ka dies its second death, and while you scribble, your mortal body is cooking in the sun."

She imagined herself lying on the desert floor and felt her Ka-light darken. "Then why did they kill me in the first place? I could have written their Book in life."

Seth glanced sideways, as if preparing his words. "You…are not like the sons of Rekemheb. You are…compromised, not altogether theirs, the gods would say, and in your own world most unpredictable. Only in the Duat can the gods control you."

Valerie stood speechless. Of their own accord her hands rolled up the blank papyrus. It fit smoothly inside the incantation scroll in the hollow ivory palette.

Seth added the final stroke. "Do you know what has happened to your loved ones?" He took a step forward. "They are wandering in the desert, bleeding and thirsty. Wouldn't you rather be there, helping them—than here?" He gestured once again toward the empty landscape. "Go back," he repeated. "Jehuti has overstepped himself in letting you die for his foolish project."

She chewed her lip for a moment, then met his cold eyes. "Even if I wanted to go back, I couldn't. You know that."

His camel mouth formed what might have been pursed lips. "It is true that none has gone back, but then, none like you has ever come here before. You must only reverse your path. The judges cannot stop you if you do not wake them. And once you have passed through the Hall of Judgment, you need only cross the river."

"The river, right. Will the ferryman take me back to the other shore? And what then? How can you reverse death?"

Seth raised his own hand, reassuringly. "Do not worry about these things that you do not understand. Flee this place. It is the darkness from which the one light has sprung." He stood with his feet spread apart, his unmuscled arms folded across his chest. His voice became almost kind. "Go back quickly. You may still be saved."

Uncertain, she walked back up the path, hanging the scroll case again on her shoulder. The two arguments warred in her mind. She was part of a great mystery of renewal. Or she was a fool. Why during the whole misadventure hadn't anyone asked her what she thought or wanted? What did she want anyhow? As she stood finally before the rear portal to the Hall of Judgment, she knew. She wanted life.

The great doors stood partly open, though guards stood before them, as they did at the front portal. She feared she knew why; the way back was forbidden. As she approached, her fears were confirmed, for the guards stepped forward and crossed their spears in front of her.

It was a small obstacle, one that she would have easily gotten around a few weeks earlier. But now, the sum of all the shocks, fears, and horrors came together in that one gesture, and it broke her. She threw herself against the guards, seizing their spears, one in each hand, and forced them back a step. But the other two joined them, and the

four of them fought her off, throwing her to the ground.

Then something terrible occurred that had not happened to her since she was a child. The recollection of her losses accumulated in her like a floodwater, and she suddenly dissolved in tears. Clutching the front of her shirt, she wept incoherently for all that had been taken from her: for her career that had been ruined, for her friends who had been harmed on her behalf, and for herself, robbed of life for a mystery.

It seemed so unfair. She had asked for so little from life and had worked so hard. No family had supported her; no great love had sustained her. She had dragged herself up to success as if climbing from a pit and had been thrown back in, her sense of self and purpose shrunken to the mere urge to live. Broken, she covered her face with her hands.

Then she heard it. She was not sure at first; it seemed impossible. But then she made out the high delicious sound, the faint melody, and she recognized the words coming from inside the Hall.

"*Che farò senza Euridice…*"

She looked through the space between the great doors. Unbelievable. There he was, on the other side of the Balance, hands outstretched to the judges overhead. A long scarf—it looked like Yussif's *khaffia*—was draped over one shoulder and the other forearm. In the ranks overhead, the judges did not sit but stood at the balustrade, and they seemed agitated.

What was he doing? Singing in Italian to Egyptian judges? He was mad. And yet the bright sound rose up, plangent and compelling, and the judges seemed to listen.

"*Dove andrò senza il mio ben.*"

He turned back and forth to both ranks of judges as she herself had done, sweeping the air with supplicant hands. The drapery wafted gently back and forth as he moved and postured, a black Apollo Belvedere.

"Euridice! Euridice! Oh Dio! Rispondi!"

The door guards too were affected, and they watched him, speechless. She had heard him a score of times in concert halls surrounded by an enraptured public, but this—there was never anything like this.

"Io son pure il tuo fedel!"

"Fedel." Oh, yes, he was faithful, following her into the underworld. More faithful than any lover.

"Più soccorso più speranza. Né dal mondo, né dal ciel!" He finished his aria on a delicate, high pianissimo. She waited, breathless, for the murmur of the judges.

For a moment there was no reaction at all. Then, quietly at first but with increasing volume, the tapping began, and the clattering of the judges' staffs made its stately way around the Hall.

Derek then simply walked around the Balance. The heart-dish and the feather-dish had never moved, neither up nor down, as if the rules of judgment had been suspended for him. The Devourer sat in his place panting like a housedog as the singer walked the length of the Hall. At the rear doors, he stepped out and, as if enchanted, the guards stepped back.

"Hello, you!" Valerie whispered as he came near, and she waited for his exuberant embrace, his reciting of all her names. But as he arrived in front of her, he closed his eyes. Behind him in the Hall, the judges hardened once again to stone.

"What's wrong?" Valerie laid her hand on his chest.

He did not reply, but with both eyes still tightly closed, he made an about-face and stepped back into the quiescent Hall.

"What are you doing?" She followed him, reaching out again to touch his shoulder.

He curled his fingers over hers without speaking. Leaning forward, he pulled her with him back through the Hall, looking nervously up at the frieze of rigid judges.

"Please tell me what's going on. You came all this way, sang your way into the Underworld, and now you refuse to even recognize me!"

Derek halted abruptly. Though she could not see his face, the sudden tilt of his head told her he rolled his eyes in exasperation.

"Oh." She nodded, finally getting it.

"Whew," he sighed, reaching back to pat her fingertips on his shoulder.

"Well, then. Let's get out of here," she whispered.

They tiptoed forward together down the center of the vast chamber, toward the front portal. They crept, step by soundless step, and there was no reaction.

Finally they came to the Balance, where the mummified Osiris sat staring vacantly and the Devourer beast slept. The Balance and the Book, Valerie thought, and felt Jehuti's scroll case brush against her

hip. She began to have doubts. Jehuti had chosen her, thousands of years ago, and now she fled from him. A twinge of guilt arrived like a prod in her chest.

The Balance tipped with the squeaking of unoiled metal. One of the dishes suddenly held a heavy heart, and its weight drew the dish downward. A judge turned his head ominously. The Devourer beast stirred.

"*Merde*!" she thought, taking another step forward. The Balance creaked again.

"Be light of heart, light of heart," she whispered to herself. She called up happy memories—the rendezvous at the souq in Cairo, Derek's laughter, Nekhbet's kiss.

Nekhbet.

The heart-dish crashed to the marble floor, and Osiris's eyes flew open. The stony judges burst as one into color, and their indignation rumbled around the chamber. The Devourer huffed to its feet.

"So much for silence!" Derek seized Valerie's hand and propelled them both toward the front. At the portal, they threw their weight together against the huge doors. At the first opening, they squeezed through, one at a time, and broke again into a run. Behind them the great bronze doors thundered closed again, but the row of guards and the Devourer beast pursued them.

Concentrating on her footing as she descended the hill, Valerie dared not look back, but she sensed something in pursuit; through its eyes she could see herself fleeing. Then, smiling inwardly, she realized it was her own Ba, fleeing the underworld with her.

But all that stretched before them was the dark river. The ferry to the other side, to life, was gone. Seth had lied.

"What now?" Derek called out without turning.

"Don't know!" she called back breathlessly. She was so sick of running, of being manipulated, cheated. Would something always be at her heels? And now there was simply no place left to run. Nothing but the endless shore that rose over rocky promontories and descended again to beach. And they had blundered to a cliff. The guards were on them now; she felt a hand brush against her back, about to seize her.

Derek halted only for a second at the edge and flung himself with outspread arms into the rippling water. Valerie leapt after him, for a moment feeling herself suspended in the air. Then the icy water rushed through her Ka, chilling her. Instinctively she held her breath, although

faintly aware that a spirit could not drown.

She saw Derek swimming awkwardly in front of her, his legs kicking froglike. She wondered if they could still make it to the other side. Then she saw it. Apophis, as big as a train, snaked toward him through the water.

He saw it too and stopped, thrashing to turn around, but the creature was on him in an instant. Vast jaws opened over him, and his eyes widened in horror looking up at them. She saw his mouth form a silent scream as the maw closed again, engulfing him.

Scarcely had she turned herself—uselessly, she knew—when the creature was upon her. Blackness surrounded her, but for the line of gray-white teeth that formed an ellipse in front of her. Then the creature's jaws snapped shut, and she was sucked into its gorge.

Chapter XXXIV:
House of Hathor

Yussif gave a slight wave through the window as the military vehicle pulled away from Luxor International Hospital. He owed the soldiers a lot. They had been surly at first, obviously annoyed at having been ordered to act as ambulance drivers for reckless civilians. He could tell by their accents that they were from the hinterlands, and he knew their kind: rough pragmatists whose "honor"—if they had any at all—was purely tribal, and who stayed in the military because they had no place else to go. But he had engaged them, and when it emerged that one of them was from El Dakhla, his own village, they became almost brotherly. Auset, who had slept feverishly, had no idea of the complex tale he had woven of truth and fantasy to keep their goodwill. He would tell her one day—when it was all over.

The buzzing monotony of television news drew his attention as he slouched against the window sill of the visitors' room. Anything to distract him from the agony of waiting. Another attack on Western business interests, this time by arsonists on an Esso fuel depot. The footage was dramatic. Fountains of flame rose in the air and billowed sideways like speckled orange froth, engulfing sheds and vehicles, which in turn exploded.

The blazing scene outside was followed by somber footage in a jail somewhere. The camera swept along a row of sullen bearded faces. The government had obviously been swift in its roundup of known Islamists. Terrorists, they called them now. Yes, if they blew up oil tanks, they were surely that, but it unnerved him to see their faces. They looked like all the men he knew, men from the villages, from the poorer streets of Cairo, the shops of the souq. Where would it all end?

"Mr. Nabil?"

Yussif smoothed his soiled shirt, self-conscious in the immaculately scrubbed room. "Dr. Bakar."

A man of his own age approached and held out his hand. The doctor's trim moustache and cleanly shaved chin stood in harsh contrast to his own rough beard peppered by sand.

He shook hands but did not ask the question for fear of the answer.

"Your wife is stable but weak, Mr. Nabil. We have given her antibiotics, but she requires surgery. The bullet that struck her lodged in the curve of the pelvis bone. It must be removed, of course, as soon as possible."

"But the baby…"

The doctor dropped his eyes. "The baby is dead. It appears the bullet passed directly through it. We will remove the dead fetus during the operation, of course. With your permission, I will schedule the surgery for early tomorrow morning."

"I must talk first to…my wife. Tonight, please."

"Yes, of course. Come this way." With a detached smile, the physician held open the door to the stairwell leading to the women's corridor.

❖

Auset lay half upright in the first of the two beds in the room, an IV tube running from her arm up to a pouch of some clear liquid suspended over her. She dozed, her head facing the other empty bed as Yussif came in. She had been bathed, he noted, and strands of her hair hung still damp over her cheeks.

He stood for a moment, uncertain, at the foot of the bed, then walked softly into the connecting washroom. It smelled of lemon and antiseptic cleanser. A bottle of liquid soap stood on the sink, and he helped himself, lathering his arms up to the elbows and washing his face and neck. A week before he would have washed that way for God in preparation for the evening prayer. But now the stranger he saw in the mirror washed for himself alone. The washing felt incomplete, futile.

"Yussif?"

He stepped out into the hospital room and walked toward the bed cautiously. "How are you feeling?"

"I'm all right. Drowsy from the painkillers. But the doctor won't tell me anything."

Her voice was weak and he came closer. He dared not take her hand, and so he set his fist on the mattress next to her arm. "I talked to him. He says they have to operate soon to take the bullet out. And…it seems the baby is dead."

She looked around the room for a long moment, biting her lips; then, as her mouth began to tremble, she lifted one hand to cover it. Her quiet weeping grew into sobs, and he cleared his own throat, which had suddenly grown tight. Finally, he reached out one hand and laid it on her shoulder. To his surprise, she grasped it and held it against her cheek. He felt the moisture of her tears under his palm and could find nothing to say.

"Oh, Yussif. We have been through so much. Running away from Cairo, wandering in the desert, never knowing what was ahead or behind us. But always I was certain I would finally come home and have this baby. I didn't care whether it had anything to do with Rekemheb's gods. It was *my* baby." She sobbed again. "And now it is all for nothing. This miracle that was supposed to happen, it's all gone."

A female voice said, "Jehuti's story is not gone."

Yussif spun around, annoyed, to a woman in a plain white dress. "We did not ask for a nurse."

"Who are you?" Auset's voice was hoarse.

"I am the one who can help you now. Your physicians know nothing of the Ka of things."

"Ka? You are a friend of Rekemheb?" Yussif asked.

The woman tilted her head back, and her soft laughter was like tinkling bells. Two horns curled slowly upward from her temples, and a ball of orange light began to glow between them. She continued in the same musical, soft voice. "I am, you might say, Rekemheb's employer."

"Hathor!" Yussif confirmed, blocking her from the injured woman. "Haven't you done enough?"

"We have not done this." She pointed past him. "And there will be time for explanations later. I can save the Child, but you must come to my temple at Dendara. Right now."

"Dendara? No, that is out of the question. Auset has been through a terrible ordeal. Because of you. First you caused her to carry this

child, and then you caused her to lose it. What cruelty is this?"

Auset looked back and forth between goddess and man. "This is the first time in five days I've been safe," she said weakly. "Why didn't you come to help us in the desert, or even in the tomb before the gun went off? And what about our friends? What happened to Derek? And Valerie? Weren't they part of this? Why do you show up only now?"

The goddess took a step closer. "I have no power where men have forgotten me, not even the power to bring you away from here. Only in my temple can I assist you. But you must hurry."

Tears appeared again on Auset's face. "Why have you done this to me? I'm not religious, or political, or anything. Why me?"

The goddess wafted toward the sickbed, carrying with her a fragrance of fruit and flowers. Her face was somber with affectionate concern, and her voice was golden warm.

"Because you are my blood and bone, Auset. This is how the Egyptians today speak of Isis, which is my other face. Isis, whose son Horus was killed by his brother. You are myself, and we are the mother of a murdered child."

Auset sighed weakly. "What about Yussif? Who is he named after?" Her tone was bitter. "Have you chosen him for anything?"

"He has proven himself worthy and he will know us. Only come to Dendara. Come quickly."

Her voice faded, along with her image, gradually, from the feet up until only the warm orange sphere atop her head remained, and that too evaporated.

Unfazed by the epiphany, Yussif turned back to Auset. "You do not have to do this. We can go back to Cairo where you will be safe. I will take care of you."

Auset wiped the wetness from her cheeks. "You'd like that, wouldn't you, Yussif? For us to pretend that nothing ever happened. And my parents would pretend I was never pregnant with a foreigner's child." She looked up at the ceiling for a moment, then turned again to his face, which had become so gentle. "That's the choice, isn't it? Between respectability and this…this call of a strange heaven." She held her belly, swollen with the stilled fetus. "What should we do?"

Yussif laid his hand on top of hers. "You must decide. It is you who carried their child and who is in danger. So much has happened these five days, I am lost in wonder and know nothing. But a week ago

I was certain I knew everything and was as wood.

"Yes, I am changed too." He sighed softly. "There is some great mystery we do not yet understand, only that everything we thought before is…incomplete." He thought for a moment, looking into space. "The prophet Mohammed must have stood before a decision like this—to return to Medina and accept the ways of his people or to listen to the angel. It must have seemed like madness. I do not compare myself with the Prophet, peace be upon him. But…I too have seen an angel. And my heart wants to hear."

Auset curled her fingers in his. "I want to hear the angel too. We will listen to her together, *Habibi*."

❖

Alhamdulillah, he thought, there are always taxis in Luxor, day or night. Always poor men to drive them. He approached the nearest one and leaned over the driver's window. "Brother, I need a taxi tonight. It is an emergency."

"Emergency or not, I cost the same." The driver smiled with broken teeth and started his engine.

"I have no money."

"Ah, then. Not driving costs the same too." He turned off the motor.

"But I have this." He drew the heavy silver ring from his last finger and held it close to the splotchy-bearded face.

"See the stones all around it? Sapphires. With this you can buy yourself another taxi. Look, I bet it even fits your finger." He tapped the ring on the back of the driver's hand.

The driver took the ring and turned it between thumb and forefinger. "How far do you want to go?"

"Dendara."

"Dendara? That's forty-five kilometers!"

"My brother, you will only sit idle out here all night anyhow, and my wife is very sick. I must bring her to…her mother."

"You want to take a sick woman *from* a hospital?"

"Yes. To her mother." Yussif scooped the ring from the driver's palm. "Look, do you want the ring or not? There is another taxi right behind you."

The driver nodded and shook his head at the same time. "All right. But if the ring is not good, I will come again to your wife's mother and demand more money."

"Yes, that's fine. Wait here. I will be back in five minutes."

❖

"I have a car, *Habibti*. Are you ready?"

"Yes, I think so." She struggled to sit up, wincing. "If you can carry me."

"Of course I can." He slid one arm behind her back and the other under her knees. With a single powerful lurch, he lifted her from the bed and steadied himself, balancing the weight. She drew her knees up, trying to make herself small, and encircled his neck with her arms.

He closed his eyes for a moment at her first intimate touch and laid his cheek lightly against the top of her head. The smell of her hair sent a wave of resolve through him. He would carry her any distance and never weaken.

The corridor was empty, but as he turned the corner he confronted a female orderly who mopped the floor. She called out to him, but he passed without answering. She stood for a moment in consternation and then hurried away, sounding the alarm.

Yussif kicked open the double doors to the stairwell that led to the lobby. Two nurses confronted him, and a man called out to him from behind. He plunged past the women through the main doors of the hospital into the night.

The driver had waited in his battered black-and-white as agreed, and Yussif laid the feverish Auset in the back. He climbed in next to the driver just as half a dozen men poured shouting from the hospital entrance, and the car lurched forward.

"*Alhamdulillah*," the driver said.

"Yes," Yussif replied, not daring to bring the words over his lips.

❖

Inexplicably, in spite of the late-night hour, the gate at the forecourt of the Temple of Dendara was wide open. Yussif helped Auset from the taxi and held her for a moment on her feet as the car sped away. Then he swept her up in his arms once again and slow-marched across the wide

court toward the vast temple façade.

The stones underfoot were irregular, and he paced cautiously, surveying the temple grounds. In the moonlight he could make out the main buildings, the majestic temple at the center, the secondary buildings and ruins in the forecourt. Glass panels formed a long facade against the low wall along the right side of the enclosure, silver in the reflected moonlight. "Glass?" he murmured. "Strange."

"To protect the reliefs." Auset laughed weakly. "Valerie was right."

"You are cheerful, *Habibti?* I am glad." Yussif quickened his pace past the wall of glass as small night creatures came out from the ruins and seemed to gather behind them. In a few moments they were at the entrance of the great hypostyle hall.

"Put me down, Yussif. I want…I think I can walk in here on my own."

He set her on her feet, his arm still around her waist. "I will not let go of you in the dark."

"Dark? No, look. Up there." Auset pointed to the rounded columns that rose high over their heads. At the top, wide triangular faces looked out to the four directions with Mona Lisa–like smiles. The outer columns disappeared upward into darkness, but the innermost columns, near the entrance to the naos, glowed softly around the face of the goddess. "I think they've left a light on for us."

In cautious, shuffling steps, they passed through the hypostyle hall, and she glanced at the hieroglyphic texts that ringed the columns. "I wonder what they say?"

"Prayers, songs." Yussif shrugged. "I don't know. Do not worry about them. Save your strength."

"There is so much to know." She took hold of his arm again and tilted her head back to study the strip of ceiling between the columns. Two rows of carved gods marched in single file, one toward and one away from the temple interior.

Yussif followed her glance. "Gods that are animals. Animals that are gods. I don't know."

"Strange," she mused, not hearing him. "I seem always to know what room we're in. This, I'm sure, is the Chamber of Offerings."

The last room, softly illuminated at all junctures where wall met ceiling and floor, emanated both mystery and welcome.

"Yes." He nodded. "And this is the sanctuary."

Auset gasped suddenly and stopped.

"What's wrong?" Yussif asked, alarmed.

"I think…oh!" She curled forward. "Oh!" she repeated, and broke into tears.

"What is it?" He put his arms around her.

She sobbed quietly for a moment, leaning against him, and then caught her breath. Her lips still trembled, and she pressed her fingertips against them.

"Oh, Yussif. Just now…as I entered the sanctuary…I felt it."

"What, *Habibti*?"

"The child moved."

Chapter XXXV:
Lazarus

Valerie awoke lying on silty ground. She turned her head. A meter away, a parabola of yellow light spread dimly over the ground, its apex toward the lens of a flashlight. It lay, she saw, on the palm of her friend slumped against a stone wall, and its light shone on a gold and heavily jeweled object.

Fears assailed her like a gang of thugs. Derek. Why wasn't he moving? Auset and Yussif. Had they made it to Luxor or had Auset miscarried along the way? Jehuti. Her hand felt for the papyrus at her side, for the test that she had failed. She felt guilt like a burning coal somewhere in her chest. Her mouth was dry as paper. If this was resurrection, it was overrated.

Derek stirred and the flashlight rolled away from him. Valerie sat up as he opened his eyes. He rubbed his face. "What the hell was *that*?"

"Apophis." She shook her head. "Incredible. Jehuti said, 'He swallows up my words and thus undoes them.' I guess that's what happened. It was all undone. We aren't 'justified' anymore."

"Or dead!" Derek pressed his hand on his chest, feeling his heartbeat. "Yep. Definitely not dead."

"And I thought Seth had tricked us," she mused. She clenched and unclenched her hands, trying to get rid of the tingling.

Derek looked around in the semidarkness. "And this is Rekemheb's cave tomb, right? Yes, I remember now. I brought you here to Rekemheb. I asked him to take me into the underworld to get you back, but he said you were fulfilling your part of the prophecy."

"Yes, that was the plan, apparently."

"Yeah, and they don't like it when you try to change it. He refused to take me to the Duat, so I had to do it myself." He picked up the pistol that lay by the side of the sarcophagus.

"My God! You mean you killed yourself just to come and get me? Oh, you sweet, insane man. How could you be sure you'd find me or ever make it back?"

Derek massaged his ankles, trying to bring blood to his still-numb feet. "I figured one underworld was like the other, and I'd kind of 'been there, done that,' you know? Onstage, I mean."

"So that's what you were doing in the Hall, playing Orpheus to my Euridice."

"Yes, but that was just to get in. I hadn't much thought about getting out again."

"Who would have believed that the way back was through Apophis? There's certainly no mention of that in the mythology. I wonder if Jehuti knows…"

Derek's attention had wandered. "Uh…Val? Where's the Bedouin woman? She was right here. I put your body down right next to hers."

"Seth was right, then." Valerie touched the empty spot on the tomb floor. "He said she was alive." She shook her head. "I don't know who to believe anymore. I don't even trust Rekemheb now. He tried to keep you out of the Duat, but he sent me into it. And what about Auset and Yussif?"

"The army found us before we got to Luxor. They arrested me, but they promised to take Auset on to the hospital. Yussif went with her. But when I came back here, Rekemheb kept saying, 'Go to Dendara. She will be at Dendara.' What does that mean?"

Valerie looked at the scroll case that still hung from her shoulder. "It means the story's not over."

"What are you talking about?"

"Things have changed, Derek. We're not helpless pawns anymore. We've made it back from the underworld. We're important to the gods, and we can make demands. You are the chosen father of the child, and you have just defied the gods." She was on her feet finally. She brushed silt from her pants with several decisive slaps.

"And I am their storyteller."

Chapter XXXVI:
Epiphany

Praise God," Yussif whispered. "The gods," he corrected himself and looked at Auset. "How can you be sure?"

She wiped her cheeks with her fingertips. "My water just broke. The baby's coming."

Yussif looked down in horror at the trickle of fluid that seeped down her ankle and onto the stone. "Hathor!" he called out. "Where are you?"

"Ohh." Auset bent over, clutching at the cloth of his shirt.

"Hathor!" Yussif shouted again, fearful for the first time.

Something behind them breathed noisily, and Yussif turned. A dwarf with a beard and a mane of wild hair stood in the doorway. Under one hairy arm he held a rolled-up object and in the other a clay urn nearly as tall as he was. He waddled into the sanctuary, throwing his weight from side to side with each laborious step. Pivoting around to stop before them, he pressed the rolled mat into Yussif's hands. Then he stepped away and with two hands tipped the urn toward the center of the stone floor.

A frothy, yellow-brown liquid flowed out in a widening pool, hissing softly as it spread. The smell of fresh beer was pleasant as the fluid covered the stones and rose in a dense vapor. In a moment the sanctuary floor was dry again, with a sheen of polish coating the stone.

Yussif looked down at the bundle he held, a linen mattress some three inches in thickness, filled with straw. Without speaking, the dwarf took it and spread it out on the floor next to the rear wall.

"I'm guessing that's for me, Yussif."

"Ah, yes, of course." He guided her to the wall and held her gently as she eased herself onto it. His hands shook slightly as he knelt beside her and unbuckled her sandals. A familiar voice sounded behind him.

"*Djed meddu,* Yussif." The glowing form of Rekemheb appeared, standing before the goddess Hathor and holding her golden stool. He repeated the formal declaration in strangely accented English. "The words are spoken. The prophecy is fulfilled." Then he smiled with an expression that seemed to say, "I told you so."

"Grandfather!" Yussif shuffled to one side on his knees, and Rekemheb set the stool down next to him.

The Mother Goddess seated herself regally, and when she had arranged her skirts, she bent toward him. "Yussif Nabil, you have brought my daughter to me in your arms. Thus is your faith strong."

"Faith?" He shook his head. "I don't know. I came here for Auset's sake. You promised to take care of her."

"And so I shall. But this hour is for you as well. Behold…"

Auset moaned with the onset of the next contraction. Yussif adjusted her cushion with inept tenderness until the pains subsided. She smiled weakly, but then her glance slid past him, consternation clouding her face. He turned to see what troubled her.

A monster stood in the doorway. His wide chest was half covered by a collar of gold and turquoise, but above it, on muscular shoulders, a wide feathered neck rose to an enormous falcon head.

"My son Horus." The Mother Goddess finished her introduction. The two mortals flinched as the god came near. He bent over them, half prince, half raptor, gray wrinkled eyelids blinking over predatory eyes the size of walnuts. Around them dark feathers showed the divine markings, the lines that fell like tears below the iris, one in a curve and the other straight down.

The rapine head came close, and the sharp hooked beak opened. "Horus greets the mother of the gods' child," he said, his high, shrill voice at odds with his ferocity. He bowed formally and was about to back away when he seemed to have an afterthought and pivoted around again. "The son of Ra does not taste like chicken."

They looked after him, speechless.

Another god entered the chamber. His step, as he approached, was light, as if he preferred not to be seen. And yet he was conspicuous, for his camel-like snout and long upright ears made him look both

disdainful and slightly comical. He stared down at the birthing woman without comment.

"Seth," Hathor-the-hostess said. "I am surprised to see you here."

"Surprised? How so? I come like my brother Horus, to pay my respects. Am I not one of the sons of Ra?" He turned without waiting for a reply and went to join his brother at the door of the chamber.

Frowning, Hathor waved the two out into the vestibule and snapped her fingers. A young woman appeared in a simple linen dress, her hair covered by a cloth. She held folds of white cotton in one hand and in the other hand a glass bowl of what appeared to be wine. "The Lady Meskhenet will attend you," Hathor said.

The assisting divinity knelt down to spread one of her cloths over the laboring woman's knees, then sat back on her heels. Rekemheb appeared at Auset's side and placed a gold cup before her lips.

She drank in large gulps, then wiped her mouth with her hand. Her head rolled slightly as the liquid took effect, and her speech slurred. "Mmm." She licked her lips. "Is this the same stuff they clean the floor with?"

Yussif looked over at the goddess. "What about the bullet? The doctor said—"

Hathor raised her hand gently. "Put your mind at ease, Yussif. The gods of Egypt look after her now."

"Gods of Egypt, yes." He glanced around at the animal heads in conversation in the vestibule and then at the sanctuary walls covered with their images.

Seeing where his eyes went, the Ka of Rekemheb reached out to him and pulled him to his feet. "Come," the spectre said, turning his back, and strode before him out of the chamber.

Hesitant at first, Yussif sidled past the divinities at the door and then, relenting, let himself be led along the eastern corridor. As man and ghost turned the last corner to the foot of a long staircase, they stood in darkness but for the gray-green iridescence of the Ka himself.

Rekemheb stepped up on the first step and took hold of Yussif's right hand. "Read, and you will know us." He placed the Arab's palm against the staircase wall.

Under his fingers Yussif felt the outline of a face, the last of a long procession leading up the stairwell. "Ah," he said, as he recognized the being, not just the name-hieroglyph that burned in the darkness

through his fingers, but its very essence as god and beast.

"Read," the priest repeated. "And by this touch you will know them." Then, gently tugging, himself walking backward, the Ka drew the man up the dark stairwell.

Yussif followed, sightless, step by step, his fingertips dancing over eyes and horns and beaks carved along the wall, and each god image drew him in. He swam through a kaleidoscope of minds that changed at each new step, and each one in a different way revealed the world to him. He looked down upon it from a barren crag, saw up to it from a moist burrow, recognized it from underwater, from the swamp, and from the searing sand. He heard the night wind breathing over sand dunes, the dung beetle clicking between the rocks, the raven's croak, the shriek of the baboon. He felt each god-beast's appetite and sense and knew nurture, patience, cunning, rut, and ravening hunger.

Drunken with revelation, he found he had reached the top of the staircase, and he staggered out onto the temple roof. The full moon shone down on him so brightly that he cast a shadow. Before him on the walls more hieroglyphics called out to him: incantations, blessings, hymns of praise, all in a solemn, stately language. What texts he could not read by moonlight, he could detect with his fingers. He laid his hands on them with the same reverence as he had once held the Koran and felt their truth.

"Recite, Yussif," Rekemheb said, and Yussif nodded.

"'I have spoken no falsehood against men. I have not robbed or stolen. I have slain neither man nor woman. I have not impoverished my neighbors or deprived the orphan of his property. I have not taken grain or encroached on cultivated land. I have not driven animals from the green land or diverted the water in its season. I have not tampered with the Balance weight or required anyone to labor unjustly for me. I have not made hungry or to weep.'"

He found himself laughing, as he read, at how little was expected—and how much. There were no commandments, laws, or admonitions, only the affirmation of a decent life. Countless gods had to be revered and appeased, but the way to appease them, after paying tribute, was simply to live righteously.

He turned around and leaned against the wall, feeling the lines and ridges of the confessions on his back. How rich he was now, knowing these things. How full the earth, how sheltering the sky with moon and stars.

"Mak! Sothis!" The glowing Ka stood at the edge of the roof, his arm extended toward the horizon. "*Mak*," he repeated, and Yussif understood, "Behold."

Yes, there it was, at the rim of the predawn sky, like the call of a distant trumpet, the Dog Star, Sirius, the herald of the solar year.

"Dewa netchar!" Yussif responded joyfully, as if he had said it a thousand times before. It was the first day of the new season, *Opet Nefer Renepet*, the opening of the good new year, and beneath their feet in the sanctuary a child was being born.

Euphoric, the convert descended the staircase to take his place in the nativity.

Chapter XXXVII:
For Unto Us

Hands pressed over her eyes, as if to block out the pain, Auset rocked from side to side, knocking over the empty beer cup. Each contraction merged into the next one now, depleted muscles working automatically.

Panting, she seized hold of the two arms closest to her, of the Mother Goddess and of Rekemheb. She arched her back and moaned in a long exhalation through clenched teeth.

In the silence that followed, she suddenly heard a tiny bleating, a weak vibrating "Eeeeehhhh."

Meskhenet reached under the cloth with both hands. "*Djed meddu!* The Child is here."

Yussif watched from a cautious distance. He could not see under the cloth and resolutely did not want to, but he could tell by the motion of the midwife's hands that she washed the infant with wine between its mother's feet. In a few moments Meskhenet wrapped the pinkish gray creature in a cloth and presented it to the exhausted mother. Auset kissed its damp head and rocked it gently as she passed the afterbirth.

When the visceral aspects of the birth seemed over, Yussif ventured close again and knelt again beside the new mother. He touched the back of his index finger to the infant's cheek and whispered, "Welcome."

"Welcome indeed, child of Rekemheb," a voice said from the doorway. Horus and Seth stepped apart, and the angular figure walked between them into the chamber. Yussif recognized the long narrow beak that curved downward from the small head.

"Jehuti," Hathor said. "You come at the right moment."

The Scribe-god came forward and knelt on one knee before the nativity. The two brothers behind him remained standing.

"The prophecy is fulfilled," the Mother Goddess said, taking the baby from Auset's reluctant arms. Holding the head and narrow shoulders in one hand and its tiny bottom in the other, she rose from her stool. "*Djed meddu*. Behold the Child of the gods."

The newborn opened large dark eyes, and Rekemheb exclaimed, "Oh, how beautiful is his face!"

Seeming to sense its precarious position in midair, the baby inhaled deeply and emptied its lungs in a long vibrating wail.

Rekemheb exclaimed again, "How robust is his cry," and Horus murmured agreement.

The infant thrashed with tiny arms and legs, and the swaddling that had covered it fell back, exposing the tender torso.

Horus's hawk-eyes widened in shock. Jehuti stood up, his beak open. Seth snickered.

Hathor pivoted the tiny body around to see what problem there might be. "Oh," she said.

Seth stepped forward. "A girl child. Is this the best the gods can do?"

"Do not defile my temple with derision, Seth," Hathor snapped back. "You once were one of us."

The god retreated a pace. "Once, yes. But now?" He spat air. "You are a sorry sight, the three of you, in this filthy, ruined temple. A forgotten goddess with her darling son and a scribbler who cannot even convince a mortal to tell his story." He turned to the Ibis face. "Where is your new Book, Jehuti?"

The Scribe-god blinked, but had no reply.

"His Book is here," a voice said. Bats fluttered in the halls and all heads turned.

The two of them, dust covered, stood for a moment in the doorway like brother and sister. Derek once again wore the jeweled medallion, and Valerie stood with the Scribe's palette hanging from her shoulder. Holding it to her hip like a weapon, she announced, "And I will tell his story."

Jehuti nodded and repeated the ancient question. "Of the rebirth of the year?"

"Of the rebirth of the gods," she ritually replied and held up a single page of handwritten text.

Beaming, Rekemheb left the side of the Mother Goddess and strode toward them. "Then lo, I am witness to these things: the Balance

and the Book—"

"And the Child too." Derek touched him briefly on the shoulder and hurried past him. "Auset. Are you all right?" He stopped before her, where Hathor still held the infant.

"Yes, I'm fine, and the baby's fine. But the gods seem to have an…issue."

Hathor laid the tiny creature in his arms. "You have a daughter, and she is strong and beautiful, but…"

Derek looked down at the squirming bundle. "Ohh, she's perfect!" He kissed the infant's forehead. "Look, Rekemheb. The next generation. And you're here to witness it, just like in the prophecy."

"No," Seth shook his head, contemptuously. "The prophecy has failed. This child, this paltry knot of flesh, is nothing to Aton, nothing to the gods. An irritant, merely." Then he seized the infant suddenly from Derek's arms and spun around.

Auset screamed "*No*!" Yussif sprang to his feet. Derek reached out uselessly with one arm. Seth ran a stride ahead of them toward the chamber door.

A dark form blocked his way.

The tattered black abaya still hung from her, and torn strips of it fluttered in the air like feathers as she entered. Seth backed away.

Her shrouded head still drooped forward as she extended rag-hung arms. They lengthened grotesquely as she rose in height. The torn abaya and the dark fingertips became feathers and extended outward until powerful wings wafted along both temple walls. Then, above the ruffling torso, the veil fell back, and the great terrifying head of the desert vulture looked out over the sanctuary.

Horus found his voice. "Mistress of the Desert, Protector of Pharaohs, Guardian of the Royal Blood, Ancient Mother of all Things, Nekhbet!"

"Nekhbet?" Valerie said softly. The woman who had twice kissed her, the woman she had fallen in love with and on whose behalf she had been killed was…

"The Vulture-goddess," Derek gasped behind her. "Wow. Sure didn't see that one coming."

"What kept you, sister?" Hathor looked up to the vulture head that towered over her and all the others.

"Complications," a woman's voice replied. But then the huge curved beak of the scavenger opened, and the Mistress of the Desert

thundered, "Open the temple!"

The walls seemed to vibrate for a moment, and then, with the sound of cracking ice, all Dendara became as glass. Over the soft yellow ambience of the chamber, the night sky appeared with the sharp light of the full moon.

The goddess spoke again. "I call on every god that dwells in the Duat and in the Field of Reeds and in the Temples of Kemet." Her head swayed from side to side, addressing east and west. "All those whom this Child's advent shall rejoice, come hither and attend me." The solemn cry seemed to echo as it faded.

The night gave back its silence. Somewhere in the temple the scarab beetle rolled its dung ball across a stone, and in the dark recesses of the corridors bat wings rustled again, waiting.

Finally it came, barely discernible at first, then unmistakable, the thrumming of a distant multitude. Valerie and the other mortals drew together and watched, incredulous, as they came from the horizon.

In a long aurora borealis they snaked, in streams of luminescence, emptying the underworld. Majestically they curved first northward and then to the south, then headlong toward the temple, as if the procession itself were the celebration. Slowly they neared, joyous and solemn, delaying revelation, till finally the mortal eye could make out their individual forms. Macabre and stunning, they were a bewildering demon host of half-humans, birds, felines, canines, rams, and nameless creatures; they sported horns, feathers, flowers, moons, and spheres of heavenly light.

In proximity it was almost not to be endured, as in kaleidoscope they spiraled, forming rank after burning rank, an amphitheater of inconceivable color suspended over the soft gold of the sanctuary below. Rekemheb was prostrate, and Valerie stood enthralled, naming the deities to herself as they came in overhead: "Anubis, Knum, Sekhmet, Ptah, Amun…" until she too was overwhelmed by the sheer spectacle and dropped to her knees. "This is all the Duat," she murmured. "These are the very forces of the earth."

The Vulture-goddess reached out winged arms toward Seth, who had not dared to move, and with slender hands emerging from the wings' middle joints, she took hold of the silent infant. From the center of the temple, the Mistress of the Desert rose up to meet the waiting host and hovered over them in the crackling air. Sable feathers curled

around the child, sheltering her as in a cradle against the wind that blew between the worlds beneath her magnificent wings.

"Hail to you, gods of Egypt! I know you and I know your names!" the vulture spoke, and the temple walls reverberated. "This is the hour. And this is the Child who shall be under my wing. Greet her as your own, for her name is *Nefer-renepet*, the Beautiful Year."

Murmurs of wonderment rippled through the Host of the Duat. A child of the modern age, a girl child no less, and from the lineage of a mere priest. Yet the oldest of their number, the protector of all things royal, had proclaimed it: This was the Child, the Messenger. Agreement spread throughout the ranks. Then jubilation, at every pitch in the myriad mouths and beaks and maws, accumulated like a gathering storm in an unbroken crescendo, until their collective acclamation rumbled like rolling thunder across the African sky, "***NE FER REN E PET.***"

Crouching still on the floor of the temple under the spectacle, Auset reached out to touch Rekemheb. "All right. I get it. Your prophecy is fulfilled. Now, please, let me have my baby back."

He took her hand in his. "She is the gods' child too, Auset, and she will need their care, for the governments will be upon her shoulder."

Auset fell silent. Drenched in the sweat of her labor and the heat of the sanctuary, she shivered.

Chapter XXXVIII:
Aton Rising

A faint line of color appeared on the horizon. A voice called from among the divine host, "The sky lightens!"

Jubilation ceased. Disorderly and flamboyant, the gods broke ranks, fretting like guilty party guests about the hour, and rose up from the temple precinct. In twos and threes they streamed toward the horizon, the golden lines of them threading into the pink and orange that secreted from the east. Horus and Seth trailed after them, two long comets.

The Vulture-goddess descended to the sanctuary, and its walls opaqued behind her. Folded black wings metamorphosed to slender bronze arms, her coat of feathers to the familiar sheath dress of tomb portraits, and the appalling scavenger head to the face of the shepherd at the well. As woman, Nekhbet knelt down and placed the curiously unperturbed infant in her mother's arms. "The gods will watch over her. See to her earthly welfare until she hears her calling."

Auset's eyes darted anxiously over the handsome head and shoulders of Nekhbet, as if fearing the vulture might reappear.

"Earthly welfare. Calling. Yes, of course." She wrapped another layer of swaddling around the infant's legs, her firm grip indicating that there would be no more baby-passing.

Nekhbet rose again, and as a woman she wafted from the sanctuary, glancing for an instant toward Valerie as she passed.

Derek knelt down over his daughter, who sucked with concentration on her fist. "You have your god-name now, a great big one, but I'll call you Nefi." He touched her other hand with his pinky, and miniscule fingers encircled it. "What a baptism. You got a whole circus, a carnival,

and a visit of the heavenly host, all in one. Isn't that wonderful, my kitten?"

"More like a Bosch painting." Holding her infant in one arm, Auset raised herself up with difficulty. "And they're all our new in-laws."

"Yes, Nefi's in-laws." Unperturbed, Derek pressed his lips against the top of his daughter's warm head. "My cricket has all kinds of ghosts looking after her. Just like our great-great-great-grandfather, Rekemheb."

Rekemheb knelt on one knee over the newest of his line and took her tiny feet in his hands. At his touch, the infant opened her eyes wide and her mouth formed an *O* as she squirmed, raising both fists. Then she yawned and stared dreamily at him. "She much resembles my daughter Merut-tot," the Ka said tenderly. "What will her worldly name be?"

"I…I don't know. That's up to Auset, I guess. I promise this child everything I can give her from my own country, but I'm not ready for fatherhood." He rubbed his cheek against the infant's damp hair.

Hathor sat down again on her golden stool and adjusted her skirt. "No, you are not. In this, we seem to have miscalculated."

Derek looked pained. "I know what you're going to say. I abandoned Auset, didn't I, when I died for Valerie."

Auset looked up at him. "What? You died?"

Hathor continued. "The gods had not planned for mortal love. Its fevers led you astray from our prophecy, but it also brought us this good man." She raised her hand toward Yussif, who had sat in silent wonderment through the entire spectacle.

"Yussif Nabil, you have embraced the gods this last night of the old year, and your heart is full. Will you care for this woman and this child as man and father?"

"With all my heart." He looked tenderly toward the young mother. "If she will have me."

Auset still frowned. "Derek was dead? Like Nekhbet? Has anyone else here been dead that I don't know about?"

"Everyone, actually," Valerie said. "Except you and Yussif. We'll explain all that later. I think."

Hathor held out her arms, encompassing the group. "Now, my dears, you must be gone from here. Strangers will arrive in my temple soon, touching everything, understanding nothing. Go home now, all of you, and begin this our New Year. We will be watchful."

Without ceremony, she evaporated. Rekemheb remained a moment longer, holding the golden stool. Then, grinning in unpriestly fashion, he wiggled his fingertips at his descendants and disappeared after her.

Auset looked at the empty space where the goddess had stood. "Home. Right. Has anyone thought of how we're going to get there?" She took hold of Yussif's arm and struggled to her knees. "Oof. Amazing how everything you do requires stomach muscles."

"Don't worry. You'll rest for a day in Luxor, and we can train to Cairo tomorrow." Valerie reached under Auset's right elbow, which was curved around the baby, and found herself inches away from the infant's face. Clear eyes stared up at her, and she could smell the buttery scent of its newborn skin. Valerie let her hand linger a moment on the tiny, warm foot. "Can you walk?"

Yussif took hold on the other side, and together they pulled Auset to her feet. She winced. "I think so."

The new family shuffled toward the sanctuary doorway. Behind them, the dwarf reappeared and gathered up birthing cloths into the middle of the straw mat. He rolled it all together and, with the bundle curved over his shoulder, he waddled toward Valerie.

She smiled. "That was you in the Necropolis, wasn't it? I should have recognized you. Thank you, Bes, God of Birthing Women."

The panting dwarf reached out a plump fist as if to give her something. Puzzled, Valerie held her own hand under it. The stubby fingers opened, and something tiny and hard dropped into her palm. The misshapen god turned around and waddled away through the doorway.

Valerie stared, perplexed at the strange dark pellet in her hand. "Oh," she murmured, recognizing the lead slug from her own gun. Chagrined, she put it in her pocket.

Alone in the sanctuary, she turned in a circle, as she had done in the tomb of Rekemheb, sweeping her eyes over the reliefs and inscriptions. She had been right. They had spoken to her alone, telling the old story. And now she was called to tell the new one.

She drew out the folded pages that she had tucked into her shirt and thought of Seth. Telling the old mythology anew was insane, he'd said, and he was right. It was folly to attempt to resurrect a dead religion. But now she knew what had killed it.

She unfolded the paper and read the opening words to her manuscript:

Everywhere before his burning eyes the beasts, the winds and waters, and the hills cried out. P itiless, the S un D isk r ose and smote them, rendering them dumb. Ā en Seth, iron-eyed guardian of the light, loosed his spear upon the v anquished. But lo, a humble priest stepped for ward, an amulet in his hand, and the spear blade shatter ed into spar ks upon it. G athering the spar ks with the po wer of his br eath, he sucked them in—and spat them out again as words.

She had grasped, finally, the nature of the thing that had to be undone. Militant monotheism. The Bible had it backward, it seemed. The first crime was not disobedience to the absolute, but the absolute itself. Man had not sinned against God; Almighty God had sinned against life. And life—in all its forms—would not be whole, or safe, again until it once more had its names and voices.

Jehuti would be pleased, for she would tell the story that he told her, the one in which she lived and acted. The others—Derek, Auset, Yussif—all had their stories too, but she was the scribe. She would sit down with them in the coming days and months and weave in their accounts.

Only Vanderschmitt remained opaque. What drove him to pursue her with such zeal was still a mystery. How could a man who was merely irksome, who in his tenacity was not unlike her, become her murderer? And why had the gods not saved her?

And then there was Nekhbet, whom she had begun to love and who still stood among the columns of the great hypostyle hall. Valerie approached the goddess, hesitant, wondering if anything was left of the woman who had kissed her. Who had twice pressed warm human lips upon hers.

The hall was somber but the goddess seemed to contain her own light, for Valerie sensed every detail of her. How stunning she was, a woman's form harboring ferocious power. The simple sheath clung to her from midbreast to midcalf, and Valerie could see now that it was no dress but a coating of tiny feathers, iridescent black, like a crow's breast. The ageless eyes of Nekhbet turned toward her, then to the paper in her hand. "You have begun?"

"Yes. A few thoughts. But I'll have to talk to the others as well. There are so many questions." Valerie glanced toward the front of the hall. In the transparent darkness she could just make out the forms of

her friends who waited. "A curious holy family, isn't it? One child with three parents."

"An adjustment to the original plan," the goddess replied coolly. "We had not reckoned with human emotions. Always so troublesome." She looked out at the dawn gray, which had sent a strip of dull light along the stone walk at the center of the hall. The morning breeze floated through the columns, lifting a few strands of her pitch-black hair. "But see, the New Year begins. You must leave now."

"I thought we would have more to talk about." Valerie tried to discern emotion in the majestic face but could not. "I mean…that night, in the Bedouin camp. You kissed me…"

The goddess looked away. Her voice was velvet, but toneless. "Enlightenment. Such was given to every Pharaoh."

Valerie's face grew warm. "The Kiss of the Gods, as on the tomb wall." She closed her eyes in disbelief. "Of course. How could I be so stupid? It just seemed so…personal."

"We meant it so, to win your devotion." Nekhbet still did not look at her.

"My devotion?" Valerie was aghast. "You mean so that I would go to my death for you? So that I would descend to the Duat and be given my assignment?"

The goddess shook her head. "It was not so simple as that. We were in a struggle with Seth. As he moved Vanderschmitt, so we had to move you. He had also to be taken out."

"Vanderschmitt was part of the scheme too?" Valerie laid her hand on her forehead. "Oh, this just gets better and better. You manipulated my affections, my fears. And you assumed that once I was in the Duat, I would forget all feelings."

Nekhbet looked out toward the courtyard at the waiting family. "Feelings. I have had quite enough of mortal feelings. They have been a plague on the great plan for centuries."

"Centuries? What are you talking about?"

"About your lineage, which we chose for Jehuti's noble story and yet has failed in one way or another in every generation. Your mother nearly ruined it, and now you might do it as well. Will you never control your desires?"

"My mother?" Valerie's voice became a whisper. "What has my mother got to do with this?" She searched her memory of a woman who

no longer had face or voice, and found nothing.

The goddess gazed back at her, compelling black eyes holding her in place.

"Monique Foret was much like you. She was our chosen one, in her day, but she failed us. You provoked Seth, and we could manage that, but she surrendered to him."

"My mother 'surrendered' to the god Seth? What does that mean, exactly?"

"Not to the god. But to his chosen one, Vanderschmitt, from the lineage of his priest Sethnakht. He knew your mother and got her with child. But if you give the world our story, Seth can be defeated after all."

Valerie shook her head as if forcing herself to wakefulness. "Wait. You're telling me my mother knew Volker Vanderschmitt? That she… was pregnant by him?"

"That's what I am telling you. This man was your father."

Valerie staggered back as if struck. Leaning on her hand against the stone pillar, she shook her head again. "It's not possible. Jehuti himself said I was a child of Rekemheb."

"And so you are. By your lineage you are the child of Hathor's priest, but also, and more recently, of a man of Seth. The two bloods mingle in you. His visions of us were much like yours, but tainted by the zeal of a follower of the Aton. In your quiet hours you can witness the troubled workings of his soul. They will be familiar, for you live in the Aton world. But now you have seen our world as well, and you must choose between the two."

Valerie walked close again. "Look, you keep springing new information on me, revealing these mind-shattering secrets. But when will I know all the secrets? At what point will I know enough to make this choice, between my world and yours? All I can be sure of is what I knew before I met you, and that's quite a bit. I am not a blank slate that you can write on. I have a story too."

Impulsively, Valerie stepped across the distance between them and took the majestic head in her free hand. Surprise registered on the goddess's face, as it had once on Valerie's own. The divine lips of the Mistress of the Desert, Goddess of the White Crown, opened slightly in astonishment; then mortal lips covered them.

The goddess flinched and her empty hand rose in the air. Valerie pressed the kiss, warming with excitement, as if the body she leaned

against could be excited in return, as if the nubile mouth, tasting still of cardamom, were not of unfathomable age.

Memory of their last kiss, when the Bedouin Nekhbet had thrown her down and answered her passion with pedagogy, returned to her. It angered her to have the kiss explained away, the passion nullified. This now was her response, and she was the one who threw the other woman down and answered smug instruction with unashamed desire.

She pressed the feather-clad goddess up against a pillar, felt a woman's thighs against her own thighs and the panting breath flow from human nostrils across her cheek. Her hand that had reached ardently for the Bedouin breast searched now again, with more insistence. And when she found it, firm and womanly, she caressed it once as she invaded the moist interior of the goddess's mouth.

A familiar vision ignited then between them like an explosion, and she soared again above the Nile. But now two entities, not one, spun together in the timeless air, and two wills contested. The ancient predator dominated first, pulling the young spirit back into murky memories of the beginning. Steaming swamps alive with prey appeared beneath them, reeking of nourishment and blood, of fecundation and decay.

Then youthful wings beat against the weight of centuries and forced the turning, so that the two of them rose upward. The land below them dropped away to savanna and then to desert fed by a single twisting vein of water flowing northward on the broken shoulder of a continent. The landmass shrank away, revealing dark blue waters on both sides and a gauze of white clouds that swirled across its center. Still the ground receded, the eastern and western horizons curving in to join at the north and south. Finally the earth appeared in its entirety, a frothy blue-beige-green sphere suspended in black space.

Their commingled being that hovered over it broke apart again; the youthful one gave forth the image while the ancient one beheld it, awestruck, dazzled.

"*Rekhi renusen. Djedi medjatsen*," reverberated throughout space and time, and the voice of the Vulture-goddess gave it back in the new language, laughing. "I know their names and I will tell their story."

"Val, honey, what's taking so long?" A familiar sound broke the vision. The euphoria ebbed away to the sense of solid ground, decayed stone columns, and the smell of mold from under the high temple ceiling.

Valerie opened her eyes to see she still held the goddess as a woman in her arms.

Nekhbet was quiescent, and for the briefest moment tenderness flickered across her face. Then she drew away. "Let me go." She twisted sideways, and the dark feather covering began to grow up over her shoulders.

"No, wait. Not yet," Valerie pleaded. "Look at me." She held the goddess a moment longer. "You do care for me. Say it, please, before you go."

Fathomless black eyes looked away. "You do not know what you do," she said, and twisted away again into empty air. Nothing remained of her but the flutter of invisible wings.

"Valerie, hurry. We've got to get out of here before the tourists come!" Derek's voice summoned her again, now *molto agitato*.

She hurried forward from the shadows of the hypostyle hall into the sacred court, where the new family waited. "Happy Egyptian New Year," Derek said and started forward.

"Happy New Year," she greeted back and followed a step behind him.

"So, is this prophecy done?" Auset looked back over her shoulder. "Can our lives go back to normal now?"

Derek draped his arm over Valerie's shoulders. "Well, my friend's got a book to write, and we still don't know what that sun-rising-in-the-west thing is all about."

Auset shifted the sleeping infant from the crook of her arm to her shoulder. "I wouldn't worry about that, after everything else we've been through. Whatever it means, I doubt it has anything to do with us."

Walking behind the family, Valerie took a long last look around the temple precinct, trying to memorize it. On the eastern side the ruined boundary opened to the plain, offering a long vista to the horizon. Directly ahead of them the entrance gate—amazingly—was still unguarded. Finally, to her left, a row of glass panels leaned against the western wall. Bathed in the comforting, hopeful light of dawn, every object seemed to warm with anticipation.

Overhead two military jets ripped northeastward across the modern sky. She wondered vaguely where they headed: Saudi Arabia? Israel? It did not bode well.

Then, with sudden violence, the sun itself burst up from the horizon. Its first bright light that scorched the eastern sky sparkled also in the glass panels leaning toward the west. Staring horrified at the glass, Valerie halted as if struck.

"Ā e sun disk, rising in the west, in the hundredth generation."

Ahead of her, the family walked across the beam of warm reflected light. Valerie watched, appalled, as the ominous western sunrise illuminated first the sleeping infant's face and then the others, one by one.

About the Author

Justine Saracen was a college professor for fifteen years before leaving academic life for the arts. Her scholarly book, *Salvation in the Secular*, addressed themes that persisted into later fiction: the role of religion in history, the leitmotifs of fanaticism, and the power of language. Her second "career" in opera management provided another favorite theme: the power of music. In the 1990s she leapt onto the freight train of Internet fan fiction with "The Pappas Journals," "In the Reich," and "Lao Ma's Kiss." More important was a trip to Egypt with her Egyptologist partner to study the Ptolemaic temples. The experience gave rise to the Ibis Prophecy, a series that follows a lesbian archeologist through modern, medieval, and ancient Egypt. The first novel of the series, *The 100th Generation*, was a finalist in the Queerlit 2005 contest. Her upcoming work is the sequel, *The Vulture's Kiss* (2007). Justine is a member of the Publishing Triangle in New York City and is currently studying Arabic, Islamic history—and parrots.

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BOLD
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BOOKS

VULTURE'S KISS

THE IBIS PROPHECY: BOOK TWO

by

Justine Saracen

2007

VULTURE'S KISS
THE IBIS PROPHECY: BOOK TWO

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By the Author

The 100th Generation—The Ibis Prophecy: Book One

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DEDICATION

To Dr. Angelique Corthals, who brought me to Egypt, and to the Jewish-American Medical Project that brought me to Jerusalem.

DISCLAIMER

This story deals with religion, monotheisms and polytheisms. Judaism, Christianity, and Islam have all made their contribution to art, learning, and the formation of cultural ideas. Each has a core of goodwill and an attempt at a just moral code. But at their fringes are the dogmatists and absolutists whose otherworldly doctrines threaten the secular values of tolerance and basic human rights.

On the hard Christian right stands the politically powerful evangelist John Hagee and his 18,000-strong congregation, who ar gue that, to fulfill God's plan for the Rapture and the Second Coming of Christ, the US must join Israel in a preemptive strike against the Arab world. Judaism, which traditionally looks to Israel as its spiritual home, has its most militant proponents among the settlers who—supported by the Israeli military—pursue what they believe is God's plan to make all of Palestine Jewish and, in doing so, perpetuate confl ict in Israel and in the Middle East. Islam, it will surprise no one to learn, has Al Qaeda and other violent fundamentalist sects that see the West as satanic and seek to do it grave harm. In all cases, the mix of religion and politics is lethal.

This story, though fictional, suggests that religion be returned to where it started, in the reverence for the majestic, and sometimes vulnerable, elements of nature.

Prologue

It was of a Friday, the very day and hour of Our Lord's crucifixion, that the city of Jerusalem was taken. The valiant duke, the knights, and the other men of arms descended from the walls into the city. All of them that they met they slew in God's name, men, women, and children, sparing none. No prayer nor supplication could avail them. They slew so many in the streets that one might not pass but climb upon them that lay dead. The men went in bands, holding in their hands great poleaxes, swords, mallets, slaying all the heathen until the channels and gutters ran with their blood, and the streets were covered with the dead. Truly it were a lamentable thing, had these not been of the enemies of our Lord Jesus Christ, and misbelievers, who had defiled the place with their foul law of Mohammed.

William of Tyre (c.1181) trans. from Latin: William Caxton (1481)

While the Frankish armies went rapine through the city, on the high platform the noble emir surrendered. He came with our women and his guard and laid down his sword before the Frankish prince. The emir was courteously met and granted mercy. Yet a knight coveted one of the women and sought to take hold of her. Strangely, a vulture came upon him suddenly and lit upon his chest, catching its talons in his garment and striking him in the face. The knight fell back, covering his eyes. An armbruster shot it through with a bolt from his crossbow and it flew off. The knight was sorely vexed and snatched the woman's child into the air. A cry seemed to go out from the very wind to stay his hand.

Sharif al Kitab (fragment: c.1102) trans. from Arabic: Saïd Khoury (1998)

1

Haunted

Valerie Foret remembered when the vultures came the day she died. Lying supine on the rocky dune, she saw them through dead eyes as they descended on her murderer.

The sandstorm stopped him from fleeing, blinding him and choking the motor of his jeep. The wind ripped away the handkerchief that covered half his face as he jerked to a halt. He crawled beneath the dash on the passenger's side and tried uselessly to pull his shirt up over his head. But the tiny particles of the desert crept into his nostrils and along his throat. When he began to cough, he was already doomed, for each cough required an inhalation, and every inhalation forced more cutting sand into his lungs. He thrashed wildly, inhaling fire and coughing out pieces of his lungs until the desert finally stilled him.

Abruptly the sandstorm stopped and left him staring sightlessly at her, his face a powder-caked *kabuki* grimace.

The vultures appeared next, a dozen of them, descending all at once around the jeep. One or two fluttered near him, heads bobbing, and pecked tentatively at him. Others joined them, tearing through the fabric of his shirt to reach the tender flesh. The rest gathered then, squabbling, displacing one another on the ground, in the vehicle, and on the still-warm cadaver.

Valerie watched the roiling mass of feathers through her own dead eyes, wondering if she was next, wondering how it would feel to be torn apart. Even if they did not devour her, she knew something would. He was carrion for vultures, she for microbes; it made no difference in the end. All that mattered were the people who were left, the ones who would mourn or be outraged.

Sated, the flock of scavengers calmed and they withdrew from the hideous remains. They did not leave but seemed to wait for something, forming a rough circle on the ground. And then it happened. At the center the largest of them elongated vertically and assumed a new shape. The narrow vulturine head broadened, the reptilian neck withdrew into

itself, and empty eyes began to reveal expression. Wide wings drooped to the fluttering tatters of a black abaya, and beneath the tatters a woman appeared. The croaking birds drew away from her with gobbets of flesh still hanging from their beaks.

The apparition stood for a moment, gazing out over the desolate landscape, the last of the storm wind playing with loose strands of her long black hair. Finally she noticed the dead woman who stared at her, and she neared, moving mysteriously, with feet that did not quite touch the ground.

She was enveloped in a strange light, a bright darkness that seemed the residue of some unworldly place. Severe and powerful, she was stunning, in the perfect uncompromised way of a predator, with eyes as savage as the scavengers behind her and black as eternity.

The iridescent darkness around her expanded, both ominous and inviting. She extended one arm, clothed in the fluttering thin black cloth, and the slender limb seemed to oscillate, now woman's arm, now blood-smeared vulture's wing. She beckoned, compellingly, but with eyes that offered nothing but abyss. That was the choice, Valerie knew. To stay and decay into the desert sand or embrace the alien thing.

Dead, yet still she ached. *Don't leave me here,* she thought as the lovely monster loomed over her.

The shrill buzz of the three o'clock bell jolted her from her reverie.

Oh, right. Her last class. Damn. She had been staring out her office window, lost in memory again, a frightening habit that had gotten worse in the last few months. How much was real memory and how much was the imagery of her feverish longing?

She shook her head. No time to brood on the question now. A classroom full of dullards waited for her to explain Egyptian theology.

She laughed inwardly. If they only knew.

2

Trouble

August 28. Brussels University, Department of Archaeology

Vulture worship. That's a little disgusting.' The well-developed young man who stood at the back of the classroom hooked his thumb over the belt of his jeans, causing his bicep to bulge slightly under the sleeve of his spotless white T-shirt.

Why did stupidity so often house in such robust bodies? Valerie wondered. Well, it was the last day of a summer review class for students with credit deficiencies. What did she expect?

"But you are missing the point here." She circled to the front of the podium. "The animals had conquered the desert long before humans, and people had every reason to be in awe of them. The two goddesses, Nekhbet the vulture and Wadjet the cobra, could survive in the desert without water , and for the Egyptians, they symbolized a tenacious life force." She smiled at his simple masculinity . "Besides, Nekhbet appeared to mortals as a beautiful woman. You would have found her irresistible." She set the chalk down below her blackboard drawing of the vulture-form hieroglyph for "protection."

The young man slid the fi ngers of both his hands into his jeans pockets. "You think so? But what if in the middle of a hot kiss she popped back into a vulture? Not to mention in the middle of doing, you know, the other thing." The other students laughed openly and he sat down, smirking.

Only one student seemed unamused. A sleek, raven-haired woman sat in the front row and watched intently as the lesson continued, never lowering her eyes. She leaned back slightly , crossing and uncrossing blue-jeaned legs. Her dark blue blouse was a fraction too tight and unbuttoned a fraction too far down for classroom dress A wave of black hair spilled over the slender shoulder into the visible cleavage. She took no notes, but ran her fingertip back and forth over closed lips.

Valerie directed her gaze elsewhere, though she kept returning to the disturbing anomaly, the dark shimmering spot that reduced everything else in the room to dullness. Her unrelenting stare made it hard for Valerie to concentrate.

She forced her attention back to the young man. "If you find the vulture goddess disgusting, Monsieur Vernaud, then you'll really have trouble with Khepre, the dung beetle who created the world by rolling up a ball of cow feces." The class murmured appreciation. "But never forget, we are talking about one of the first great cultures of humankind, and their divinities were their way of dealing with nature. When the gods were revered, nature was revered. Rather more reasonable than having to placate a vengeful father-god, don't you think?"

The four o'clock bell spared her any further youthful disdain. The students stood up murmuring their private conversations and gathering their things, all but the dark-haired one, who was suddenly beside the podium.

"Do you have a question, Mlle...uh...?" She couldn't remember the girl's name, couldn't actually remember seeing her in class before. The student hunched her shoulders slightly as her male counterpart had done and slid her fingers into the two front pockets of her jeans. What was it about blue jeans that lent them so easily to sexual posing?

"Belle Cather." The student shrugged for no apparent reason, drawing up her shirt in a curve under her perfect breasts. "I'd like to talk to you privately, if that's possible." She glanced toward the other students who were going through the door or who hung back waiting their turn to talk to the professor.

Valerie was taken aback. Asking for a private conference usually meant the student wanted an exam postponement. In this case, there was no exam. What was going on?

"Uh, well, yes, certainly, Mlle Cather." To her surprise, she found herself stammering. "I'm tied up with conferences the rest of the afternoon, however. Can you tell me what you need to talk about?" Five or six other students were closing in from the periphery, each one with a question.

The young woman dropped her eyes. "Something important that I need to discuss in private. If you don't mind." She pressed her lips together as if stifling the rest of what she had to say.

"Perhaps after the other conferences. In my office. I have a few

minutes before a dinner meeting with the dean."

"No." The lovely creature looked at her through long lashes that were the same jet black color as her hair. "It will take more than a few minutes. I will come after dinner. Will eight o'clock be late enough?"

Valerie glanced at the other students who were already within earshot. Her inner alarm was beginning to sound. *Student fl irtation. Danger her e. Frivolous, unethical, r eckless. Twenty-one, too much makeup, too much libido, too little intellect, nothing to offer but one brief thrill. Danger. Run away.*

"Yes. Eight will be fi ne," she answered quickly and directed her attention to the next student in line.

❖

Valerie stayed in the empty classroom for a moment and stared at the vulture hieroglyph. What the hell had just happened? More to the point, what was going to happen? Was it the sex-char ged air of the young students that weighted everything toward the carnal? She didn't know, but something about the black-haired girl had afected her. Whatever the discussion at eight o'clock that evening, it was unlikely to be about Egyptology, or even meaningful. Well, no matter. She had given up the thought of having anything meaningful with women.

The last time she had found "meaning" was in a Bedouin tent somewhere in the vast Egyptian desert. By the flickering light of an oil lamp, she had poured out her secrets to a mysterious woman and given herself to someone—to something—about which she knew nothing.

Yet when their lips had fi nally met, the Bedouin had not given back desire, but revelation, a staggering apocalyptic vision. It had changed the meaning of everything Valerie knew. Meaning in the place of passion. Enough meaning for her to lose her life over.

Since that night, Valerie had felt empty. No woman's kiss moved her beyond mere lust, and she sometimes wondered—half laughing at herself—if she had simply lost her taste for mortals.

She glanced through the open door where Belle Cather , full of promise, had disappeared.

Well, lust would do.

3

Gladius Dei

His hands were steady as he duct-taped the device against the thin metal wall that separated his compartment from the one in front. He added another strip, crisscrossing the others to hold the mechanism fast. Then he wedged his rock-filled suitcase against the explosive so it would blast forward.

He nodded, satisfied, and set the timer. Thirty minutes. That should put detonation somewhere around Qena.

The train slowed to a crawl as the porter announced the station. He slipped off his rubber gloves and dropped them on the floor where they would burn away. Some half dozen tourists shuffled along the corridor dragging their holiday luggage toward the door. When the train started again, at the last moment he opened the door and jumped out.

On the platform, he tugged the brim of his hat a bit lower and strode briskly out into the warm night air of Luxor.

Fifteen minutes later he pulled onto the highway that ran parallel to the railroad tracks. He could drive at top speed now; the night traffic was sparse. The train was well ahead of him, but he did not need to be in sight of it, only close enough to hear the explosion.

He checked his luminous watch. Ten minutes to go. The August night was hot, and he propped his arm on the car window to let the breeze blow into his shirt sleeve. Under the calm of his competence and resolve, he was excited. It felt good to be a lone soldier, fulfilling a complex and righteous mission that was both personal and for the greater good.

It had taken him a long while to surrender his will and to accept his duty. He bore the scars of harsh discipline. But he bore them with honor now as the signs of his identity. He was the heir to generations of piety and sacrifice of the most rigorous sort—a lineage of martyrs in a way His father, who had so often laid the strap to him, would finally be proud.

The soft boom somewhere ahead of him and the orange glow in the distance spread warmth downward from his chest. *I am the arm of vengeance*, he thought. *I am the instrument of righteousness*. He felt, curiously, like both a victor and a martyr.

4

Caught

Valerie hummed a bit of Italian opera as she organized the chaos in her office. It had grown imperceptibly during the summer term, and now, before she went on leave again, she had to deal with it.

She reduced the towers of reference books, returning them to their places on the shelves, but the loose papers thwarted her. Each one required a decision: create a folder and file, or discard. And every one of them contained some vital piece of information. Defeated, she simply squared the piles, improving their appearance but obscuring further the location of any given article if she should need it.

Among the papers were some photos and she paused to study them. Ah, yes, the "family" photo Derek had insisted on taking just before they left Luxor two years ago. Valerie smiled at the memory. They had been hurrying to get the train back to Cairo, but he had run and bought a disposable camera and asked the merchant to snap the shot, in the middle of the Luxor street. Silly, sentimental, wonderful Derek.

She held the photo close. Auset, poor dear, looked exhausted, and no wonder, having endured childbirth on the floor of an Egyptian temple only two days earlier. Yussif, beaming, to the extent one could beam from behind a thick black beard that generally rendered him ferocious. Derek was grinning too, no doubt because he had just acted out a living opera of heroic sacrifice and triumph. Valerie, herself, looked a bit distracted. And in the middle, asleep in Auset's arms, lay the newborn Neferenepet, the Child of the New Year who had just been acclaimed by a few hundred Egyptian gods.

Valerie stared, bemused, at her own image and wondered what attracted students to her. No one would call her pretty, not in the girlie sense. Her oval face could occasionally look bony, especially after a few months on excavation when hard labor completely burned off the lentils and pita she consumed. She used to like her large, slightly slanted eyes until she learned they came from the paternal side of her

family. She shuddered a little. Akhnaton eyes. Was that what appealed to students like Belle?

Maybe it was the scar. She ran her fingertips over the crescent-shaped ridge just in front of her left ear. The look of the adventurer, the veteran of mortal confrontations. She chuckled to herself. You could say that.

Someone tapped at the door.

❖

"You're right on time, Mlle Cather. Come on in."

"Call me Belle."

A thin sweater, too short to be tucked in, had replaced the blouse. She wore the same dark jeans, which hugged her narrow hips and left a line of exposed skin between pants and sweater. The flawless skin was caramel colored, and she was obviously not Belgian. Moroccan, perhaps? The last name gave no indication. The face was generic pretty, as if copied from a cover of one of the glamour magazines.

Valerie sat down on the narrow couch at the side of the office and motioned toward the armchair at the corner. "So. How can I help you?"

Belle ignored the chair and sat next to Valerie on the tiny office sofa, then shifted sideways, clasping her hands in her lap. "I'm sorry I missed some of your lectures," she began. "Did you talk much about the Egyptian gods? Did the students always react as they did today?"

Noting the proximity of their legs, Valerie smiled inwardly. She had no doubt where this was going. "Yes, and I'm afraid they did," she answered pleasantly. "The few who are religious take offense at polytheism altogether. They have their own supernatural beliefs and allow no room for any other perspective. The students who are not religious have no interest in the supernatural at all. And both groups are contemptuous of what they see as animal worship."

"They do seem resistant—and superficial." Belle rested one elbow on the back of the sofa. The sweater on that side of her waist lifted to reveal a handbreadth more skin.

Valerie's face began to warm with the realization that Belle's knee had somehow approached her own and now brushed lightly against it. "In a way, their skepticism is healthy, but they are also inflexible,

unwilling to explore different ways of comprehending the world. But what was so important that you wanted to talk about?"

"I will get to that in a minute. First, please tell me about yourself. How did you become interested in Egyptian religion?"

Ah. The tell-me-about-yourself gambit. She had used it herself many times. Obviously Belle had nothing "important" to talk about, and the "conference" was pure flirtation. The pressure on her knee confirmed her suspicion. "That's a complicated story, and I don't think you want to hear the long version."

"Maybe I do. Maybe I care why. Do you teach this subject out of conviction, or just because it is entertaining?" Belle shifted closer so that they sat almost parallel, arms and legs lightly touching.

Valerie could smell the freshly shampooed hair now, and the pleasant fragrance of youthful skin. "Are you asking me whether I believe in the Egyptian religion?"

Belle laughed emotionlessly, tilting her head back with the feigned amusement of a fashion model. "Perhaps I am. Will you answer?"

Sitting so close, Valerie studied the well-formed lips and teeth. What stroke of luck or fate had brought such a delicious creature to her couch? She was almost too good to be true.

Valerie tried to move the focus away from herself. "Why did you take my class? Maybe your beliefs are more relevant than mine. That seems to be an issue with some of the students."

Suddenly Belle grew serious and leaned forward again. Her arm slid along the back of the sofa and her breast grazed the professorial shoulder. "You are evading my question. Tell me, first, what you believe."

Valerie was aroused by the challenge and the intimate touch. Already her mind jumped ahead to what was coming: the climb, step by delicious step, to shivering thrill. Familiar heat spread upward, urging her toward gratification. So easy to press the little vixen back against the sofa and get the whole thing started. "I'm a scientist. I believe what I can see, and…touch." She laid a fingertip lightly on the side of the fashion-model face.

"Is that so?" Belle murmured.

Her head was close now, the thin white line of her upper teeth just visible between parted lips. Valerie detected the smell of mint that in a moment she would taste firsthand. Oh, minty kisses were nice. In the

precious heart-pounding seconds before the first touch of a new mouth, she slipped her hand between the young thighs. This little romp was going to be quick. Quick and very good. A millimeter from the inviting lips, she closed her eyes.

Thwack!

Valerie's head snapped back from the force of the slap.

5

Grim Tidings

Valerie blinked in disbelief.

Then she recognized the woman, and the noble epithets ran by her as if on a frieze: Mistress of the Desert, Lady of Elkab, Vulture of Upper Egypt, Protector of the King, Goddess of the White Crown. Nekhbet.

She was livid. " *This* is what you do? The Aton raises his hand against us once again, and this is what you do?"

Valerie rubbed the side of her face and looked up speechless at her accuser.

The Eurotrash clothing had disappeared along with Belle and her pretty pout. The goddess was clothed as she was portrayed in tombs and temples, in a simple black sheath dress from calf to bosom. Her sleek shoulders and arms were bare, and the swelling of her breasts was visible just above the sheath.

"Excuse me, but I could ask you exactly the same thing. Is this what *you* do? You glide into my classroom and my offi ce looking like some nubile young thing, flutter your eyelashes, and entrap me."

"Entrap? I entered your world as one of your own, to see what you have accomplished at the end of two years. If you imagined other motives," Nekhbet gestured toward the sofa, "you are in error."

"Me?" Valerie was indignant. "What did you expect me to think? No student visits a professor at night for scholarly discussion. You said you had something 'important' to discuss, but it was just a ploy to get us together."

Nekhbet waved a dismissive hand. "Do not argue these subtleties with me. I have something important to tell you, and you have let your baser urges interfere."

"Baser urges?" Valerie was sputtering. "So I'm to blame for—"

"There have been disasters. Rekemheb has disappeared. His ba-bird no longer flies between the worlds."

Valerie's indignation abruptly became alarm.

"His ba-bird is gone?" Valerie knew that the soul took the form of a bird when it left the deceased. It fl ew between the living world and the next with its human face as long as the bodily form remained. Its disappearance was ominous.

"We left his mummy safely in his new tomb. You saw that. Is it possible that someone has found it?"

"Perhaps time has found it and the fl esh crumbles. Whatever the reason, you must create a likeness to house his ka. If it is not too late."

"I understand the principle. But do you think I can create a likeness of him just from memory?"

"Foolish child, you have already forgotten. Wherefore was Derek born in the image of his ancestor? He will be the model.There is a man in Egypt who knows the craft. I will guide you to him. But you must hurry."

Valerie could not take her eyes from the divine mouth where an exquisite groove descended from between the nostrils to the bow of the lips. The suggestive upward curve at both corners of the mouth hinted at a smile. But Nekhbet never smiled.

The same solemnity, the same dark eyes, deep as history, that had mesmerized her two years before did so again. It was the face, faintly Greek as well as Egyptian, that haunted her dreams and reveries.

It had been two years since she had witnessed the stunning spectacle of the gods in the Temple of Dendara. Over that time, she had labored to write their chronicle and tell their glory and all the while, the thought of Nekhbet had been with her like a heartbeat. Valerie wanted her again. She wanted her all the time.

"The summer term is already over ," Valerie said, forcing her mind to the task at hand. "I can leave in two days. But if it's so urgent, wouldn't it be faster for Auset and Yussif to go? I mean, to arrange for the statue before we arrive?"

Nekhbet lowered her eyes. "That is the other disaster . Yussif is dead."

6

Mission Accomplished

After the orange light of his bomb faded from the night sky, he drove the rest of the way to Cairo at normal speed. With unfeigned nonchalance, he left the rented car at a garage in Giza. A television in the small office was tuned to the news station, and while the clerk did the paperwork, he watched impassively as the the explosion was reported. The young woman noted the news for a moment, shook her head at the familiar talk of terrorism, then resumed writing.

He tapped his fingers lightly while he waited, concealing satisfaction. The plan was successful so far, but would the bait work? If not, he had alternate plans. One way or another he would get them all together and move them into place for the final retribution.

He licked his lips, as if savoring the first taste of a banquet. To his surprise, the year-long mission had not sapped him as he had feared, but made him stronger, and he knew that strength showed in his demeanor. He had always been handsome, with light wavy hair, but now he exuded potency, and people responded to it.

By their deeds ye shall know them.

The clerk handed him his receipt and held his glance a fraction of a second longer than she needed to. Yes, it was the best thing he had ever done. He had sacrificed his normal life, yet he had never felt more virile and alive.

7

Summoned

Valerie dropped down on a chair. "Yussif is dead? When? How?"

"See for yourself." Nekhbet pointed to the small television atop the bookshelf, a device she seemed to accept but would not touch.

Valerie clicked it on and swept through the stations until she found a news broadcast. The tidy, attractive form of Worldnews correspondent Najya Khoury appeared, leaning toward the camera while behind her a fire raged. Explosion, derailment near Qena on the night train from Luxor, she reported. Fatalities unknown but terrorism suspected.

"He was on that train?" Valerie knew the answer.

"Yes. He lies on the ground and his ka is departed from him."

Valerie sat slack-jawed, remembering Yussif's scowling bearded face that would break into a radiant smile at the sight of his gorgeous wife or her infant daughter. She recalled their conversations on the long march through the desert, and the surprisingly deep intelligence of the man. Precious few Egyptian men would marry a woman with an illegitimate child by a black foreigner. "Does Derek know?"

"He does." She indicated the phone, which at that moment rang.

Valerie answered, still staring at the images on the television screen and at Najya Khoury, reporting in the scripted tones of the newscaster. "Derek? Is that you, dear?"

He answered breathlessly, his voice higher than usual, from the shock of the sudden tragedy. No time for a long conversation, no night for chitchat. They agreed to leave right away for Cairo on Thursday flights, he from Paris and she from Brussels. They could plan everything else once they were together.

"I'll call you with my flight information," Valerie said. "I'll telephone Auset too, first thing tomorrow morning." She set down the phone, her head swimming. "This will change everything."

"No. It changes very little."

Nekhbet's beautiful lips were pressed thin. "The same crisis looms

as before. Your seas are dying, and the wild places are despoiled. The land and air are poisoned, and the Aton still whispers in the ears of the powerful. This is but a small tragedy."

"It is not small to Auset. I thought the gods were protecting us."

"We protect the Child above all, but we are not omnipotent. And Yussif…we never thought—"

"Because he was not part of the original plan. Yes, I know," Valerie said bitterly. She closed her eyes and forced the anger away. "All right. As you heard, I've made arrangements to leave Wednesday night."

Nekhbet did not move and merely raised her chin a little. "There is something else."

"Oh? Yet another disaster?"

Nekhbet ignored the sarcasm. "Where is our Book? The chronicle you were called to write two years ago. We have waited."

Valerie took a step toward her desk and yanked open the top drawer. "You mean this?" She lifted out a thick manuscript held together by rubber bands and dropped it with a thud on the desktop. "I finished your damned Book a year ago, and it's only now being published. By a small women's press. I don't imagine they see themselves as apostles of a new religion, though."

Valerie laid her hand on the printout. "This cost me a year's work and kept me from the professional articles I should have been writing. What about your side of the agreement? You were supposed to look after us. But for two years I have seen no sign of you."

"I made no agreement," Nekhbet said, aloof.

"Not in so many words, I suppose." Valerie fumed for a moment. "Damn it. I died for you. I went into the underworld because of you. The memory of it haunts me all the time."

"Many have died for us and in far worse ways. You can make no claim to martyrdom. You descended into the underworld and fled from it again." Nekhbet's glance swept around the office. "You have recovered from death quite well."

"Martyrdom is the last thing I would claim. I only want you to protect us a little. No one did that for Yussif. Is he in the underworld?"

The goddess would not meet her gaze. "It is complicated. We will talk later about that. First do as I tell you."

"Talk later? When will that be?" Valerie replaced the manuscript

in its drawer, but when she glanced back, she was alone. She exhaled angrily, uselessly, and walked over to the office window, trying to sort her thoughts.

Below her, in what remained of the summer evening, students were emerging from the lab or the library. They had no idea this bizarre other world of ghosts and animal-headed gods waited just outside their own. That once again, after millennia, nature and their own jealous authoritarian god confronted one another. And that she, of all people, was chosen to be the one to tell them.

She felt uneasy about Cairo. If Islamists were blowing up trains, things had gotten very bad again. And dangerous for a white European. She unlocked her bottom desk drawer, lifted out a .38 revolver, and dropped it into her briefcase.

8

Brussels to Cairo

Gods, how she hated crowds. She had become an Egyptologist in order to spend time in the vast openness of the desert, and now here she was trapped in a tiny seat in an airplane. The tall man who sat next to her had been politely silent for the entire trip, for which she was grateful, but he blocked ready access to the aisle. Worse, the person in front of her had reclined his seat to nap and thus removed another third of her airspace. She was caged, and even when she escaped to walk in the aisle, which she had done repeatedly, she had always to return to her confinement.

She stared out the window into blue sky above and vaporous clouds below, starved for openness. Finally through a gap in the cloud she glimpsed land. The dun-colored patches told her they had crossed the Mediterranean and reached Africa. She guessed they were curving over the Libyan plateau and, mercifully, were only about half an hour from Cairo.

Seeing the desert from such a height called to mind the soaring vision that Nekhbet had once given her. Valerie smiled inwardly at the chain of events that had led up to that moment: the four of them wandering in the desert carrying a stolen mummy, the encounter with the Bedouins, the strange midnight invitation to the Bedouin tent, the tense, thrilling flirtation with the beautiful woman under the veil, and finally, the shattering kiss. The kiss she had craved her whole life, without knowing it.

She could not even find a word to describe the ecstasy that she had experienced. For the briefest moment she had been caught up in pure, scorching eroticism, but just when she feared she would die from it, her consciousness had slipped free of the physical and become pure thought and image. She had witnessed Egypt, all of it, throughout its history, complete with the desecration and destruction of its gods. The wonderful, terrible vision had told her that, in spite of the kiss, she was not so much loved as needed. That through the mummy they carried,

she was tied to those gods and that she was called to bring them back to the world.

She sighed. Here she was again, still needed but not loved, on a mission to rescue a man who had been dead three thousand years. Not just any man, but her own distant ancestor , himself once martyred for the gods. She had grown to like him, this priest of Hathor , who had come into her life as a ghost. Now his ka, the spirit that could live as long as form and substance existed to house it, had disappeared, and she was ashamed that she had let it happen. Why had she not thought of making the statue when they entombed him?

Of course the whole point of the ka's appearance in the tomb had been to prepare them for his last descendant, the precious infant who was born finally at the end of their flight through the desert.

Nefi made it all worthwhile. Half black, half Egyptian, of parents who were Christian, Jewish, Muslim, and pagan, she was their hope. Born on the Egyptian New Year's morning, in the sanctuary of Hathor's temple, and welcomed by all the gods of Egypt, she was somehow the seed of both the new and old religion, though it was not clear how. Even the name the gods had given her , Neferenepet, which simply meant "The beautiful new year," only hinted of her destiny.

For that matter, Valerie had no idea what any of them were destined for. She had written the Book called for in the scribe god' s prophecy, describing the gods' spectacular appearance in the night sky over the temple, yet she still had no idea how the gods would find their way into a world fraught with religious turmoil or what effect they would have. They seemed to have little interest in human affairs and no power to influence them. With their headpieces that marked them as wind, river, harmony, wrath, fertility, and countless animals, they were simply the powers—or fragilities—of nature. She found it somewhat endearing that they did not rule, or impose laws that commanded how humans should behave, dress, eat, and love.

On the other hand, on her more contentious days, the struggle of the Egyptian gods to be recognized seemed preposterous. If the gods did not reward or punish, or even provide any real guidance, what good were they? What was a god, anyway?

❖

The seat-belt light finally went off, and the passengers stood to retrieve luggage from the overhead compartments. Dulled by the half sleep she had fallen into,Valerie sat patiently, hating the crush of people worse than the confinement of her seat.

She peered drowsily at the passengers as they shuffled toward the exit, and for an instant, as if in a dream or nightmare, the man at the front of the line took on the snout and ears of a jackal before he ducked his head through the doorway and moved out of sight. *Anubis?* she thought, astonished. Behind him, the man who had sat next to her through the flight suddenly had a falcon's head. He seemed to stand taller for an instant; then, as Horus, he too passed through the doorway The woman that followed presented Wadjet's cobra's head. Tasting the air with her forked tongue, she curled briefly toward the passenger behind her. Valerie wondered if the next one would be Nekhbet, but no, she sprouted the horns of the cow goddess Hathor, a sphere of light suspended between them.

A spark of divinity ignited in one passenger after another. Valerie named them to herself. Horus, Wadjet, Hathor, Amun, Shu, Nuut, Sekhmet, Ptah. Only the last one in the line, a man who bore an extraordinary resemblance to the actor John Gielgud, nodded toward her, his puckered mouth morphing into the long ibis beak of the scribe god Jehuti. Then he too exited the cabin and Valerie remained sitting, stupefied.

A hand touched her shoulder lightly "Madame," a steward said, "I am sorry to wake you, but we have arrived. Can I assist you with your luggage?"

9

Cairo, Mother of the World

Valerie stared at the sky, watching a lone vulture glide in soundless arcs. She imagined what the airport must look like through its miraculous eyes as they surveyed the land from high above. Nothing but a wide strip of concrete in the middle of a sandy wasteland.

Derek's plane had been on the ground for half an hour, but customs was no doubt holding him up. He would not have had time to apply for a visitor's visa in Paris and would have to do it here before he could leave the airport. And so she waited, impatience sapping all other emotions, even the sorrow and dread she had carried with her for the past forty-eight hours.

She returned to the poorly air-conditioned terminal and paced for a few minutes, then stopped to look through the glass wall at the runway. Light struck her from somewhere at the side, and she could see her reflection in the glass. Rumpled clothing and disheveled hair. *Oh damn*, she thought. *I look terrible*. She stepped closer and studied her own tired face. Six months teaching in Brussels had left her pale again, and her sun-bleached hair had returned to its original light brown.

Yussif had once compared her oval face and visible cheekbones with those of Fairuz, the Lebanese singer. He had meant to compliment her, of course, since the young Fairuz was a beauty, but the aging star also became famous for her scowl. Valerie had tried to smile more, but it always felt fake. She had to laugh at the comparisons men were always making. Derek too had meant to compliment her by referring to her "Cleopatra eyes"—not realizing that Cleopatra was Greek, not Egyptian. She wondered if Fairuz—or Cleopatra—ever looked as puffy and tired as she did now.

Ah, there he was, finally. She watched him for a moment before they met and embraced. Usually ebullient, he was subdued. Then she realized he wasn't alone.

A large, slightly rumpled man in pale blue trousers strode beside

him, carrying a matching suit jacket folded over his arm. Two others walked in step behind them. Their expressions, devoid of cheer or even interest in their surroundings, revealed they were not tourists. Their massive shoulders and set jaws gave them the demeanor of hit men.

"Valerie, dear." Derek kissed her lightly, then stepped back.

He was still heartbreakingly handsome. Lar ge eyes rimmed with lashes of extraordinary length were set above cheeks a shade lighter than the rest of his dark face. As always, they gave him a sort of radiance, even when he mourned.

He took her hand, nervously, as if he knew his next remarks would be unwelcome, and indicated the blue-suited man. "Valerie, this is my stepfather, Reverend Harlan Carter. He's engaged to speak at the East-West synod in Cairo later this week, but he met me in Paris so we could fly together. He also wants to...uh…meet his granddaughter."

Valerie focused on the reverend, holding a weak smile. He was fleshy, from his wide, short neck and thick shoulders to the muscular roundness of his chest and belly , encased in an expensive white shirt. He wore suspenders, the stylish kind that bankers wore, and pinned to his shirt pocket was a small crimson metal cross. But most shocking of all was his color.

He was white, or had been white, before the Egyptian heat had rendered him an apoplectic pink.

Regaining her composure, she of fered him her hand. He took it courteously, but cupped his own hand to prevent their palms from touching. Half a handshake. "So, you are the young lady who brought my son to the heathens. We finally meet."

Valerie supposed he intended his remark as a witticism, but no one smiled and he seemed not to notice.

"Oh, how nice," she said blandly , concealing annoyance. Auset would need a great deal in the coming weeks, but she did not need a Protestant clergyman.

She glanced toward the two cheerless men behind him, and a third she hadn't noticed before.

"This is Mr. Dredding, my lawyer and advisor." Reverend Carter laid a hand on the shoulder of the older man, the only one who wore a hat, a pale straw porkpie. "These other gentlemen are here to look after me." The bulky hit men nodded perfunctorily . "I am so sorry

about your friend's death, Ms. Foret. God acts in mysterious ways, his wonders to unfold. Perhaps it is His way to bring the little girl back to her real father."

Speechless at the cler gyman's tactlessness, Valerie glanced at Derek, who only gave a tiny shrug. Falling silent, the six of them moved on to Baggage Claim, where they spread out along the carousel.

Valerie stood beside Derek and jabbed him with her elbow . "You never told me he was white. All these years I've been imagining him as black."

He saw his luggage emer ge from the bottom of the chute and yanked it off the treadmill with a single swing. "I didn' t mention it? I thought I did. Well, what difference would it have made?"

"I don't know. None, I guess. I just imagined him as a sort of Martin Luther King, but he's more like Colonel Sanders. Anyhow, would you explain to me again why he came with you—at a time like this?"

"Frankly, I was a little put of f myself when he told me. But he was already engaged for these sermons with the synod. I told him about Yussif being killed, and an hour later he called again to announce he'd changed his schedule to be here with me. What could I say?"

"You could have said this is a delicate private matter and you prefer to deal with it alone."

Derek looked pained. "W ell, he' s here now . He'll do his preaching thing and at some point pay his respects toAuset, inspect his granddaughter, and then leave."

"Fine, as long as he doesn't interfere. Oh, by the way, don't forget, tomorrow is Muslim Sabbath, so we have to get to the *souq* today and—"

The reverend appeared in front of them, all bags accounted for . After a few moments his ominous retinue arrived, each one with a single suitcase. Bodyguards, it seemed, traveled light.

❖

He stepped out of the shadows but kept a cautious distance, staying amidst the mass of people outside of customs. Well concealed, he watched the fi ve Americans arrive and be met by her . He saw it coalesce, the little family that he would soon take apart with sur gical precision.

It gave him a particular thrill to hear her voice, though they were too far away for him to make out what she said. All of those in the cult would have to be gotten rid of, but she was the worst. She was the source and cause of his mission.

At first he had thought she was simply one of those awful women that men had to endure in the professional world. But when he found out, through her own sickening account, what she did in her darkest moments and what went on in her filthy mind, he knew what he had to do.

Her physical presence revolted and confused him. He could barely stomach the fact that someone with her perversion enjoyed the authority of a university professor and the fame of a great discoveryThat she had a boyish attractiveness simply added one more outrage. She ought to be disfigured, repugnant.

He stood within the mass of passengers around the baggage carousel, watching her, and made up his mind. He would do her last.

10

Father, Son, and Venus

I think we have it sorted now," Derek said. "Pa, you'll come with Val and me in this taxi, and Mr. Dredding and his…colleagues in the one behind it."

Reverend Carter frowned faintly at the black-and-white Ladas that pulled up in front of them, but Valerie didn't bother to explain the noisy, smoky Russian vehicles that dominated the Cairo streets.

Derek got in the front seat next to the driver, abandoning Valerie to the reverend in the back. As the taxi took off, Derek twisted around and broke the awkward silence. "I've got prezzies," he said tunefully and fluttered his eyelashes. In spite of the grim reason for their arrival, he was obviously trying to be his normal bright self. He opened a leather carry-on and withdrew a plastic bag. "I didn't have time to wrap them," he apologized, and fumbled for something at the bottom of the bag. "This is for you." He reached over the back of his seat and dropped a small white plaster thing into Valerie's hand.

"The Venus di Milo?" She peered perplexed at the armless figurine that had become the world's cliché for "statue" and examined it to see if there was anything special about it. Except for her name scribbled on the bottom, she found nothing.

"I know it's not a *real* gift, but you told me Venus is the Roman version of Hathor. I bought it for you in the Louvre as a sort of good-luck piece, you know…to meet someone." He raised one eyebrow.

"Ah, well, thank you for worrying about my social life, but it's not that bad. All right, maybe it is." She dropped the figurine into the knapsack at her foot. "What else have you got in there?"

"Let's see. I got this for Auset." He unfolded a bright orange scarf. "And these for Nefi." He held up pink leather shoes.

"Tap-dancing shoes? Derek! She's only two years old. I think she's just learned how to walk without waddling."

"They're not for real dancing. They just have this tiny tap on the toe. Like training wheels."

Harlan Carter had detached himself from their conversation and

stared out the taxi window at the trash-strewn, drab gray landscape on his side of the road. For the first-time visitor, Valerie knew, it gave a sad introduction to the Egyptian desert.

"Look what they've done to this place," he grumbled. "It used to be the land of milk and honey."

"So, Reverend Carter…" Valerie said lightly, "what exactly will you be preaching on at this…uh…synod?"

The reverend smiled without warmth. "As Derek might have told you, our church is affiliated with the Mission for the Family organization based in Atlanta. It has sponsored me as a guest preacher here."

"Yes, he did mention that." Valerie clasped respectful hands over her knees and waited for wisdom.

"What my son has probably not told you, since he does not believe it, is that these are the End of Days. But I counsel you to believe it. A great conflict is arising, far beyond your imaginings, that will determine who is saved and who is lost. I have taken up the burden of trying to save as many souls as possible."

"Even in a Muslim country?"

"God loves the Muslims too, Miss Foret. They do not murder their unborn children as we do in the West, and they punish promiscuity and homosexuality." He did not look at his stepson as he spoke. "Since they ceased to have four wives, Muslims cherish family the way God intended it to be. They are heathens only because they have not heard the rest of God's message. I am here to get them to listen to it."

Valerie raised her eyebrows slightly. "The 'God-intended family.' Interesting concept. And what would 'the rest' be?"

"That God loves them, but they have gone astray. It is true that they submit to God and they recognize Jesus Christ, for which I give them credit. But they have got to be made to recognize that Jesus is the one coming back to judge them, not Mohammed."

"I see."

"I am also here to look after my family."

Derek twisted around again. "It's my family, Pa, not yours, and that's why I'm here. You don't have to be involved at all. I'll do whatever Auset needs me to, including staying in Egypt."

"Staying in Egypt? That's ridiculous. Your child is part of our family, and you should be raising her in your own country. Lord knows, you've spent little enough time there. A Christian man takes care of

his own." He shifted in his seat toward Valerie. "Don't you agree, Ms. Foret? Or are you of the Jewish faith?"

The overly delicate phrase "of the Jewish faith" irritated her. "Ahh, no. Lapsed Catholic, I'm afraid."

The reverend lowered his eyes. "A shame, to give up your faith. Jesus died for you, and He will soon call you before Him."

Derek winced. "Pa, please—"

Valerie felt the door creak open to her internal weapons locker. She licked her lips. "Not for me, he didn't. I wasn't born yet."

Derek inhaled, as if to speak, then stopped. Nothing he could say would prevent the duel that was coming.

Harlan Carter brushed dust off his jacket as if it were flakes of her blasphemy. "You didn't have to ask him, child. God loved you so much He let his son be crucified for the sins of *all* men. For yours too."

Valerie squinted, turning the idea in her head like a jeweler studying a crystal. "Let me see if I understand this, Reverend. You mean God created a son, perfect in virtue, to suffer the punishment for the rest of us, his other sinful children. And to show His love for the *guilty* ones, God let the *innocent* one be tortured to death on a Roman cross." Valerie looked at him directly. "That's pretty sadistic, don't you think?"

A plump pastoral hand went up between them, as if to project light from his palm into the darkness of her mind.

"Sadistic? Oh, child. You have no idea." He spoke in a rich baritone. "The creator of the universe is not warm and fuzzy. His plan for the world is a harsh one, but it is also full of mercy. When the Day comes, the Lord will descend from heaven in a robe that has been marked with blood. He will visit His wrath upon the sinful, and even the penitent will gnash their teeth. Salvation will be costly."

Valerie stifled the urge to smile. "This is the message you're going to preach in Cairo?"

"Not only that. The Egyptians must be told of the restoration of the nation of Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple of Solomon. All of Palestine must be reclaimed from the Mohammedans. It will be a hard pill to swallow, but it is God's will."

"I don't think they will welcome that message, Reverend."

"I know that. I have chosen the most difficult of all missions, and in the eleventh hour. Some will be obdurate."

Valerie looked back over her shoulder at the car behind them

carrying the lawyer and bodyguards. "I think they will be *very* obdurate, Reverend Carter."

Just then the taxi drew up to the Hyatt hotel, and the reverend swung himself from his seat through the open door . He stood up and checked to see if his bodyguards had followed. They had. He leaned back down to speak.

"Do not think I didn't notice your sarcasm, Ms. Foret. Your soul is yours to save or lose, but I will not let you harm my granddaughter . A Christian man takes care of his family. Good day to you."

11

Always Home

Well, I think that went rather well, don't you?" she said as Derek moved around to the back seat and the taxi pulled away.

"Please, Valerie. I need you to help me here, not fight with my stepfather. It's going to be hard enough to take care of Auset and Nefi, and keep him out of the way." He tapped on the back of the driver's seat. "Zamalek, please. Shari' al Zahir. Did I pronounce the street name correctly?" he asked Valerie.

"Perfect. Your Arabic is getting pretty good." She leaned forward and got the driver's attention again. "After Zamalek, please go on to the Shari al Hassan."

"You're not coming with me? I thought we both were going to Auset's."

"I decided I should give you two some private time togetherAfter all, you need to discuss important things with her about your daughter. Don't worry about me. I still have the same room near the souq where I'm perfectly comfortable. Plus I need to call the museum. I'll join you at Auset's house later this morning.Then we can go together to the souq to order Rekemheb's statue."

He leaned back against the taxi seat for a moment, looking helpless. "What can I say? It must be so awful for her."

Valerie took his hand absentmindedly, comforting herself as well. "Yussif was her bulwark. Ours too, in a way. He wanted nothing but to be a good man and to have a happy family."

"I know. I spent two vacations at their house in El Khar ga. Some people might have thought us a little weird, getting along that way, but Yussif was always easygoing. He was as much like a brother as I could ever imagine. So what happened on that train, anyway?"

"I don't know any more than what we both saw on the news.They think it was terrorists, but that's what they always say. They're mostly right, of course, but I don't see any context here. It's not like they killed a lot of foreigners like they did in the Valley of the Queens in '97."

Derek moved his jaw around, as if he were actually chewing on a thought. "Do you think Yussif's in the underworld? In the Hall of Judgment where I found you? I've been wondering about that for days."

The "Hallelujah Chorus" sounded suddenly from the vicinity of Derek's hip. Valerie looked around. "What's that?" The melody continued in dry, tinkly electronic tones.

"Sorry. Cell phone." He unhooked the palm-sized silver object from his belt and flipped it open with a deft flick of the thumb. "Hello? *Ach, Johannes. Nun, was ist*?" He lowered the phone for a moment. "Sorry, Sweetie. My agent in Germany. It'll just take a min."

Valerie stared out the window at the shabby apartment buildings being built along the Avenue of the Pyramids. Badly reinforced, they collapsed occasionally during Cairo's frequent tremors. She loved Cairo and the Cairenes, the fast-talking cynical city folk of Egypt, but she was glad she didn't have to stay in it for more than a few days at a time. Whether because of inefficiency, corruption, waste, or simply an exploding population, the quality of life in much of Cairo was poor, and the air in all of it was dreadful.

Three minutes later Derek clicked his cell phone shut with a flick of the hand. "Sorry about that. New engagement. Recital in March. Some castle in Provence."

"Weren't you just in Paris?"

He smiled, wan. "I was in six countries in the last four months. That's what's so crazy about my stepfather wanting me to bring Nefi 'home.' Home for me is all over the musical world."

"I know what you mean. I don't travel the way you do, but I feel just the same whether I wake up in Brussels, New York, or Cairo. Home's where my friends are."

"Tell me about it. Since last May I've had goulash with Barenboim in Budapest…" He held up his fingers, wiggling each one as he enumerated. "Blinis with Rostropovitch in St. Petersburg, Sachertorte with Ozawa in Salzburg, croissants with a handsome baritone who shall remain unnamed in Paris, and in about fifteen minutes, Arab *chai* with Auset in Cairo."

"Do I detect a theme here?" Valerie teased. "Or a just a man with sugar 'issyews?'"

He grinned back. "My point is, I don't have a sense of place. You

don't either. It's partly our careers, of course, but we also know from Rekemheb that our ancient ancestors were Egyptian. Who cares about Atlanta or Brussels? Our family," he made little quotation marks with his fingertips. "Our 'family' started here, then wandered all overAfrica, the Middle East, and Europe. We're kind of world Bedouins."

"Nice way of putting it." She thought about the Belgian orphanage that had darkened her childhood. It was the last place she would call home.

He gazed up at the ceiling of the taxi for a moment. "Do you think they were like us, the ancestor Dereks and Valeries?"

"You mean smart, good-looking, and gay? Oh, I'm sure of it."

12

Northern Sinai Trade Route—1099

Desperately thirsty, Faaria brushed powdery sand from her lips. She glanced toward Sharif for comfort, but the way her brother was slouched over the saddle of his camel told her he was no better off. The afternoon sun baked them, and no one in the caravan had any more water. She had a single small mouthful left in the bottom of her goatskin. It wasn't enough to slake her thirst but she kept it, taking strange comfort in the knowledge that it was there, that she could drink it any time.

What fools they'd been to leave the trade route and venture into the Sinai desert on an insane pursuit, risking their lives for a few manuscripts. But Sharif was mad, and he had made the rest of them mad too, convincing Husaam al Noori that the books were worth it. Thieves had taken them, he said, but he was certain they could be bartered with, and he knew where they hid. Near a well, he said, where they could replenish their supply for the two-day trip back north to the village of El Arish.

What a shock to find the manuscripts but not the water. The well was dry. She chuckled bitterly at the irony. They came upon them dead, thieves murdered by other thieves. But, *Alhamdulillah*, they had been killed for the gold they carried, not for what they had hidden under the heaps of dung-smeared straw. The dead men could not have lain there long, for they had not yet attracted vultures, and the bundles of straw, of so little interest to the attackers, still protected their vellum treasures.

And here they were, Husaam al Noori, his scribe and companion Sharif al Kitab, his daughter Amhara, and herself. Cairo merchants who ought to have known better. They carried alabaster, ivory, flax, and now six manuscripts—and not a drop of water. They had been traveling, parched and by sheer force of will, for two days, and El Arish was nowhere in sight.

Faaria heard a soft whimper and looked over at the other camel where, in her panier, Amhara held her limp infant.

"My milk is dry I have nothing left to give her," Amhara whispered hoarsely.

Faaria stared at her through sand-scraped eyes. The daughter of the caravan owner was still beautiful, even though windblown, parched, and in anguish for her child.

Amhara shook her head. "If the gods wish to punish me, I accept it, but please, not my baby."

Faaria understood. Amhara had no husband, and the dark-skinned, year-old infant had been sired—so said the camp gossip—by a Nubian camel driver who had run of f to avoid being killed. Now the young mother was unmarriageable as long as she kept her child, the proof and outcome of her transgression.

"I am so afraid," Amhara whispered and held the precious bundle to her breast. "She doesn't even cry any more."

Faaria rode close enough to see the baby, limp fists closed on her chest. Her little bow lips were blistered like her mother's, and her head lolled back. It seemed unlikely that she would last much longer.

Faaria sighed inwardly and reached for her goatskin. "There is not much left, not enough for us. But maybe for her…" She handed the crumpled skin across to Amhara and watched hungrily as the precious water dribbled for a few seconds into the tiny mouth, then was gone.

Gone. For all of them now . She struck her camel with the goad and lurched forward, not wanting to be thanked. If she was going to die of thirst, she didn't want to have to make polite conversation while she did so.

Was this what dying was like, she wondered.A pity. They were all so young and—if they had made it to Damascus with their alabaster and ivory—they would have been rich. They were like a family, the four of them, though Husaam al Noori was in fact their employer.

How kind fate had been to set the two half families—the widowed father with his errant daughter and the misfi t siblings—in each other's path. Life was hard after their parents' death by plague, though it was not all that promising before then either.

Sharif was delicate of form, attractive some would say, but for his deformed foot and the limp it caused him. Faaria was also somewhat fair, though her hair , red like his, made her suspect. But the fi ts of madness—at least they called it madness—set her apart from all the other women. She dreamed of birds and animals that spoke, and she

mistakenly told the dreams to others. They called her demented and, worse, *shaytaneya*, possessed of the devil, and if Husaam al Noori had not taken them in she might have one day been killed for it.

But something akin to love had developed between the merchant and Sharif, his scribe, accountant, and companion. For the assistance and comfort Sharif gave him, Husaam tolerated his boyish sister as long as she made herself useful. Today, however, she was useless.

Let me die, she prayed silently to the indif ferent sky. Not the baby, not Amhara, not Sharif. Take me. She swayed dangerously on her saddle, feverish and dizzy from exhaustion, no longer caring. She scarcely heard the voice of the drover at the forefront of the caravan call out, "*Shuff. Alhamdullilah*. The caravanserai!"

13

Intruders

Valerie trudged across the Midan al Hussein into the shabby and pungent butchers' souq where tourists were a rarity. She passed the chicken cages that were always piled up just before the cloth sellers' market and felt a moment of comfort when she came to the familiar entrance to Sammed's café.

Keeping the room and Sammed's goodwill on permanent retainer was one of the smartest things she had done. In the two years she had worked on cataloging the newly excavated "priest's tomb" it had been her home. It was always there when she returned from the desert, whether for supplies or a quick rendezvous with Jameela al Rashidi, wife of the Chairman of the Council of Antiquities.

Even after Jameela had lost interest and Valerie had begun to teach summers at the University of Brussels, she had held on to the room, paying the meager rent from afar. She always kept a few books, a change of clothes, and her other fedora there, just to come home to something familiar each time she was in Cairo.

"*Sabah el kheer*," she said to the young man who stood behind the tiny counter. "Is Sammed around?"

"*Sabah el noor.*" He gave the standard reply. "He's out for awhile. Business."

Valerie knew what that meant. Sammed was making some deal. For foreign cigarettes, probably, or whiskey, which enjoyed a surprisingly large market in Cairo, Islam notwithstanding. She would touch base with him later, maybe after a trip to the *hammam* for a bath.

She walked around to the side of the simple mud-brick and plaster building that blended in so well with every other house in the souq, and climbed the narrow brick staircase to the upper floor. As she reached for the door handle, she stopped, puzzled, at the deep buzzing sound that came from inside the room. Cautiously, she opened the door.

"What the hell?"

In the corner of the single room, nude except for boxer shorts, a man lay on the narrow bed. With his head thrown back like a defeated

boxer, he snored vehemently. She stomped into the room.

A pair of cargo pants was folded over the back of a chair, and under it hiking boots stood side by side. At the foot of the bed, on the floor, an open rucksack lay on its side, its contents of folded clothing visible.

Valerie detected a faint odor of beer in the room. The bastard had apparently gotten drunk and fallen asleep, sweat and all, on her clean linen. Worst of all, a killing offense, he had covered his eyes against the light with her fedora!

Valerie let her knapsack drop onto the floor and strode over to the bed.

"Wake up!" She kicked the foot of the bed. "What the hell are you doing in my room?"

"Huh?" He woke with a start and sat up, befuddled. "What the fuck? What the hell are you doing in *my* room?" he echoed. As he swung around to sit on the edge of the bed, the fedora fell to the floor and she snatched it up.

"This *is* my room, so you will please take your..." she looked at his rucksack on the floor, "*things*, and get out."

"I don't know what the hell you're talking about, lady. We paid for this room already."

"Excuse me?" a faintly condescending voice said behind her. "Is there something we can do for you, Miss?"

Valerie spun around, as if she had been spat on.

A woman stood in the doorway, slightly shorter than herself. Late thirties, Arab or Indian, and her tailored Western clothing screamed "professional." She looked familiar, but from *where*? Anger shouldered out any further thought.

"What you can *do* for me is get out of my room."

"Come on, Najya, this dump isn't worth fighting for." The man had stood up and was pulling on his pants. "Let's just get a room in a real hotel." He zipped up his fly and buckled his belt but seemed to see no need to put on a shirt.

Valerie could smell the odor of his skin now, pungent and male.

Najya. Now she remembered. The newscaster. As the man grabbed his knapsack and began to stuff his clothing back into it, Valerie saw the camera case on the floor. She softened a little and backed toward the door. "Uh, sorry to evict you this way, but I keep the room on a

permanent retainer. It's obvious Sammed has tried to slip one past both of us. I'll just go and get it all sorted."

She hurried down the outside staircase while they packed. Damn, she thought. This on top of everything else. She wondered who she could complain to if Sammed was still out. But when she rounded the corner to the street, she saw him, authoritative in spite of his short rotund form. Owl-like with his large curved nose punctuating his orders, he directed two muscular Sudanese who carried bulging burlap sacks. Obviously a recent large purchase.

"Sammed!"

He glanced toward her , his momentary surprise immediately replaced by congeniality, and waved the two Sudanese inside.

"Dr. Foret. What a pleasant surprise." He extended both hands.

"Yes, I bet it is. What are those two people doing in my room? You know we had an arrangement."

He clasped his hands in front of him, as if he had just applauded something. "Yes, yes, of course we did. And I have honored it, I can assure you. But this was an extraordinary situation, with a very special person. Najya Khoury. Surely you know this journalist."

"Yes, now that you tell me, but what is she doing in the souq with the riffraff?"

"I did not inquire, but please accept my profoundest apologies. I will see to their removal immediately."

"That doesn't seem to be necessary," Valerie remarked as the two intruders descended the stairs. The man had put his shirt on fi nally, hurriedly tucked in, and he struggled with a pole in one hand and a camera on a brace on the other shoulder. A battery pack strapped around his waist tugged at his trousers, exposing a strip of the undershorts Valerie had already seen.

Najya Khoury, unruffled, followed him carrying a trim black flight bag.

"I am sorry for this misunderstanding." Sammed was deferential. "May I offer you a cold beverage before you leave. On the house, of course."

"Thank you, no," the journalist said. She held up a blue cell phone. "We have made other arrangements. We'll come back later for our refund." She glanced at Valerie. "I wish I could say it has been a pleasure, Dr. Foret, but…" Without finishing her sentence, she marched

down the narrow street toward the butchers' souq and the opening to the square.

Valerie pivoted around to Sammed. "How did she know my name?"

"Oh, Dr. Foret. Of course she knows you. She is a journalist, and you were big news when you found the priest' s tomb. The papers ran the story for weeks."

"Umm." She watched the two turn the corner to the butchers' souq. "I suppose I was a little brusque, wasn't I?"

"Oh, certainly not." He changed the subject. "Are you here to work again on the tomb, *Duktura*? Will you be staying with us for awhile?"

"I don't know, really. I'm here for an emergency, family business. But I expect I'll also need to spend some time at the museum."

She glanced again toward the narrow street where the two journalists had gone and felt a twinge of embarrassment. They were probably perfectly nice people.

14

Auset

Valerie approached Mahmoud al Fakhir's house, curious to see what sort of life the widowed Auset had returned to. It was a good one. Her father was clearly a prosperous man. His large house combined his business and his family life in a congenial way, at least architecturally. His high-end antiques shop and his household were at once separated and deftly joined in a style of building that had housed the prosperous since the Greeks. The ryad, two stories high and built in a quadrangle around a central courtyard, nestled inconspicuously among the apartment buildings in the Zamalak section of Cairo.

As she walked around the periphery of the quadrangle, she noticed that one full side held the showrooms and commercial space of the antiques business. Two of the sides, with windows only on the second floor, clearly housed the family. The fourth wall, where the tops of trees and rose bushes were visible, revealed a garden at the center. Valerie thought, absurdly, of a tale of Scheherezade.

She arrived again at the west side at the private entrance, as discreet as the antiques business was public, and knocked on the door. An elderly man opened it and stepped back, bowing slightly. Of course Mahmoud al Fakhir would have a houseman.

"As salaamu 'alaykum," she greeted him formally.

"Wa 'alaykum as salaam," he replied and led her down a corridor to the central garden.

But for the recent tragedy, it would have been idyllic. The quadrangle was full of fruit trees and flowering shrubs. At the center, a stone fountain bubbled up a thin stream of water that fell into an upper, then a lower bowl. Where it dribbled softly over the rim, brightly colored birds fluttered and drank. Brick paths radiated out in four directions from the fountain and cut the garden into quarters. In the moist garden air, the fragrance of roses mixed with the stronger smell of jasmine. Directly across from where Valerie stood, Derek had one arm around Auset and held his daughter in the other.

Auset turned at the sound of her footfall and embraced her. The

half-Arab, half-Jew had always had a certain voluptuous beauty, but today her face was simply swollen from weeping. "Thank you. Thank you for coming," she whispered hoarsely.

"Of course," Valerie answered softly, and looked again toward Derek and his daughter. Her visits to Egypt had never coincided with his, so this was the first time she had seen them together since the baby's birth. She noted a sort of reverse resemblance between them. Nefi had shiny dark hair that hung in thick ShirleyTemple curls around her face, while his was ruthlessly short. She had the same radiant eyes as her natural father, but where his sparkled with joie de vivre, Nefi's seemed more solemn.

"Please, both of you."Auset's voice was raw. "Come and sit down here outside the kitchen." She pointed to a round glass table at the side of the garden that was already set with plates and fruit. "Fahd will bring us some breakfast."

"What a beautiful place." Valerie postponed talking about Yussif. "It's part of your father's business, isn't it?"

Auset blew her nose into a tissue. "Yes, my father's shop is at that end, under the arcade."

Valerie traced the balcony walkway that went around three sides of the courtyard and marked out the upper floor. Though it overlooked the garden full of plants, it also held pots of flowering vines that hung down over the carved balustrades. Behind them she could see the doors and windows to the private rooms.

Derek sat down with Nefi on his lap. "I was planning to stay at the Sheraton," he said to Valerie, "but Auset's father invited me to stay here. I want to spend more time with Nefi, anyhow. Not that I want to replace Yussif, of course."

Valerie saw where his eyes went, toward the photo at the center of the table, and she picked it up. Yussif sat on the ground and leaned against a palm tree in Al Dakhla. On his lap was Nefi at the age of one, already with an explosion of curls. In the three-day beard that he insisted on keeping, Yussif still looked fierce, but his eyes beamed contentment. One of his large hands held his adoptive daughter around the waist; the other held up the brightly clothed Cleopatra doll that Derek had sent as a birthday present from the Munich opera.The first of a series of lovely and impractical gifts from all over the musical world.

Gently laying the picture back down, Valerie thought fondly of

Yussif, that rare kind of man who cheerfully , lovingly raises another man's child. Yet in the gods' scheme of things, he'd been an afterthought when the Child's natural father proved a poor choice as paterfamilias. How had the gods not noticed that Derek was gay? Or that she herself was? Yet the two of them, unrepentantly deviant, carried the bloodline of the chosen priest, Rekemheb.

She looked around again. "It seems like an idyllic place to raise a child."

The houseman set down a wide tray with a metal teapot, numerous glasses, and bowls full of yogurt, tahini, and pita.

Auset thanked him and poured tea for all of them. "It's a safe place for us, for awhile. But my father is religious, and mullahs and imams come and go through the house all the time. If it gets too Islamic, I plan to take a vacation with my other grandparents in Jerusalem."

Jerusalem? Derek's eyebrows went up. "Aren't they religious too? Your mother's family, I mean."

"Yes, they are, but the two religions would sort of balance out, I think. Savti and Babi always made a fuss over me when I was little, and now they have a great-grandchild. They have a shop in the Old City, so I would visit them just to get away from Cairo for a while." She passed around the yogurt, cheered, it seemed, by the talk of travel.

"I thought Egyptians needed visas to get into Israel."

"Not Jews. Remember, there's that right-of-return thing. I've been there lots of times with my mother."

Valerie frowned. "You're as Jewish as I am Christian."

"I'm as Jewish as I need to be. My mother is Jewish, and by Jewish law, both Nefi and I are too. Only my father needs a special visa. Absurd, isn't it?" She added more tea to Valerie's glass. "How long can you stay? I'd love for Nefi to spend time with you."

"I'd love it too. A lot depends on whether I can save Rekemheb."

"Save him? From what?"

"Nekhbet appeared in Brussels suddenly and told me that Rekemheb's ka has disappeared because his mummy is damaged, she thinks. I promised that I'd drive down to his tomb and see if I could save him."

"I never really understood about kas. Just how would you do that?"

"You know that the ka-spirit can migrate to a statue, if it looks like him, but only if you get there in time and do the right ceremonies. We plan to order the statue this afternoon, and when it's done, rush it down to his tomb."

While Valerie spoke, Derek unwrapped the little pink shoes and slid one absentmindedly onto one of Nefi 's bare feet. She accepted it, intrigued. "All the pain we went through to save his mummy and it would be for nothing." He buckled on the second shoe.

"That's why it's so urgent that we get to him right away I estimate two days to get the statue carved and two days to get to the tomb."

Auset took Valerie's wrist. "Wait. You're going to try to save the ka of Rekemheb? Why not Yussif too? Doesn't he have a ka?"

Valerie raised her brow in tentative agreement. "He ought to. But for a ka to live in the underworld, he needs an earthly form."

Auset looked appalled. "Y ou mean I'd have to mummify him first?"

"No. You could make a statue too, I guess, like we're doing for Rekemheb. But I just don' t know. When the gods came to Dendara, none of us thought to ask if the rules applied to all of us. And when I asked Nekhbet, she refused to say."

"Well, I guess we better hope Rekemheb makes it, so we can ask him, right?" Then, as if realizing the cumulative weight of the problems, Derek rubbed his forehead. "So how should we do this? Should I go with you, Val? Auset? What do you think? Maybe we could all go together, like before."

He hugged his daughter briefl y as she examined the brightly colored objects on her feet.

"What are you thinking, dear?" Auset was adamant. "I couldn' t possibly take a small child into the desert. And I won't leave her alone either. She still doesn't understand why *Baba* doesn't come home."

"It's all right, Derek." Valerie touched his hand. "I need you to come with me this afternoon to get the statue made, but you don't have to go to the tomb. I'm the only one who knows the incantations anyhow. You should stay in Cairo with your family."

"Sounds like a plan," he said, obviously relieved. "So when are we visiting this image-maker person?"

"As soon as I've made a quick trip to the hammam for a bath. I'm

wearing the same clothes I had on in Brussels, so I apologize if I'm a bit ripe, Auset. I considered going before I came here, but seeing you was more important."

"You can have a bath right here," someone said.

Valerie glanced around to the source of the soothing voice and saw a gray-haired woman in the kitchen doorway wiping her hands on a towel. Hannah Ibrahim opened her arms and Valerie stepped easily into the light maternal embrace. Though they had met only briefly, at Auset's own house, Valerie felt a warmth that had carried over.

"You know you are family here, Valerie, dear. Derek has the guest room, but we can make a place in the library for you to stay with us."

Valerie studied the mother of Auset al Fakhir. Hannah was short and slight of build, but had a force of personality that seemed to lend her substance. She had an age-softened version of her daughter's sensuality, but while Auset confronted the world with wisecracks, Hannah met it with quiet conviction. She had not only stood up to family condemnation for marrying a Moslem, but she had also protected her willful daughter and illegitimate grandchild from hostility on all sides.

"Oh, thank you, Hannah, that's very kind. But I've stayed for so long at Sammed's place, it really feels like home. Besides, he's just evicted a couple of people for me, so it would be impolite not to go back."

"Shuff, *Jaddee*!" Nefi lifted one pink foot toward her grandmother.

Hannah stroked the new shoe with her fingertip. "*Gameel,* habibti," she said, admiring their beauty.

"*Duktura Foret*," a baritone voice said behind them.

"Oh, Mahmoud al Fakhir, good morning." Valerie knew not to offer her hand to a conservative Muslim, but she inclined her head in what she hoped he understood was sincere warmth.

Auset's father was tall and slightly stooped. In spite of doing regular business with the West and of having sent his daughter to college in New York, he seemed in every other way a traditional Egyptian. A full beard, now shot through with gray, grew down to his collar, and his galabaya and turban were both white. He looked like any of a thousand men prostrating themselves in the Citadel mosque every Friday.

And yet she knew from Auset how very untraditional he was, in spite of himself. At the discovery of his daughter's pregnancy, he had

been furious, but after a few weeks of silence he had evidently decided that family was more important than shame, and so he accepted her back. That his daughter and son-in-law had embraced polytheism had not yet been revealed to him.

Al Fakhir sat on the remaining chair and patted his knees. Nefi slid off Derek's lap to climb onto her grandfather 's, where she was obviously at home. Reaching over her shoulder he took the knife, cut a piece of melon, and placed it into Nefi's plump hand.

Fahd was suddenly at the table. " *Sayyid. Fee raghel mistaneek barra aiyz yeshufak. Amerikani,*" he said in a rapid, agitated stream.

Auset looked at Derek. "AnAmerican? Do you have any idea who it could be?"

Valerie turned toward him as well. "You didn't tell her?"

15

Grandfathers

Harlan Carter entered hesitantly, clearly surprised by the lush, perfumed garden. Valerie suspected that the atmosphere of elegance and prosperity didn't quite fit with the reverend's picture of a squalid people in need of salvation.

The men at the table stood up to receive him. Though he was clearly taken aback, Al Fakhir offered him his hand and gestured toward the remaining chair.

Carter sat down, brushing imaginary dust from his trousers. "Pleased to meet you, Mr. Alfakker, is it? Mrs. Alfakker." Mispronouncing the name, which was not hers in any case, the reverend held out his hand to Hannah.

After an awkward moment, she touched his hand lightly and withdrew it.

"Yes, and oh, there she is, my granddaughter." He reached over to Nefi, who still sat in al Fakhir's lap, and pinched her cheek. "Hello, sweetie. Well, aren't you a beauty. Your daddy's goin' to have to beat the boys away with a stick, isn't he?"

Nefi leaned backward away from him, and al Fakhir raised a protective hand in front of her. "She does not know you."

"Of course she doesn't. Not yet anyhow." He wiggled his fingers at the puzzled child. "Honey, this is your other grandpa, and is he looking forward to spoiling you rotten!"

"Pa, please," Derek said. "She has no idea what you're saying."

"That's all right. She'll understand this." He reached in his pocket and held up a wrapped candy. "See, peppermint. Everybody loves peppermint."

He handed the candy to her, and she opened the crackly cellophane. Without taking her eyes from the stranger, she put the sweet into her mouth with the palm of her hand. She wrinkled her nose for a moment, then took the sticky lump out with her fingers.

Auset scooped it from her hand with a paper napkin. "She's never seen candy. Egyptian children don't eat much of it."

Reverend Carter would not be deterred. "But I bet they love toys as much as American children do." From the other pocket he withdrew a stuffed bear, only slightly larger than his own plump fist. He presented it to the fascinated child, and she smiled broadly as she squeezed its soft plush.

"What are you giving her? Derek asked. "A toy bear with armor?

"This is the Armor-of-God stuffed bear. Look, he's wearing the shield of Faith, the Breastplate of Righteousness, the Sword of the Spirit, and the Helmet of Salvation. It teaches kids that God is their salvation."

Nefi squeezed the soft plush bear, clearly pleased.

Al Fakhir, who still held her in his lap, forced a polite smile and spoke to Nefi in Arabic.

"*Shukran,*" she said dutifully.

"She says 'thank you.'"

"Doesn't she speak English?"

"Not much, Pa. I see her only twice a year. And I try to speak to her in Arabic."

"Well, she can learn, of course. She's a smart girl, I can see that." Reverend Carter took hold of one of the little hands, "I am your grandpa. Say 'grandpa...grand...pa.'"

Nefi yanked her hand away and Auset intervened. "Perhaps we could have the English lesson some other time, Reverend."

Carter stood up. "Of course. There's plenty of time for that. I won't disturb your little family any longer." He addressed Derek. "Would you come by the hotel today? I have something important to discuss with you."

"Sure, Pa. But only for a few minutes. Valerie and I have urgent business this afternoon."

"Just stop by before you go. It's very important." He nodded toward al Fakhir, who set Nefi down in order to rise courteously but didn't speak.

Fahd came to escort the stranger out.

"Don't forget." Reverend Carter squeezed Derek's arm as he turned to leave. He followed the housemaster out, his blue polyester suit seeming somehow alien in the Arab garden.

Valerie glanced over at the rival grandfather. Al Fakhir had watched the clergyman depart and still stared at the empty path. She

detected more than simple dislike in his expression. Something very old, some archaic battle that once was fought with swords, seemed to have awakened in him. How could it not have? The terrorist's hand had reached into his family, and now some know-nothing foreigner had invaded his house as well.

16

Hammam

Valerie strode along the narrower alleys of the souq. Over her head, elaborate screens of Mameluke bay windows overhung the street. Behind them, she was certain, idle women gazed down onto the activity below. A wide red carpet hung from below one of them, waiting to be dusted.

The Khan was timeless. It seemed to always have the same heat, colors, sounds, and smells, and when she returned here after an absence, it was as if she had never been away. In the spice souq, the shops were doing brisk business, and as she passed them, she suddenly smelled cardamom, clove, and incense.

She passed the wood-carvers working on their elaborate screens under the shade of an awning.Their decorations, like their script, curled in languid arabesques. But languid was one thing she was not today.

It was the hot part of the day and she was already sweating. She quickened her step. El Fishawy cafe was full of tourists as she passed through it and found the nameless alley that led toward the Hammam Sallahhudin.

She loved the hammam, and not only for the delicious pleasure of a vigorous scrubbing in the company of women. Like the mosque, the bakery, and the souq itself, it had always been one of the basic elements of Arab life. The Muslims used the hammam to purify themselves before prayer, yet, throughout history it was also a place for sensuality and openness. As the mosque called them all to God, so the hammam called them back to the needs of the fl esh. She wondered how many deals had been struck, how many marriages arranged, how many illicit affairs begun in its steamy semi-darkness.

"*Shukran*." She handed over her Egyptian pounds and received a folded cotton bath cloth, a plastic tube of liquid soap, rubber flip-flops, a brass bucket, and a locker key. It was a relief, in the moist warm air of the hamman dressing chamber, to finally take off her boots. She placed her folded clothing in the wooden locker and hooked the fl imsy lock

over the latch. As she entered the domed hot room wrapped in her bath cloth she felt reprieved, if only for an hour. She exhaled the dust of the street and inhaled the smell of soap and rosewater, of henna, and behind it, the faint whiff of chlorine on the marble floor.

The circular bath hall was dim and mysterious, almost temple-like. Its only light penetrated from high above through glass "eyes" scattered over the dome. The midday sunlight shone down in a spray of narrow beams onto the marble platform below, where several bathers lay. From the dark periphery, where columned arcades covered niches, Valerie could hear the gush of water and the banging of metal buckets against the brass spigots. As her eyes adapted, she discerned the figures of women in small groups, their voices bright as they washed each other's hair or let themselves be scrubbed by the hamman's own scrubber.

Businesslike, she washed herself thoroughly, declining the assistance of the burly female attendant, and savored the slight lasciviousness of bathing in a half-lit public place. Then she wrapped her towel around her hips and lay down on the platform a respectful distance from the others.

"Ahhhh." Something between sound and thought escaped her. She moved her head and felt white light pour onto her from the dome. It occurred to her that the other women on the dais lay under such light beams as well, each one in her own revelation. A good metaphor for religion, she thought. Then she dozed, recalling the painted scenes of pharaoh touched by the fingers of sunlight. Her sleep-addled scientist's brain added, "But it's only photons from burning hydrogen."

❖

Some small noise, the tap of a slippered foot on the dais or an exhalation, penetrated her sleep. Her eyes fluttered open and were blinded by white light until she jerked her head to the side. Her glance fell on a towel-covered hip, then traveled up along a smooth bare arm and shoulder to a face that was studying her. The light that poured down from the dome illuminated the top of the stranger's head and cast a shadow across her eyes. Valerie smelled the woman's skin, like steaming food, then recognized her.

She sat up. "Is this some kind of joke?"

The woman shifted her weight and turned toward her, leaning on

her elbow. "I'm sorry. I wondered what I could say that wouldn't make it sound like I'd crept up on you. I couldn't think of anything, so I thought it was best to leave you asleep."

Annoyed at being watched while she slept, Valerie snapped, "What are you doing here?"

"Bathing, like everyone else. And I was just as surprised as you."

Valerie became aware of the other woman's half-nude body, the well-formed breasts a shade lighter than Jameela's but still unmistakably Arab. They were full, but firm enough to swell upward, and they left an expanse of midriff exposed beneath them. Valerie averted her eyes, but not before she noticed the thin line of intimate dark hair that descended from the navel into the towel.

"You mean it's pure coincidence that you showed up at the same time I did in an obscure hammam?"

Najya Khoury shrugged slightly with one shoulder. "It's not obscure at all. Every journalist who comes to Cairo knows this place."

"But what are you doing in the souq anyhow? I know who you are. A big-name Worldnews journalist wouldn't stay in a place like Sammed's."

Najya laughed softly. "I might ask you the same thing, Dr. Foret. You see, I know you too. Did you think any journalist in the Middle East wouldn't recognize this century's Howard Carter?" She shifted her weight again and her breasts drew attention once more. "Look, this morning was unfortunate. Can we start over now? I'm Najya Khoury, journalist." She held out her hand. "And in case you're worried, no, you weren't snoring. You looked very peaceful and I really tried not to wake you."

Valerie sat up in order to be able to shake hands, conscious now of her own breasts. "In that case, Valerie Foret, archaeologist. Sorry I threw you out of your room."

"No harm done. It was Harry's idea to go there anyhow. We're staying at the Blue Nile hotel now, only a few streets away from Sammed's."

"Not much of a step up. So what *are* you doing here?"

"I came here from our Israeli office to do a story on fundamentalism and martyrdom. Then the train explosion happened. I'm just staying on a few days to talk to some more people. I can get better interviews here in the souq than in modern Cairo."

"Fundamentalism. So you think it was the Brotherhood that blew up the coach?"

"I can't imagine who else would do it. But if they were trying to frighten the West, they got very little for their efforts. Only one coach exploded. Just a couple of people killed, a few more injured. It'll scare the tourists away for a few months, but they'll come back."

"One of my good friends, a family member in a way, was killed. I only learned about it from your broadcast. Can you give me any more details?"

"Oh, I'm so sorry. For us it's a flashy news story. We forget sometimes that for the victims and their families, such an event is shattering. And I'm sorry to say I don't know any more than what was broadcast the last few days.The evening train from Luxor Only damage was to the first-class coach, the one the tourists take. Everyone's saying fundamentalist terrorism, and that's what I'm here to write about."

Valerie shook her head. "Don't take this personally, but I'm not sure an Israeli journalist is the right person to address the complexities of Arab fundamentalism."

"I *do* take it personally. And I'm *exactly* the right person to address it. I'm a Palestinian Israeli, born in Jerusalem. I have a degree in international law as well as journalism. I'm perfectly aware of the difference between the intifada and purely religious violence. Conflict and Jerusalem are in my blood, so to speak."

Valerie studied the earnest face, which had put her off at first. But now it seemed more intelligent than hard. It was the face of a woman who didn't suffer fools gladly. In their brief confrontation at Sammed's she had looked heavily mascaraed, as if her eyes were rimmed with kohl. But Valerie saw now it was her lashes, lush and black, that made her look Egyptian. Valerie imagined Hatchepsut, the female pharaoh.

The compressed muscle around the mouth, which had at first seemed to indicate annoyance, now suggested a certain verbal restraint, as if the well-cushioned lips held something back. It was, in fact, a rather nice mouth. "So to speak…?" Valerie echoed.

Najya gathered up her hair from where it lay between her shoulder blades, twisted it into a single coil, and curled it around itself. Her raised arms showed a softly curved musculature, though less defined than Valerie's own. Najya let the coil of hair fall at the back of her neck and drew the strands of loose hair over her ears. "I've lived in Jerusalem

most of my life, and I know every street in every sectorI even led tours when I was a student at Al Quds University. I also have a…well, you could call it a 'genetic'connection with the Old City My father tells me our family goes back to Jerusalem before the crusades."

"Very impressive." Valerie dropped her eyes before her interest became obvious. "But if you want to write about confl ict and fundamentalism, Israel has its own version of it. Why don't you start with the militant Jewish settlers?"

Najya's arms dropped again, the hint of biceps disappearing under bronze-colored skin "Oh, I have. I have reams of interviews with them, with some of the most militant. You'd be surprised how similar their views are to those of the Islamists."

"I wouldn't be surprised at all. I know all about dogma. I spent years in a Catholic orphanage that had a single theme—revelation—and a single lesson—obedience. I don' t have a very high opinion of religion."

Najya looked directly at her now , though when she lowered her head, the harsh light beam that streamed from overhead cast her eyes in shadow and obscured their color . "I can see how that could sour you. But, aside from religion being a part of a person's identity, I think religious dogma arises more from a yearning for order and sense. A noble longing, in fact."

Valerie was distracted by the light play "Religion and superstition noble? I'm sorry, I don't follow."

"I think humans crave morality , as well as order . I'm saying that religion does not make us moral. Quite the opposite. Our innate morality makes religion. In fact, I believe in people, not God. That's why I studied international law before I went into journalism."

"Morality makes religion." Valerie smiled from the side of her mouth. "Pretty clever. Did you come up with all that just now?"

"You mean lying here naked? Unfortunately, no. I didn't come up with it at all. I got it from Salman Rushdie."

"I'm so glad. I was beginning to feel a little stupid not being able to formulate a brilliant worldview while lying dazed in a hammam. But I do have a good formulation for you, before I leave, which I have to do right now. I'm already late." Valerie stood up. "If people can dream up a law-giving spirit in the sky, they can also dream 'down' a spirit-filled nature around them."

"You mean animism? I'd have thought that's over and done with. What's the point of projecting your ideals into trees and animals?"

Valerie re-tucked her towel around her and stepped into her fl ip-flops.

"'The story that you tell is the story that tells you.'"

"That sounds mysterious. Who said that? Defi nitely not Salman Rushdie."

"No. It's from Jehuti, Egyptian God of Scribes. But I guess you had to be there."

As Valerie walked away, she felt the glance of the other woman on her back and wondered if it was lascivious. For the briefest moment she imagined caressing those beautiful dark breasts. Then she remembered a man's pants folded over the back of the chair in her room.

Damn, she hated it when straight women flirted with her.

17

Caravanserai

The last stretch of desert to the shelter of the caravanserai seemed endless. But fi nally the line of their heavily laden camels trudged alongside it. Faaria could count the blind archways that made up the wall: ten of them, each one a camel's length in width. The small windows at the top of each archway revealed two stories, one below, presumably for beasts and fodder, and one above for people.

The drovers brought the caravan around to the main portal, which rose to a peaked arch. Mud-brick walls supported wide wooden doors that could be shut against marauders.The refuse and desert sand that had collected along their lower edges showed that had not been necessary for some time. As the camels fi led one by one into the shade of the entrance tunnel, Faaria felt immediate relief

The central courtyard, as she expected, was open to the sky , but around the four walls many of the niches and archways supported cloth awnings. The parched caravan passed to the far end of the oblong court where a cistern lay. Smelling the water, the camels strained against their reins.

The men dismounted and quenched their thirst, then carried bowls of the cool water to the two women.

Amhara dribbled it between the baby' s lips, then wiped her face with it. The child began to cry , and Amhara smiled relief at her full-throated wail.

Finally unleashed, the camels jostled one another to drink, scarcely fitting around the periphery with their wide loads.When the camels had drunk enough, the drovers hauled them back and ur ged them toward one side of the court to be unloaded for the night.

At one end of the cistern, Amhara perched her baby on the stone wall and continued to splash cool water over the little head and back.

The child seemed revitalized. Her whimpering became chortles of pleasure, then breathless excitement as a yellow bird suddenly appeared and lit close to her on the wall.

"Look Reni, it's a bird," Amhara cooed. "A yellow bird."

Reni pointed with her entire baby arm toward the fl uttering creature and said, "burd."

"Did you hear that?" Amhara called to Faaria, who had returned with the empty goatskins. "Reni said her first word!"

"What an odd word—" The noise at the gate drew Faaria' s attention. A second caravan was arriving behind them and moving to the north end of the caravanserai to unload their goods at one of the bays. She knew the men would do a little trading that evening and exchange news.

Faaria hurried to fill the goatskins before the new drovers brought their camels to the cistern. She glanced idly back at the yellow bird, which still perched on the wall with its tail toward her . Strange, for a bird like that to be in the desert, she thought. Then, as the creature hopped around to face her , she nearly dropped her goatskins into the pool. Where it should have had a beak it had a nose and, behind it, a tiny human face. A thin black feather—no, it was a minute black twist of hair—hung down one side of its head.

"Hurry up there, woman," someone barked behind her"Men from the Negev are here, and we can't wait all day!"

The strange bird took fl ight, and Faaria gathered her goatskins in her arms.

"Come on, before the others take the good rooms." Amhara was already following a servant to a narrow staircase on the inner wall. At the top of the stairs, on the second story , were the sleeping rooms, empty but for a pile of straw and a coarse woven curtain at the front.

Once inside, Faaria noticed the tiny window high on the outside wall. It would let in little heat and just enough light to tell them when it was dawn. She dropped the armload of goatskins on the walkway just outside the room, then went inside and found a spot on the straw that suited her. This was where she would lay out her sleeping carpet.

Amhara perused the room once and nodded with satisfaction. "Rest later, Faaria. Didn' t you smell it? They're cooking in the courtyard. Lentils and fresh bread."

"*Alhamdullilah*!" Faaria sat up again and stretched aching muscles. "Supper. And then a bath."

❖

An hour later, Faaria and Amhara left the central courtyard for the hamman built over a secondary cistern. At the gate, a donkey cart full of camel chips passed them, the battered wooden wheels rumbling over the rocks. It drew up at the rear of the bath building, and the driver , a mere boy , shoveled the camel dung onto a pile against the wall. Another boy shoveled the chips with a wooden rake toward the fire that smoldered under the stone floor of the building.

They walked to the front, and at the entrance they saw that the single bathhouse had been divided in half along its length. The men's and women's entrances were at the same end, but discreetly separated by the central wall.

In the antechamber of the women' s bath several abayas and undergarments already hung on the hooks, and Faaria could hear the laughter of the other women and their children coming from inside.

Amhara undressed Reni, who stood bow-legged and giggling with her hands on her toddler's belly. Then she drew off her own abaya and underclothes.

Faaria averted her eyes, staring at the wall as she herself disrobed, realizing that in spite of all the nights they had slept side by side, she had never seen Amhara naked. Still glancing off to the side, she said, "It will be a relief to wash the Sinai out of my hair" a bit too quickly and marched ahead through the doorway.

The second room, as always, was the cool room. The circular cistern was divided down the middle by the wall that separated the men from the women. Leaning over the wall, Faaria could hear the voices of the men on the other side.

They hauled up buckets of water and took them into the hot room. Three women from the Negev caravan were already lying on the hot stone at the center of the room, and two others scrubbed children in the tubs on the side wall. They greeted the newcomers as they entered and returned to their own conversation.

Amhara drew out a flask of washing oil after they sat down in a corner. She scrubbed the squirming Reni first, starting with her hair and ending with her toes. When the ordeal was over , the baby slapped her flat hands in the bucket and called out "burd" with each little fountain.

"Come on, it' s your turn." Amhara grasped Faaria' s wrist and drew her in front of her. Humming some fragment of a tune, she poured the fragrant oil over Faaria's hair and rubbed it into a froth. "I love the

color of your hair. It sets you apart. But why do you keep it so short?"

Faaria tilted her head back. "I cut it in mourning when my parents died. But then I left it short, to keep Sharif from marrying me to the nearest merchant to get me off his hands."

"Your brother doesn't seem to try very hard to get you married to anyone. He isn't even married himself." Amhara poured handfuls of clear water over the shoulder-length strands, then lathered them again.

"Oh, no. He is dedicated to Husaam. Haven't you noticed? They make a perfect couple. I don't think either one of them wants a wife now."

"Shhhh!" Amhara giggled as the other women got up from the platform, still chattering among themselves, and left the hammam. Only the two women at the tubs still scrubbed children.

Faaria sputtered as Amhara poured the remaining water from the first bucket over her head. Then they switched places and Faaria moved behind. She poured handfuls of water on the long hair, then drizzled the washing oil down the length of it. She gathered the thick hair in handfuls and squeezed the lather through it from the scalp down the length of Amhara's back. Finally she rinsed with handfuls of water until the froth was gone.

Sitting in front of both of them, Reni let herself be splashed, then crawled onto her mother's lap, sucking her thumb.

Amhara kissed the top of her head. "Why don't you want to marry?" she asked over her shoulder. "Don't you want to have children?"

Faaria combed water from the long hair with her fingers. "Yes, of course I would. But I wouldn't like that—what men do to make you pregnant. They are too rough."

"Not all men are rough. Samek was tender."

"Was he?" Faaria was torn between desire to hear Amhara talk about love and resentment that she had given herself to a near stranger.

"Yes," Amhara confided. "He came to me only once, while the men were preparing the winter caravan. He was supposed to be one of the drovers. I knew it was wrong, but something came over me. He was different from the other men."

"He must have been. I mean, you wouldn't have otherwise…" She resumed combing.

"No, I wouldn't have. He came from the South. From a people he said worshipped the old gods."

"Did you love him?" Faaria asked, sullen.

"I had no time for that kind of love, but I would have loved his whole people, the idea of them. He said they made gifts to the water and to the animals. I wanted to be like him and know the names of his gods."

"What happened to him?"

"He was caught the moment he left my room. They tied him up, but he escaped and ran away. A month later I knew I carried his child."

Faaria was silent for a moment. "I would be tender ," she said finally, and trickled water once again through the hair . "And I would know what to do to please a woman. If I were a man, I mean."

Amhara glanced at the two women from the other caravan, who seemed engrossed in their own conversation, then said softly , looking nowhere in particular , "Really? What would you do? If you were a man, I mean."

Faaria dropped her voice. "I would take my time and touch her in all the soft places." She added a bit more oil to the hair so as to have something to do with her hands. The back of her fi ngers touched the slender neck as she worked up the lather again. "She would know what comes at the end and would want me to hurry, but I would not."

"Do you know what is at the end? You aren't supposed to know that, you harlot," Amhara whispered back.

"Oh, yes. I do know, and I would press my lips against her throat and caress her breasts to make her long for it."

"I am sure she would like that." Amhara sat motionless, with her back toward Faaria as she played with her hair.

"Do you think so?" Faaria stilled her hands. Her palms warmed from the heat of Amhara's neck while the backs of her hands were cool against the wet hair—a confusing sensation that seemed the physical form of what was happening in her mind. "Do you think she would want to kiss me back, deeply , like a lover?" She leaned forward as closely as she dared.

Amhara didn' t move. Only her shoulders rose faintly as she inhaled. "Kiss you? Yes, I am sure she would. But the girls kiss all the time in the harem. You must know the things to do to reach the end."

"Oh, I know them. I would put my hand on that lovely place every woman who is not mutilated knows. I would make her sweet juices flow over my fi ngers." Faaria closed her eyes and allowed her lips to

brush softly against the damp hair. “I would go where men want to go, but I would do it so gently that she would moan with happiness.”

“Because of what’s at the end.” Amhara’s voice had grown tight.

“Yes,” Faaria breathed. “That moment when the air becomes honey and your head swims with happiness.”

Amhara reached back and stilled the hand that stroked her hair. “I think my hair is clean enough.”

“We can go back to our own room then, and we’ll be alone.”

Amhara didn’ t answer but stood up, her sleeping baby in her arms.

Faaria gathered up the buckets. They dressed without speaking in the anteroom and walked, not looking at one another , out of the hammam.

The caravanserai had settled into its evening quiet. The unsaddled camels clustered in two groups near the portal, chewing contentedly on fodder. At the far end, the cooking fi re continued to burn, fed from an inexhaustible supply of camel chips. The men of the two caravans crouched together in a circle around it, wrapped in their burnooses and exchanging news or rambling tales. She could smell the cof fee they had just boiled, but had no interest in it. Tonight she would be with Amhara.

Faaria’s heart was pounding as they approached the curtain over their doorway that cut them of from the sight of men. In a few moments they would be in a private place, alone for the night, and she would make Amhara moan with happiness. She drew back the curtain.

Five women sat or lay on carpets. Two held infants at their breasts, while the others scolded small children who, for their part, whined or tussled among themselves. A boy of about three urinated into a clay pot in the corner.

Faaria stood at the entrance, biting her lip, still gripping the curtain. Forty days of growing infatuation had seemed to climax in the intimacy of the hammam. And then, at the very doorway of the room in which they would lie, it was snatched away . Her mouth, which half a day before was dry as sand, filled now with the taste of bile.

18

Family Values

Derek was standing in the lobby as Valerie arrived at the Cairo Sheraton. He embraced her again, as if he had not just seen her an hour before.

"Umm, you smell nice. You must let me have some of your shampoo."

"Silly queen. Get your own shampoo." She had for gotten how much fun he was to be with, how he reminded her of every little thing that was good, even the smell of freshly washed hair.

"I've just spent a nice hour at the hammam, and you should try it too. It'll take your mind off the heat."

"Mmmm. I'm not sure I'd know how to behave in one of those places. I'd have trouble knowing where to look." He blinked with beautiful long eyelashes.

She linked her arm in his. "Ready to go to the souq, girlfriend? You can tell me about your big important meeting with the reverend while we're in the taxi."

"Uh, I haven't really had the big important meeting yet," he said sheepishly. "I thought if you were here with me and we said we were in a hurry, he'd get to the point faster. Otherwise I know I'll get a sermon."

She looked at her watch. "Oh, Derek! We *are* in a hurry. Tomorrow is the Muslim Sabbath so the shops will close early. We're really cutting this close."

"I know that. Rekemheb is my ancestor too. Look, I promise we'll be out of here in five minutes." He led her to the elevator.

Valerie sighed. "We came here for serious things, and dealing with Reverend Carter wasn't one of them."

"I know, Val. But you shouldn't be so hard on him. He really believes he's offering the Egyptians salvation."

"They'll recognize that of fer. They had it once from the crusaders."

They stepped into the elevator together. "I suppose so, but he's

basically a good man. He just has this Christ-and-Judgment-Day thing."

"That can't have been a very nice atmosphere to grow up in."

"He was a good enough father when I was young. At least until I told him I was gay. He slapped me and said we'd never speak of it again. And we never did. But I still had a home. And think about it, Valerie. You and I both lost our fathers, but you got put in an institution while I had the benefit of a decent stepfather."

"If he's such a decent, fun-loving guy, why does he travel with bodyguards?"

"I guess he figures he's going to meet some hostility."

"He's right about that. And when he does, his two goons, who don't speak a word of Arabic, will be useless."

The elevator pinged and the doors opened on the fourteenth floor. They stepped out together. "Well, I guess it'll be my job to see that it doesn't come to that."

"But it *will* come to that," she insisted. "Don't you remember two years ago in Al Amarna, how furious those people were that we entered their shrine? It's far worse now. Egypt—the whole Middle East—doesn't welcome crusaders." She walked beside him along the red-carpeted corridor.

"Al Amarna," he said nostalgically. "Seems a lifetime ago, doesn't it? Lordy, Lordy," he added softly, shaking his head. "If I'd known what we were in for…that we were going to both die…and *then* be resurrected—"

"Yes, but not in that big-spectacle way that Reverend Carter preaches about." Valerie checked her watch again as he knocked on the door. "We really only have five minutes, Derek."

The door opened to a view of the entire room with Reverend Carter standing at the center, in front of the television set. News was being broadcast—something about melting glaciers—and he flicked it off. Annoyance registered for an instant on his face when he saw Valerie, then he waved them both in.

"Uh, Pa. Can we take care of this quickly?We're in sort of a hurry here. We have to get to the souq before it closes."

"This is more important than shopping, son. This is family business."

"Ours is family business too, Reverend," Valerie countered as

she entered. "For a family member in the South. And I'm afraid we're really pressed for time."

Carter didn't reply, though she could feel the air in the room crackle with his hostility.

"All right, Pa. What is it?"

"Please. Take a seat." Carter motioned toward the chair in front of the hotel television set.

"No, Pa. We can't sit down. Please just tell me what you want to discuss."

"What I want to discuss, my son, is salvation, so you had better sit down."

"What? Oh, please. Not that again." Derek took a step toward the door. At that moment, the two bodyguards entered from outside. One confronted Derek and the other one took up position by Valerie's side.

"What the hell's going on?" Valerie looked around.

"I will thank you to keep a civil tongue in your head, Ms. Foret."

Carter turned to Derek. "You know your momma and I love you, and you must understand that this comes from my heart." He set a second chair down next to the first.

"This? This what?" Derek held out both hands.

The burly guards took Derek and Valerie both by their shoulders and pressed them down into the two chairs.

"This intervention." Carter sat in the bed next to Derek's chair and laid a hand on his forearm. "You have no idea how much it pains me to have to do it this way, but one day you will thank me. Perhaps very soon, when we are all standing before God."

Derek leaned away from him. "Pa, if an intervention didn't work when I was sixteen, it's not going to work now. I'm a grown man and I like who I am. Now we've got urgent things to do, and you've got to let us go and do them."

Carter still held onto his arm. "I know who you are. You're that little boy who used to sing like an angel in our church. Your momma and I were so proud of you. You were filled with the Holy Spirit until you fell into bad company." He shook his head, seeming to recall the ruinous moment.

"You've got to fight it, boy, and you can! We're your family and want to help you push away those unnatural influences." He didn't need to glance at Valerie for the accusation to hang in the air.

Derek jerked his arm from the grasp. "It' s not unnatural. You always said God is love."

"Of course He is. And God loves the sinner always. It is just the sin that He hates." Carter opened the briefcase at the side of the bed and drew out a battered Bible. "Let me read you the passage where it says so." He opened a bookmarked section.

Derek shook his head. "Pa, you're way out of your element here, and you have no idea how ridiculous you sound."

Carter was near tears. "Don' t talk that way . I'm a pastor , the shepherd of a fl ock. God has called on me to save as many as I can before the Reckoning. It' s coming soon, Derek. The wars, the hatred, all the signs prove it. I want my family to stand beside me when that awesome day arrives."

Abruptly Valerie stood up and confronted him. "It is illegal to hold people against their will in Egypt, just as it is in Geor gia. If you don't let us go, I*will* call the police." She reached past him to the hotel phone. The five minutes had become twenty, and now they'd never make it to the souq. She was furious.

Carter seized the handset from her and placed it back on the cradle. "Have it your own way. You who are unrepentant can go with your sins upon you. It is my family I care about."

He signaled to the men to unlock the door and turned back to Derek, then began to talk faster . "Please listen to me, son. Don' t you see? God made that baby to show you who you are. That woman needs you to marry her, and her baby needs a daddy . You've got a chance to take them back home to America and start over as a Christian man with a Christian family."

Derek brushed aside the Bible and got up. He opened the door for Valerie, then glanced back to Harlan Carter. "You're right, Pa. This baby showed me who I am, but who I really am is way of f your radar. There's just so much you don't know."

"I know about the Resurrection!" With his Bible across his chest the reverend spoke in a tone he was clearly accustomed to using before a congregation.

"There are all kinds of resurrections, Pa." Derek shook his head as he followed Valerie out. "And you may have just ruined one of them."

19

Books

A lamp still burned in the alcove where Sharif guarded the most precious part of the caravan's goods. Faaria slid back the carpet that covered the doorway and watched her brother. It comforted her to see him solitary, as she was. They were two of a kind.

He sat curled over one of the manuscripts that was open on his knees. Hearing her, he lifted his head slowly, as if loath to be drawn away from his private world. "Why aren't you sleeping, little sister? It's late."

"Why aren't *you*? You worked harder than I did today."

"I will soon enough." He glanced toward his pallet laid out in the corner.

"What are you brooding over like a big hen?"

Sharif waved her to his side with a slender hand. "Something wonderful, that passes from land to land and generation to generation."

She sat down next to him and leaned against his shoulder. "Stop making riddles, Sharif, and show me what it is."

"What it is…is science. Look." He moved the lantern over to her side of the open volume.

"Books? I have seen books before. Cairo is full of them. I myself have held a Quran in my hands."

"These are different. Qurans carry revelations, commandments, the way men want the world to be. But science is observation of what the world is. Let me show you." He turned back to the first page. In large calligraphic letters was the title *Canon of Medical Sciences*. "This was written by a man of great learning, Abu Ali Ibn Sina. In the North, the Franks call him Avicenna."

He laid the medical volume aside and pulled one of the tassled camel bags closer. "And you must see these too." He withdrew two large manuscripts bound in dark leather and tied together, undid the cord, and opened the first volume. "These are called *The Book of Strange Arts*. The first part tells of celestial and the second of terrestrial matters. See,

this one has a world map." He traced his finger delicately around the edge. "Did you know the world had so much water all around it?"

Faaria stared at the meaningless shapes, trying to fathom how water could surround the world rather than be in it.

Sharif had become animated. "But before science, you must have logic. He reached again into the camel bag. "Here is Al Farabi's *Agreement between the Two Philosophers, Plato and Aristotle.* Those were Greek men of science, who also turned their eyes away from heaven toward the world."

He opened another volume of vellum, covered with script and shapes and numbers. "And once you grasp logic, you can study this. This is a translation of another Greek, Euclid. The title is simple, *Elements*. But do not let it fool you. It shows that the shapes of things—circles, squares, triangles—are not random. They follow principles and work together through the art of numbers."

His eyes seemed to shine, even in the dim, flickering light of the oil lamp. "Science," he repeated almost in a whisper. "It shows that things are not present simply at the whim of God. There is an order to them, of and by themselves, and…" He paused dramatically and held up an index finger. "One can know that order. Science *wants* to know. It is a hunger that increases as it consumes."

Faaria considered the alien concept—a study of the rules of things in themselves. It seemed almost rebellious, and she liked that.

"Amhara says," she blurted suddenly, "that there could be gods in all the things: the wind and waters, in the beasts and birds too. The father of her baby told her that. Is it allowed to even think about such things?"

Sharif chuckled. "Many people think about such things—and write about them too. And not just mystics or madmen. There is even a great mathematician who says them." He drew a slender volume from inside the camel bag, scarcely twenty pages of parchment, and leafed through it gently. "These are in Persian and Arabic." He held the oil lamp over the open page, then began to read out loud.

Men say I hold a loose and dubious creed
And set my soul precariously on good deed
But let this virtue my atonement be
The One for many I never did misread.

"Are you sure he's talking about religion?" Faaria was skeptical.

Sharif shrugged. "From what I know of this man, he *only* writes about religion, even when he writes of love. Umar al Khayyam he calls himself, the son of a tentmaker. Men hold him both in awe and in suspicion, for obvious reasons." He closed the manuscript and laid it between the two books of medicine.

"What's going on here?" Hussaam al Noori stepped into the alcove.

The merchant looked haggard, though one would have had to know him well to notice his fatigue. He was a youthful fi fty, with a full head of graying hair , and his round face always gave him the appearance of prosperity. His beard, which had been regularly trimmed by his daughter and now by Sharif, showed almost no gray , though he had an old man's habit of stroking it when in thought.

"Is something amiss?" Husaam leaned forward and sat on one of the bales. It sagged with a crackling of flax fibers under his weight.

"Not at all, sayyid. I thought to examine the vellum for vermin. Faaria was simply curious, and I was pleased to show the books to her." Sharif slid the pile of manuscripts carefully back into the camel bag. "You will see, sayyid, these works are of great worth, both in coin and to the spirit of men."

"Value to the spirit of men, eh?" Husaam touched Sharif on the shoulder and let his hand rest there while he spoke. Like a father, Faaria thought, though she could not remember her own.

"I'm glad to know it," Husaam said. "But I have a business to run, so please calculate their value in coin so we can sell them. In the meantime you must disguise them. Wrap them in straw . The trade route is blocked, and we'll have to take a detour , which itself is a great risk."

Sharif slipped all the volumes back into their woolen bags. "W e aren't going to Damascus?"

"No. The caravan that arrived just after us and took half our rooms came from the Negev . But they crossed paths with travelers from the north. These people reported that the Frankish armies have taken Antioch and are moving south, seizing every town along the way."

"But they fight the Seljuk Turks, not us. Isn't it common wisdom that the enemy of my enemy is my friend?"

"The Seljuks are not my enemy . Not my friends either . I have

contracts with them for goods. So these Franks can only keep me from my business."

"Where can we go then? Where is it safe?"

"Nowhere is safe. The Franks claim everything in their path, but some cities have been able to placate them and buy them of f." He squeezed Sharif's shoulder with his large hand. "I have a friend, an old and powerful friend in a great city. He has high walls and, if need be, a large and skilled army. If anyone can stand up to the foreigners, he can. I have decided to go to him and beg the use of a warehouse and stables, rather than turn around with twenty fully laden camels and fl ee back through the Sinai."

"Who is this great man, sayyid?"

"Idris ad Dawla, emir of the city. We are going to Jerusalem."

20

El Fishawy

Allaaaah uakbar" sounded over the roofs of the Cairo souq and roused Valerie from her half sleep. It repeated three more times as she washed her face at the sink. Refreshed, if only momentarily, she went out.

"Ashhadu an la ilaha illa'llah," the muezzin sang, bearing witness that there was no deity but God.

She descended the outside steps, not quite sure where she was going, just needing to move and shake off the looming dread.

"Ashhadu anna Muhammadan Rasululu'llah," the voice persisted, declaring that Mohammed was God's Messenger.

The musical call to prayer—like the muezzin and the minaret itself, a delightful medieval anachronism—didn't evoke the usual nostalgia today, but only annoyance. Today the shopkeepers were all at the mosque instead of minding the store, and their piety kept her from her urgent business just as Reverend Carter's had.

Derek, to his credit, was spending quality time with his daughter. Teaching her how to tap dance in her new shoes, probably. Valerie, on the other hand, was spinning her wheels in the sand, and she hated it.

At least El Fishawy was doing business. The open air coffee house—which was no house at all, but a row of chairs and wobbly round tables along both sides of a small closed alley—was in fact full of customers. Obviously, not everyone went to Friday prayers. She spotted a single table in the corner near the entrance and sat down.

Not until after the waiter had taken her order and moved away did she notice the two of them, and she felt a mix of pleasure and embarrassment. How many coincidences could there be?

At a long table at the opposite end of the coffee house, Najya Khoury leaned forward listening intently to two men in headscarves. She held a small metal box in her hand in front of her, no bigger than a pack of cigarettes. Presumably a tape recorder. A few meters behind her, her photographer was taking snapshots. What was his name?

Harry. Right. When one of the men objected, he stopped and sat down beside Najya.

Valerie's waiter returned with the usual chipped enamel teapot and tea glass, and as he set it down, the hookah man—the same old man who had served her two years before—limped to her table with the water pipe. His boy dropped a large hot coal from his cauldron onto the plug of sheesha at the top.

She sipped the mint tea first, gripping the hot glass with her fingertips at the top and bottom, then took a long pull on the hookah. The water gurgled pleasantly in the pipe, and she held the sweet smoke in her mouth, letting it mix with the mint. She could understand why for centuries men had filled their idle hours doing just that—the soothing effect of sound and taste and inactivity made the world seem a friendlier place.

She watched the interview at the far end of the street. Sheer coincidence had brought her just at that hour, of course. But the pleasure she felt watching a beautiful woman who didn't know she was being watched made her feel a little guilty.

How skillful the journalist was, deferential and yet assertive. As she listened to the men, the position of her head and the squint of her eyes subtly suggested either understanding or skepticism. She shifted position away from them when they were vehement, leaned forward again when they seemed to want to confide, and always appeared interested. Valerie thought it must be a pleasure to be interviewed by Najya Khoury.

Harry, for his part, fiddled with his camera lens, then his camera case, then a coffee cup. He shifted in his seat, said something to Najya, and got up to leave. As he passed Valerie's table near the entrance, he looked straight ahead and, to her relief, seemed not to notice her.

Valerie directed her attention back to Najya and felt her face warm suddenly when she realized the journalist had caught sight of her. Najya continued the interview, seemingly unperturbed, and Valerie wondered how she was going to explain her sudden appearance in the same place at the same time. Then she realized that it would make no difference.

She leaned sideways and took another long draw on the hookah, letting her eyes half close, and continued to watch. In a few minutes, the interview was over. Najya stood up, took leave of the two men, dropped her tape recorder into her bag, and swung it on her shoulder.

As graceful as a dancer, she pivoted and glided toward Valerie.

It was a long walk down the center of the alley that was El Fishawy ten tables at least, and every step Najya took between them seemed to be in slow motion. Valerie watched the line of Najya's body shift languidly onto each leg as she ambled and thought she saw the long hair lift slightly with each step.

Najya held her glance, as if pulled along by it, the dark eyes focused but expressionless. They seemed to begin a conversation without words, without even thoughts, for everything was still a question. Yet they already had a sort of understanding, the way a wave understands the shore it swells toward. And so she came, step by lovely step, until she was at Valerie's table. The expression that formed on her face was a piquant mix of surprise, pleasure, curiosity, and a hint of revenge.

"Don't tell me. Just another odd coincidence."

Valerie still held the mouthpiece to the hookah and allowed herself another puff. "Not at all," she parried. "I've been stalking you for days."

Najya smiled and Valerie realized what she had found so attractive before. She tended to smile from one side of her mouth, letting it curve upward and open slightly, which allowed a glimpse of teeth. An arabesque of a smile.

"All right. We're even. But now I'm allowed to ask what brings *you* here."

"Nothing really." Valerie shrugged. "I have business with a certain merchant, but his shop's not open today, so I'm killing time, or at least beating it up a little. You, I see, are working."

"Yes. Getting as much information as possible before I have to leave in a few days. And you? Are you in Cairo to look after your exhibit or for personal reasons?"

"Mostly personal reasons. The exhibit takes care of itself these days. I'm here mainly to help out a…uh…relative in the South, but he needs something I can only get from the souq."

"A relative? You have family in Egypt?" Najya remained standing, rolling a ballpoint pen slowly between her fingers.

The gesture reminded Valerie of herself, playing with chalk while she lectured.

"This one is a distant relative. A…priest, in fact." *Why are you telling her this? You can't possibly explain.* "But no longer active.

Retired. Sort of."

"A Catholic priest? In southern Egypt? Sounds intriguing."

You have no idea. "No, not Catholic. A little closer to home than that. But it's a story that will have to wait for another day."

Najya finally slid her ballpoint pen into a pocket, but she still didn't sit down. "Yes, I suppose it will. It seems that one or another of us is always in a hurry. I wish we'd talked more yesterday."

"I do too. Especially since the rush was all for nothing anyhow. I met other obstacles."

"Yes, you did rush off, didn't you? And with a provocative last remark. Do you remember? You said 'the story that you tell is the story that tells you.' Maybe you can let me know now what that was supposed to mean."

Valerie paused, ordering her thoughts. "It's the *Rashomon* effect," if you know the great film by Kurasawa. The idea that absolute truth is impossible because each person has their own story, so to speak. And whatever story you inherit colors your perception of all reality, including, in the eyes of some, your experience of death."

"'Including the experience of death.' Now there's a remark that begs discussion." Najya drummed her fingers on the back of a chair. "Look, Harry's waiting for me to show up and start the next interview, and we've got them all day tomorrow. But maybe we, you and I, can get together the day after. It seems like there's a really great conversation just waiting for us to have."

Valerie smiled. "I think so too. Unfortunately, I've got urgent family business that will involve a trip to El Khariga to my relatives. But I'd love to get together when I get back."

"Ah, the mysterious priest of the mysterious religion."

"It's not such a mystery. If all goes well with him, I'll give you a call and we can talk about him. It's a story you won't have heard before."

"Don't forget, I'm a journalist. I've spent much of my adult life reporting other people's stories. I'm hard to surprise."

Najya glanced past her, and Valerie turned her head to see what had caught her eye. But it was just Harry standing in the shadows outside the coffee house.

"Yes, please call me. See if you can shock me," Najya said and went to join him.

Valerie watched the two of them disappear. "No problem."

21

Graven Images

Valerie checked the scrap of paper in her hand. "This is the corner, the crossing of Sharia'Suyufia and Shari'el Muzafar" She squinted, struggling to read the heavily calligraphied Arabic letters. "That must be it right there. The shop called Mahal Tamaatheel Manhoota."

Derek squinted as well, in solidarity. "What does that mean?"

"Shop of Graven Images."

"Well, duh." He indicated the rows of plaster and ceramic figurines displayed on the steps at both sides of the entrance.

It was the usual: Anubis in large and small, Horus in three sizes and two colors, Isis and infant, clunky and mass produced. "It's the same stuff they sell all over Cairo," she agreed, a little disappointed.

They stepped from the bright light of the market street into the dimly lit shop. A man stood behind a narrow counter—small, turbaned, and clean shaven. The sleeves of his galabaya were rolled up to the elbows, exposing well-muscled forearms and knotted hands. The hands of a craftsman in some hard material.

"*Sabah el kheer,*" Valerie said.

"*Sabah el noor*," he replied, but made no attempt to sell. He seemed to wait, rather, for them to explain themselves.

"I…uh, see you sell statues," Valerie began awkwardly. She realized suddenly that she hadn't planned what to say. The ordering of a statue with a personal identity, the identity of a dead man, was not a transaction you could initiate without explanation.

The merchant nodded, his hands flat on the counter in front of him.

"Do you also make them?" Derek asked.

"Yes, I do," he answered cautiously in English.

"Oh, then could you make one of me?" Derek laid his open hand on his chest, in case there was some doubt as to who "me" referred to.

The man's eyes shone with sudden interest. "Yes, yes, of course. A very good one." He studied Derek's face as if smitten.

"In what material?" He took up a small sketch pad and walked a half circle around Derek, scrutinizing, then sketching each feature. He nodded faintly to himself as if in some inner dialogue. "And how large?"

"Whatever you can make fast. And about this high." Valerie held one palm about forty centimeters above the other. "Small enough to fit into a knapsack."

"That would be wood. Painted, of course," the shopkeeper said.

Valerie thought for a moment. "Yes, but a shade lighter than him, and slightly more slender. The face should be the same, but with a braid of hair on one side of his head."

"Ah, like a priest, you mean." The craftsman made another circle around Derek's head, sketching him in profile and three-quarter, then from front and back.

"Yes, exactly. Like an ancient priest. Oh, and one other thing. Please add a small scar." She turned Derek by the arm and pointed to a spot under his right shoulder blade. "Right here."

Derek looked doubtfully at the sketch. "I can leave you a picture, you know. Not to take anything away from your drawing."

"If you like," the Egyptian said, laying the pad aside. "A picture will be fine."

Valerie couldn't tell whether he was offended.

Derek fished a small leather calendar book from his shoulder bag. From its middle he drew a glossy flyer folded in quarters and opened it. Dashing black man, in tuxedo and white tie.The caption was straightforward. Derek Ragin. Countertenor.

"You carry publicity photos with you?" Valerie asked, surprised.

"Of course. Opera singers aren't like archaeologists. We have to advertise."

Taciturn, the Egyptian laid the photo on the counter "In two days. You can pick it up and we will discuss price."

Valerie hesitated, instinctively reluctant to agree to a transaction without a stated price. Then she realized that under the circumstances, they were prepared to pay almost anything anyhow.

Derek hesitated too, scratching something just below his ear. "Um…maybe I'm vain. I dunno. But could you show us some of your work? I'm just curious. Do you have any figures like this that you've already made? Of real people, I mean."

The Egyptian looked at him for a long moment, as if having to make a decision. Finally he nodded. "In the back."

He led them toward a corner of the already tiny shop to a hanging carpet that had seen much better days. Dust wafted off its fringes as he moved it aside to expose a narrow door. Taking a key from the pocket of his galabaya, he unlocked the padlock that hung through an iron loop over the door handle, then laid back the rusted hasp and tugged on the door. It hung badly with age and so scraped along the floor as he opened it.

"Just a moment. No light in there." He moved away briefly and returned with a battery-powered lantern, then led them into an airless room.

Shelves were hung on three sides, and on every one, from floor to ceiling, hundreds of faces stared back at them. Statues, dolls, figurines, from a few centimeters to a meter in height. They were made of wood, painted and plain, plaster, ceramic, and polished stone. Some had cloth costumes and woolen hair, like dolls. Others were statuettes, their hair and garments cut into the wood or carved on the stone.

"Did you make all of these?" Valerie asked incredulously.

"Only a few," the Egyptian said. "It is my calling to look after them."

"May I?" Valerie took the lantern from his hand and held it up closer to the figures, trying to make sense of them. Finally, she realized that they were organized historically.

The most numerous ones on the highest shelves were pharaonic and mostly basalt: noblemen, military figures, priests, high-ranking women. On the shelf below stood similar statues, both in stone and in terra cotta, but more elaborately carved or costumed. Greco-Roman costumes identified them as Ptolemaic. Below these, there were fewer, and their costumes varied greatly: rich Byzantine gowns, Saracen silks, and wide Bedouin haiks. In the corner were some dozen more, of various races. Black ones appeared to be Nubian, the white ones European peasants. Curiously, many of them had broken noses, and some even had their entire faces smashed away.

"Who are all of these people? I mean, who were they made *for*?" Valerie asked.

"The lost ones," the Egyptian said enigmatically.

At her shoulder, Derek faced the shelves on the opposite side of the tiny closet. "What are those?" He pointed to an open ebony chest on the shelf above them where some of the figurines were set aside, though only the heads were visible. Without waiting for an answer, he reached overhead and took two of the figures from the open box.

He held one in each hand. "They're so beautiful—so realistic. This one here with the pointy helmet looks like a Saracen, or whatever they call them. And this other one, with the big red cross over his armor, even has blond hair. It's a crusader, isn't it?" he asked the shopkeeper over his shoulder.

"Please leave them in their place." The man took them gently out of Derek's hands, set them back in their chest, and licked off the lantern. "I think that will be all," he said, ushering them out. He closed the door behind them and threaded the padlock through the staple, pressing it from both sides until it clicked into place.

He was suddenly businesslike, impatient. "You must go now so I can make your likeness," he said and urged them through the front door of the shop. "Come back in two days."

The door closed behind them and they stared at each other. Derek pursed his lips, then threaded her arm in his. "Did that closet give you the creeps the way it did me?"

"A little bit. Those figures obviously weren't made for tourists."

"The two that I held were like chess pieces, except with real faces. Like they were alive once. And the whole room was like a…I don't know…like a haunted house. Didn't you feel it?"

She thought for a minute. "No, to me it felt like a graveyard."

"I'll tell you what the creepiest thing of all was. That crusader."

"Why?"

"Except for the blond hair, he looked a lot like you."

22

Miles Christi—1097

Sir Ludolf of Tournai kneed his horse closer to the promontory and dismounted, dazzled by the sight.

Constantinople spread over the hills before him, and on the plain below, twenty thousand men were gathered. At the eastern edge of the encampment he could see the standards of Flanders with their green crosses. Beneath them he thought he could make out his own tent where his grooms cleaned his armor and prepared his supper.

The spring wind blew through his honey blond hair and cooled his sweat. So this was it, then. His quiet euphoria and the pounding in his chest were what the bishops had meant by the "rejoicing in the Lord."

How much his life had changed and was about to change since Antwerp.

He had far too long been the useless youngest son. His long face and too-full lips made him look effeminate, he knew, and his wide hips and long torso made him the butt of the men's jokes. When his family had finally brokered a match for him with some tiny docile creature, he had known contentment of a sort, particularly when she informed him a child was on the way. But evil had touched his land and household, and his wife had died along with the babe she was trying to bear. For months he had wallowed in bitterness, resenting every offspring gotten by his brothers. But then he heard Pope Urban at Clermont, and had the Dream, and pledged his sword to God.

Suddenly he had a purpose, a noble one, that set him above the others. For a year he had been on the march, along with a troop of twenty vassals and their grooms and servants.

The preparations had at first seemed endless, organizing horse and household. But finally he joined Godfrey of Bouillon and Raymond of Toulouse, as they gathered infantry, then marched across the mountains to Genoa and down the western side of Italy.

Rome had been a disappointment. His Holiness had issued the call for the entire endeavor, but the Holy See from which he drew his authority held little glory. The ancient Basilica of St. Peter where Ludolf

had gone to pray was in disrepair. And it disgusted him that sheep were grazing in the Forum and in many of the city's quarters.

No matter. He was sworn to a holier pilgrimage. The trip across the Adriatic had been the real test of his faith. One of their ships had foundered in the storm, dashed against rocks. But he himself felt no fear. His faith and the certainty that God had chosen him for a nobler contest had sustained him.

He startled at the sound of hoof on gravel and turned to see his cousin dismount. The ruddy knight tethered his horse and strode toward him.

"What a sight, eh, Ludolf?" The other knight took off his helmet and held it in the crook of his arm, its plumes still fluttering in the breeze that blew over the promontory. "Here we are, standing before the richest city in Christendom!"

"Do not be so easily dazzled, Gilbert. Splendor means nothing without the True Faith," Ludolf said somberly.

"Ever pious, eh, Ludolf?" Gilbert lifted his head and let the breeze dry his neck. "Myself, I will leave the bishops to judge if these Byzantines are of the Faith. I was in the Basilica of St. Sophia yesterday though, and it certainly looked Christian to me."

Ludolf did not reply.

Gilbert seemed not to notice. "Oh, yes. It's vast, with a great dome way overhead. The walls seem to glow with frescoes and mosaics. There are even mosaics on the floor. And the relics! God's wounds, Ludolf, you wouldn't believe the relics. Christ's Crown of Thorns, pieces of the Holy Cross, the Virgin's robe—and even the head of John the Baptist."

"The Crown of Thorns? Really?" Ludolf was skeptical. "Are you sure it's authentic?"

"It has to be. They wouldn't have it in the church otherwise."

Ludolf let the remark hang in the air.

Gilbert looked unperturbed. "Rome's got no palaces like this Byzantine has, that's for sure. Over there." He nodded toward the northwest corner of the city. "He's got more gold than I've ever laid eyes on. Marble too, colored marble all over the floors and walls. He is a great emperor."

"Not so great that he doesn't need help from the West." Ludolf scratched something from his tabard. "Are you going to swear loyalty to him, as he demands?"

"Why not? Alexius has been very generous. He's given us armor, horses, silks—and rather a lot of money for provisions. Besides, Godfrey of Bouillon has taken the oath, and no one's greater than he is."

"The one who died on the Cross is greater than the Duke of Bouillon. I have already taken an oath to the Cross. That is enough."

"Don't be so righteous, old man. Every free man in the camp has taken the oath to the Cross." He glanced toward the field of tents on the plain below them.

Ludolf shook his head. "Some have sworn lightly, with less faith than urge for battle and gain. But I took a second and private oath—with my blood."

He ran his hand down the front of his tabard, so Gilbert could see that the entire crimson cross that reached from his throat to his hem and from shoulder to shoulder was outlined with reddish-brown blood.

Gilbert averted his eyes. "Well, no one will ever accuse you of laxity."

Ludolf half closed his eyes again. "No, they never will. On my knees before the cross and with blood running from my hands, I swore on my soul to be a soldier for the True Faith."

He drew his sword from his side and held it by the blade up to heaven. "I have sworn this in Rome, and I swear it again here before this city of sickly Christians. I am for God, and all my lineage shall be for God, through all generations—or my curse is on them!" He lowered his sword and whispered the declaration of God's will that was emblazoned on their banners. "*Deus lo volt*."

23

Rekemheb

It was late morning as Valerie drove her rented jeep south from Luxor, and from the east the sun shone hard on one side of her face.

She met only sparse traffic on the highway, little to distract her from her brooding. Here she was again, driving over the desert for Rekemheb. Now at least she understood why. The ka was family, the founder of the family, in fact. And what a strange lineage they were. How could she ever explain them to a stranger? To Najya Khoury, for example.

Najya Khoury. Through the long night of driving, Valerie had thought a lot about the handsome Palestinian journalist. An intriguing, complicated woman, unlike anyone she'd met in a long time. Maybe ever.

Curious that Najya could be so unsentimental and at the same time "believe in people," as she said. Still, she was worth having another conversation with, dressed or undressed. Valerie smiled to herself thinking of which alternative she preferred.

Then she remembered the trousers thrown over the foot of her bed at Sammad's place. And Harry. He had been undressed—with Najya—in the upstairs room. The image of their coupling on her bed flashed through Valerie's mind, and she felt herself grimace. She hated the ease with which men got women into bed.

She wondered if Najya ever had a lesbian thought.

❖

Banzeen, the sign said, over an arrow pointing off the road. She checked the fuel gauge—time to tank up. In less than a kilometer she reached the station, although the line of busses showed her where it was long before she reached it. She pulled in and waited.

Nervous and bored at the same time, she first drummed her fingers

on the steering wheel, then reached for the statue of Rekemheb. For some reason, the shopkeeper had handed it to her wrapped in linen rather than laid in a box. She had checked it briefly in the shop, decided it was suitable, then paid the charge. She was surprised that the price was reasonable and so added a small *baksheesh* to show her satisfaction. He didn't seem to notice.

She undid the cord and studied the statue more closely. It seemed even better made than she had first judged. The face was strikingly accurate, and the sculptor had captured the lightness around Derek's eyes so that the statue had the same facial radiance that he had. But of course it was not Derek; it was Rekemheb, complete with priestly sidelock and painted a shade lighter brown than the more African Derek.

The shoulders also were excessively wide, and the relative flatness of the chest was unmistakably Egyptian, reminiscent of the lean, spare statues of the temples. One hand hung down at his side in the archaic style and held a sistrum. The other one, laid across his chest, held a tiny object. She hadn't paid attention to it before, but she saw now it was an amulet. The image on it was miniscule, but holding it close, she could make it out. It was the Balance in the underworld. A single red dot on one side signified the heart, a single vertical white hyphen on the other was the feather.

She turned it over and studied the back. The well-formed hips and legs were covered by the long pleated white kilt of the priest, and above it, slightly to the right, was the mark where the deadly spear had pierced his back.

The whole object was extraordinary. In the sweetness and precision of its face, it was a doll in the formal rigidity of its body, a pharaonic statue.

Suddenly the gas line opened up and she set the doll aside to pull into the station.

Valerie forced the jeep across the hard-packed sand between the oasis and the great rock wall. There it was finally, the escarpment where the lines of shadow on the cliff formed the Eye of Horus. She drove as

closely as possible to the cliff wall, to take advantage of the narrow band of shade. Gathering up canteen, flashlight, and backpack, she climbed out and hiked up to the cave entrance.

It took all her strength to dislodge the stone, and when she finally managed it, she was exhausted and dehydrated. Panting, she stepped into the familiar tunnel and took a long drink of water from her canteen before she started down. As she walked, the light of her flashlight beam ovaled and sprang back to a circle along the walls and floor, revealing nothing new.

Memories returned in a rush, of the four of them, pleased with themselves, carrying the mummy of Rekemheb to his new tomb; of the sudden reappearance of Vanderschmitt and his shooting of the Bedouin woman; of her own reawakening there with Derek after their release from the underworld. All that coming and going, she thought. The place was not so much a tomb as a sort of spiritual bus stop.

When she came, finally, to the sarcophagus, she called Rekemheb's name. She wasn't sure of the ritual; it would be good to have his guidance. Silence. Nothing but the sound of her own breathing. Bleakly, she laid down her knapsack and put her shoulder to the sarcophagus lid, inching it far enough along to reveal the head and chest of the mummy.

"Oh, no," she whispered. She knew in an instant she couldn't rescue him.

Someone had opened the sarcophagus and dropped a stone onto the mummy's chest, shattering its ribs and spine. She felt nauseous with fear as she grasped what the dropped stone meant. Whoever, whatever had been there hadn't smashed the mummy cleanly, but had mortally wounded it, letting it ebb slowly, consciously, toward the moment when its ka could no longer be sustained. It was not only spiritual murder it was torture unto final endless death.

She called his name again, clutching at straws, but it was no use. He was gone. The ritual was pointless. She took another drink from her canteen and wiped her neck with her bandana, indecisive. She had come so far for him, they all had. She exhaled in a sort of weak decision. Like the rescuer who leaves the oxygen mask on the victim past the point of hope, she would perform the ceremony to pay him a last respect.

She drew the wooden statue from her pack and placed it on the stone lid in the light of her flashlight. The painted face looked at her

serenely. With trembling hands she laid out the adz and the tiny alabaster dish of myrrh. She drew her battered Zippo lighter from her pocket and held the flame to the myrrh until it caught. When the fragrant smoke was strong enough to cover the dank smell of the sarcophagus, she began the familiar invocation in Egyptian.

"*Chesu, Neteru!* Hail to you, Great Gods, and to you, Lords of Justice. You live on truth and gulp down truth. I know you and I know your names. Behold, I am without falsehood and there is no one who testifies against me."

She reached down into the sarcophagus with the bronze adz and pressed its curved tip against the mummy's mouth. "Jehuti comes filled with magic," she intoned. "He has cast away the bonds of Seth which held my words. My mouth is split open with the instrument that touched the mouth of the gods. I am Osiris, who dwells with souls, and I shall speak."

The dry lips crumbled at the touch and she quickly withdrew the instrument, placing it against the carved mouth of the statue. "I am Osiris who dwells with souls. I shall take breath."

She reached down again, this time touching the mummy's sunken eyes and desiccated nose and ears. She withdrew the tool and laid it on the head of the statue. Mechanically, she touched the adz to the four limbs and to the respective parts of the statue and spoke the final incantation. "My eyes are opened by the god and my ears to hear, my legs to walk, and my arms to fell my enemy. My flesh shall not be halted at the portals of the West, and I may go in and out in peace."

Nothing happened. She hadn't expected anything to.

"Jehuti! Nekhbet! Where are you?" she called into the darkness. "Your priest is gone now, just like the caretaker of the Child! How can you make a prophecy and not defend it? How can you not even show up?"

Her own voice echoed foolishly in the stone tunnel. She leaned her arms on the sarcophagus for a few moments, giving the gods time to answer. They had to answer. Nothing. The silence mocked her. She grasped the stone lid to slide it closed.

Then, on impulse, she stopped and shone her light down into the coffin again. If the mummy was going to disintegrate, there was something she wanted. She reached down to the fleshless jaw of the

corpse, seized hold of a large tooth at the back of the jaw, and drew it easily from the porous bone. A quick perusal under the flashlight revealed it was intact, and she dropped it into her pocket.

"So much for 'forever,'" she muttered and shoved the stone lid back into place. At the last nudge of the tablet, the ceremonial objects tumbled to the ground and lay in the silt. When she retrieved them, they felt like stupid toys. What had she been thinking? She tossed them carelessly into her knapsack. The statue of Rekemheb, which she still held in her hand, looked toy-like as well. A painted doll. Sick with the sense of betrayal, she rolled it in its linen wrapping and started up the tunnel to the entrance.

It was the hottest part of the day. The jeep shimmered in the sunlight. If she tried to drive in it, she would slowly cook. Worse, the pulsing line of orange-gray on the horizon told her that a sandstorm was approaching. She would have to wait it out.

She withdrew halfway down the tunnel where the dust would be tolerable, leaned back against the stone wall, and drew her knees up, wrapping her arms around them. Mumbling "*Merde…merde…merde,*" she let herself fall into a brief, tormented sleep.

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Though it was evening, the desert wind still blew hot against her as she drove, brooding again. There are no coincidences, Derek had said. For us, everything is connected. Yussif and Rekemheb struck down in the same week. No, it wasn't a coincidence. Someone, something was persecuting them.

How could it be, though? Who even knew where the mummy lay? Only Vanderschmitt had followed them, driven, in some way she couldn't understand, by the urges of the Aton. But he was dead, his vulture-stripped remains interred somewhere in Belgium. And though he was—she shuddered at the thought—her father, she had no interest in knowing where.

She cringed inwardly whenever she thought of Volker Vanderschmitt and was alternately repulsed and angry at having to acknowledge his paternity. Horrifying enough to discover that her father was a murderer. All the more monstrous to learn that her own

murderer was her father . Yet she carried his genes, which caused the greatest revulsion of all; it was enough to make her crazy. She slammed the door in her mind on the thought of him and ruminated on the subject from another direction.

What was different now from every other day in the last two years when nothing had threatened them? What had happened at exactly the time of Yussif's death?

She almost braked when it came to her, when the full weight of the danger descended on her like a stone.

The Book.

Her manuscript had been accepted for publication only a week before the train explosion. The moment had come when the story of the gods would be told to the world. What's more, once the machinery of publication had begun, it would not be stopped. The electronic existence of the manuscript in half a dozen places ensured its safety . Even from "acts of God."

"Is that what you're worried about?" she shouted into the empty air. "You think my little adventure tale is going to lead to a wave of apostasy?" She laughed bitterly. "You snuffed out two beautiful spirits because you're afraid of *me*?"

The engine roared as she pushed the jeep as hard as it could go over the rocky ground. It was already evening. She had water and trail food and could drive all night. She had to get back and warn the others.

24

Obedience

From his vantage point, he watched the two men, the black one and the white one, emer ge from the hotel. As soon as they stepped into a taxi, he called another one over to the curb and followed them. They got out in front of some small church, and once they were inside, he stepped out of his taxi onto the street.

He was prepared to wait indefi nitely, but they emer ged again in less than an hour. They hailed another taxi, and when they were out of sight, he entered the church himself.

He walked along the side aisles until he found a good spot. Yes, he could stand here, in a straight line to the pulpit, and be concealed. If the opportunity presented itself, he could move in close for a sure thing—but he could probably do it even from cover.

Satisfied, he returned to the center aisle at the front of the church and stood before the altar. It was a simple af fair, a block of hardwood with a white altar cloth and a plain meter -high bronze cross at the center.

The purity and straightforwardness of it appealed to him. It wasn't the church in which he was raised, but in the semi-darkness, he definitely felt the Presence. It began as a pressure behind his eyes and a rushing in his ears. On an impulse, he knelt down and let the spirit settle over him. Then, as so often in his boyhood, he raised his hands and clasped them under his chin.

"Forgive me, Lord," he began, as he always had, enumerating his failures before making any requests. "I'm sorry, Lord, for what I did to that little girl, but I was only a child myself. And I'm sorry for any evil thoughts I might have had for my parents. I'm sorry for the animals I hurt, but you know that was my foolish anger."

His head began to ache. The pain started behind his eyes, then spread over the top of his skull. He moved his confession up in time. "I beg forgiveness for my carelessness with my wife and children, and I accept their leaving me as my punishment. But you can see, Lord, I've given myself to a higher calling." The throbbing was severe now,

but he took it as a sign of the importance of the moment. God spoke to him through pain, and always he measured his suffering against the agony of Christ; each shuddering wave that washed against his skull brought Him closer. Though he had begun his prayer sitting upright, like an altarboy, he had slowly curled over until he formed a tight ball of contrition.

Then the light appeared. The jagged psychedelic rings of lights in harsh colors flashed and sparkled around the emptiness in the middle. He was blind now, but for a thin ring of vision on the periphery. He crawled toward the emptiness, the opening toward the infinite, and groped along the edge of the altar cloth until he felt the metal base of the cross.

"Forgive me, Lord, for my weakness, for my doubts in You or in this mission. I have seen Your signs, and I know what I must do. I offer my life, my strength to You. For I was a shadow and now I am a man. Guide my hand as I wipe out the abomination and make the world clean again for You."

The flashing neon rings stopped finally, and the pain subsided to a dull ache. He stood up from the altar, plucked his clammy shirt away from his skin, and exhaled slowly. His vision restored, he looked around the sanctuary once more and saw how the afternoon light had changed.

He had to take a shower, change his clothes again. The day's work wasn't finished. He ran his hand over his head, feeling that the headache was now gone, and his fingers lingered for a moment at the edge of his brow where he imagined once the crown of thorns had rested.

25

Assassin

Merde! Mer de! Mer de! Why hadn't she thought to get Auset's parents' telephone number? And why wasn't Derek answering his cell phone? She'd called three times from towns on the way north but never got through. What the hell good was it to have one of those gadgets if you didn't turn it on?

Zamalak, the road sign said. Finally She careened around a corner to the house of Mahmoud al Fakhir and parked the rented jeep half on the sidewalk. She rang. And rang again, shifting her weight from one foot to the other.

The housemaster opened. " *Ah, Duktura. Ahlan wa sahlan.* " He stepped back to admit her; his always-solemn face told nothing.

"She took a breath. "Is everyone all right?"

"*Alhamdullilah*," he reassured her and led her down the corridor to the garden. Auset sat again at the tea table next to the kitchen.

Valerie looked around, alarmed. "Where's Nefi?"

Auset stared at her with a puzzled expression. "Nefi 's fine. She's with my mother, upstairs. Are you all right? You look harried."

"I came as fast as I could. Someone was in the tomb and opened the sarcophagus. Rekemheb's mummy was smashed. There was no ka, of course. I did the ceremony, but it was all useless. He's gone."

"Oh, no." Auset dropped her eyes wearily. "I'm sorry. What does that mean for us, then? Do you suppose—?"

"That's what I rushed back to tell you. It can't be a coincidence that Rekemheb's mummy was smashed and Yussif was killed in the same week. I'm sure now that someone—or something—is out to harm us all." She glanced up toward the second story where the private rooms were. "Where's Derek?"

"He's with his stepfather at the Evangelical Church. There were hecklers at the sermon yesterday in Alexandria so Derek went along today. To 'keep things calm,' he said."

"The Evangelical Church. That's in Al Qal'a, street, isn't it?" Valerie was on her feet.

"Yes, why? I don't think you need to worry. They've got guards, after all."

"Yussif's train had guards too." Valerie hurried toward the door.

❖

She heard the reverend's voice in the atrium even before she opened the double doors to the sanctuary and saw him.

Carter stood at the center, on the top step before the altar, and held up a Bible. A finger was tucked between the pages, as if he had just been reading from it. He spoke, full throated, like a man used to preaching in large spaces. "Thessalonians tells us that the Lord will descend from heaven with a thunderous cry…and the dead in Christ shall rise up." An interpreter stood just behind him with a microphone and repeated each sentence in Arabic. Reverend Carter seemed to be used to a staccato delivery. He spoke in short phrases and paused after each one, letting his argument build.

The air was electric. Voices from the front rows said "Amen," but another, from the rear, called out "*Kazaab*!" Carter clearly did not understand that he was called a liar, and he held his Bible up higher. "And in Revelation, 'I saw heaven open up…and there was a rider called Faithful who judges and makes war. His eyes are like blazing fire.'" He widened his eyes and said "blazing fire" a notch louder, as if to impress upon them the mortal peril they were in.

One or two voices called out again, "*Kazaab*!"

Then he dropped his voice, and the audience fell silent. "He is dressed in a robe that is stained with blood…and his name is the Word of God."

Valerie noticed the two goons standing at a slight distance on both sides of him. They held their hands loosely clasped together in front of them, but it was impossible not to know that they were bodyguards. Their presence made it seem like he was delivering an ultimatum instead of a sermon.

Derek was harder to find, but then she spotted the back of his head. He sat in the front pew leaning forward. How he must have hated being there. She wondered if the good reverend had preached about the sin of homosexuality.

Keeping Derek in sight, she edged along the side aisle of the

church, glancing around quickly for anything that seemed abnormal. But there was no *normal*. The whole event, a Christian evangelical preacher's attempt at a tent revival in the middle of Cairo, was already bizarre. And every face in the congregation seemed angry. She had almost reached the front row and wondered how to get Derek's attention without disruption.

Derek sat up suddenly, and she realized the tone of the sermon had changed. She had missed a few important words.

"…for you are my brothers in Christ, if only you let yourselves be. But I tell you, the land bordered by the Nile on one side, and the Euphrates on the other…" He reached out an arm as if to show the direction. "By the Mediterranean Sea and by the wilderness of Jordan." The translator repeated each phrase in Arabic right after him. "All this is the land given by God to Israel…" The rumbling in the crowd started. "And will once again be Israel! My brothers—"

As if they had been waiting for those very words, a dozen dissenters rose en masse. Another handful joined them shouting, "Liar. Crusader, go home!" They repeated the words again and again, shaking their fists over their heads; some of them left the pews and advanced toward the steps where Carter stood. From behind the protesters, others, apparent evangelicals, shouted their own slogans and advanced as well, so that the audience as a whole seemed to swell in two waves toward the front.

The two bodyguards moved in to stand by Carter. Derek stood up and pivoted around, holding out his arms on both sides as if to catch something, though nothing was thrown. Then the belligerent crowd closed in around the four foreigners and Valerie lost sight of them.

A gunshot sounded, and the entire pack exploded outward from the center. Valerie ran along the front pew, buffeted by terrified men trying to flee.

Reverend Carter had moved to the side and leaned panting up against the pulpit that he had not used. His two guards were nowhere in sight. Maybe they were chasing the gunman; she didn't know. All she could see was the appalling sight in front of her.

Derek lay on his back on the steps, and she rushed to take him into her arms. She ripped open his shirt to see a thin stream of blood pumping from the center of his chest and covered it with her hand,

unnecessarily, for soon the bloodstream stopped as the heart ceased to pump.

Kneeling over the limp body , she looked up at the trembling clergyman. "You bastard," she wailed in helpless fury . "You smug, ignorant bastard!"

26

Antioch, June 1098

There it lay , on a silver platform on the altar . Four candles illuminated it in the somber darkness of the church. A crumbling, rusted spearhead with a handbreadth of rotted wood remaining for its shaft, lay in all its holy power upon a silken pillow . Ludolf dropped to his knees before it, his hands shaking, wondering if he dared touch it, the Holy Lance that had pierced the side of the Son of God.

He placed a hand on his own side, imagining for a moment what it must have felt like to be pierced. His own battle wounds had thus far only been bruises and a blow to the head. He shivered at the thought of the exquisite pain of the new lance blade slicing through naked flesh.

He covered his face and prayed. "Thank you, Lord, for this miracle and sign that has reawakened us to victory. Grant that we prove worthy of it and of His sacrifice."

Truly it had been a miracle that had saved them, snatched them from the very jaws of defeat.The weeks and months had been a sore test indeed. Famine had tortured them all, man and knight, so that a horse's head without the tongue was sold for three solidi, the guts of a goat for five. And then—his heart swelled to think of it—the Holy Lance had been found under the floor of the church. Despite their ravening hunger and exhaustion, the wounds on their feet from the days of penitence, they had borne it before them as they advanced against the Turks, and it had brought them victory.

"I knew you'd be here, Ludolf. The first place you would come when you woke up from your injury."

He looked back over his shoulder toward the familiar voice. Even in the dim light, he recognized his cousin' s bulky outline. "You know me well, Gilbert."

Ludolf took hold of the prof fered arm and drew himself up. He blessed himself elaborately and allowed himself to be led away from the altar. "Antioch is Christian again, Gilbert."

"Yes, though it reeks of slaughter."

"That is the smell of sacrifice. Salvation is costly."

They reached the portal together and stepped one by one around the great wooden door of the church. By the morning light, Ludolf could see what darkness had concealed when he arrived. Bodies were piled in the corners of the square, where they had obviously been dragged after the slaughter. Emaciated dogs gnawed on them here and there until someone shooed them away.

I do not think God asks for *that* kind of sacrifice." Gilbert nodded toward the three cadavers that still hung from their heels on a scaf fold at the south end of the square. Their torsos were slit open from crotch to chest, and half-dried viscera hung out over their faces. "It was said they had swallowed their gold to hide it from us." He shrugged. "The soldiers never found any, though."

"You see it backward, my friend. The death of heathens is not *their* sacrifi ce. Rather it is *our* suf fering and sacrifi ce to shed their blood against our gentler natures. We are the martyrs here, and God has rewarded us for our piety."

A rumbling from a side street drew their attention. Two women, old and bent with exhaustion, were drawing a handcart into the square.

Ludolf stepped forward to confront them, laying his hand on the hilt of his sword. But as they neared, he saw the wooden crosses hanging from their necks. "What's this?" he demanded. "Christians in Antioch? Or is this some mockery?"

The two women let the cart handle fall and groveled before him.

"What are they saying, Gilbert? You speak their Greek. Tell me."

"They say they are daughters of Italian pilgrims who settled here a long time ago and never left. They come from their quarter, a Christian quarter, which is burning now. They ask if they can pass and leave the city to bury their children."

Ludolf walked to the rear of the cart and lifted the cloth that covered it. Five cadavers lay there, two young men and two women, variously slashed and battered, and the torn skirt on one of them suggested rape. A small child lay horizontally across the others. Ludolf dropped the cloth.

"If they do not follow Rome, they are not Christians," he snif fed. "Let them go. God will reckon with them later."

The two women leaned their weight onto the crossbar and forced the cart into motion again.

Ludolf turned away from the sight of them. "Salvation is costly."

27

Mourning

The fountain in the center of Mahmoud al Fakhir's garden gurgled peacefully, indifferent to the pall of sorrow over Valerie and Auset, who watched it numbly. Auset sat with crossed legs, tapping the fingers of her open hand on her knee to some senseless inner rhythm.

Valerie propped one elbow on the back of the garden bench and rested her cheek on her knuckles.

They watched the two-year-old Nefi, who didn't know what death was, feed crumbs of pita bread to half a dozen swallows.

Auset shifted in her seat and sighed. "They've abandoned us, haven't they? The gods, I mean."

Valerie brooded for a moment. "I don't understand. Nekhbet sent us here. Derek's job was to look after you, and I was supposed to rescue Rekemheb. But both efforts have ended in disaster. And we still don't even know if Derek and Yussif are in the underworld."

"Underworld!" Auset spat out the word. "Don't tell me about the underworld. Yussif has been dead for two weeks now and Derek for four days. If there was any chance they would come back as kas, we would have seen them by now. Besides, the gods never told us—were we supposed to have them embalmed like the pharaohs? Impossible, with my father stepping in and arranging a quick Muslim burial, and the good reverend shipping his stepson to Georgia for a Christian one."

"You're right." Valerie spoke in a monotone. "They never told us the rules. And there's been no sign. Nothing."

More birds had come to join the swallows. Hoopoes and iridescent green-winged sunbirds lit on the rim of the fountain or the flat stones below it. They assembled with unbirdlike calm, except for an occasional twitch when a droplet of fountain spray struck them.

"Will you go home now?" Auset asked. "Please don't. Not right away."

Valerie shook her head. "I've nothing to go home for. I would have gone to Derek's funeral in the US on Friday, but Reverend Carter

made it clear I'm not welcome there."

"Despicable, isn't it, that he can come here and claim Derek that way. Simply take him away from us. A man who disapproved of his very identity. Well, he won't get his hands on everything." Auset took hold of a black canvas travel bag beside the bench and dragged it around in front of her.

"Oh, God, I forgot about his personal things. I suppose Carter will want those before he leaves."

"I'm sure he will, but in the meantime, I removed what I know Derek would want you to have." She drew out a small leather case with a belt hook at the back.

"First of all, his cell phone. It's one of those you can put a card in for each country. There's a battery charger too."

Valerie sat down, appalled at handling an object that still seemed to have Derek's touch. Yet it was a sort of relief to have something purposeful to do that he would have wanted. She caressed the metal casing. "He always told me I should have one of these. But it seemed like such an expensive toy."

"The phone is nothing. Look what that foolish man carried around with him. Just imagine the trouble he would have gotten into if they'd inspected his bags at the airport."Auset handed over something flat and heavy, wrapped in a silk handkerchief.

Valerie's eyes pooled again as she unwrapped it. "The amulet," she whispered and tilted it in the light, studying the filigree gold plaque with the image of the Great Balance, attended by the gods of the underworld. "I think he must have brought this to give to Nefi. She's the next one in Rekemheb's line."

"If you say so. I'll put it in a safe place until it's the right time to explain everything to her." Auset slid it into the side pocket of her skirt and continued the inventory. "He had a lot of money in his wallet and I left it all there. I don't want it and don't want to be accused of stealing. But I did take these." She handed over two photographs.

Valerie studied them with a wan smile. "Nefi, looking with great solemnity up into the camera. So adorable. And this must be one of your wedding pictures. Bride and groom. And Derek standing right next to them, as if it were the most natural thing in the world to have two fathers in the family."

"It's a good likeness of both of them, isn't it?"

"A likeness," Valerie repeated. "On that subject, I guess you should take this. It doesn't seem to have worked." She drew the linen-wrapped bundle from her knapsack and held it out. "If nothing else, Nefi can play with it as a doll."

Auset took the statue without unwrapping it and laid it next to her on the bench. "That' s it, then. The sum total of what we have left of him."

Her lips began to tremble again and Valerie embraced her . She tried to comfort, but found herself weeping as well, hopelessly , the weak sobs of one who has already cried a great deal.

Something made Auset lift her head from the embrace and look toward the fountain. She gasped audibly and froze.

Feeling her grow rigid, Valerie looked over her shoulder . "No!" she whispered. "Don't move. Don't frighten it."

"Oh, my God," Auset whimpered softly into the air, not taking her eyes from the horror. "Please, please don't hurt her. Oh, please."

Nefi sat upright on the ground by the fountain, her eyes half closed, as if in infant sleep. Coiled once around her body, with its head hovering next to her face, a full-grown king cobra swayed back and forth.

Auset whispered, "Please, oh, please" over and over.

The snake tilted its head downward and for an instant gently touched Nefi's cheek.

Auset jerked violently and tried to lurch forward, but Valerie held her back. "It's not a bite. Look. She's smiling."

The snake arched over Nefi 's narrow shoulder and slid down her back, then along the ground into the underbrush of the garden. On the stones where it had crossed, a line of pale green light glowed for a moment, then faded.

Auset threw herself toward her and snatched her up. But Nefi curled forward and struggled to be set down again.

"Leave her where she was. Something' s going on." Valerie took hold of Auset's arm and pulled her back onto the bench.

The birds that had been feeding came back. They were joined by others: warblers, doves, and quails.When the fountain rim was covered, they lit on the brush beside the path.They were unperturbed when a cat, slender and sleek, crouched just in front of Nefi 's feet. She sat, as if in

a trance, her mouth slightly open, and stared dreamily toward the wall on the south side of the garden where lager birds gathered: kingfishers, egrets, and ravens.

"What's going on?" Auset's voice had gone from terror to wonderment.

Then on the north side, on the roof above the private apartments, ospreys and gulls landed on the one side; on the other , a small white vulture and a falcon. Last of all, as if all others had prepared the way for him, a splendid male ibis flew over the wall and lit on the ground. Beside it, a smaller yellow bird with a dark head flickered briefly into visibility, then flickered out again, like a sputtering flame.

"What does it mean?" Auset stood up.

Before she had taken a step, the entire menagerie fell silent. Nefi looked around at them, her face suddenly radiant, as if she had been waiting for an audience. Slowly, she raised one fist toward them, swept it in an arc, then opened it. On her palm sat a large dung beetle. Its iridescent carapace shone greenish-black in the sunlight. It turned on her palm, as if to look at her first, then extended its little wings and flew off, leaving behind a piece of soil it had rolled into a perfect ball.

"Khepre, creator of the world," Valerie murmured. "It's a visitation. But what are they trying to tell us?"

"*Minfadlik,* Madam." Suddenly Fahd was on the the garden path rushing toward them. The whole flock of winged creatures took flight, and the cat too slunk away . The houseman paused a moment, clearly bewildered by the flurry of wings everywhere, then continued, greatly agitated. "Mahmoud al Fakhir is not home and there is a visitor . The American. Mr. Derek's father, and two others. He says it is important and he insists to come in."

28

International Law

Valerie rushed through the narrow alleys of the souq again, as she had been rushing for a week. She reached the Shari al Badustan, then slowed for a moment, to catch her breath.

Carter had been pale. At least he mourned, she thought. But he had had his lawyer at his side and minced no words when he announced that he was canceling his missionary tour to "take his family home." By his "family," he meant the mortal remains of his stepson—and his granddaughter.

What a coup, she thought. If the Aton was a conscious and deliberate adversary, and it appeared now that he was, then he had achieved a brilliant masterstroke. In a single week his mysterious agents had eliminated the guardian ancestor and the two fathers and had brought a fanatical cleric to claim the Child of the gods, to be raised in a God-fearing monotheist home away from Egyptian influence.

The irony was exquisite. The prophecy was indeed fulfilling itself, and the Sun Disk Aton, in his Christian form, was "rising in the West." But if the Egyptian gods were powerless to defend their own messenger against monotheist fanaticism, one thing still protected them: the secular law. She hoped.

The Blue Nile hotel was located at the end of the Shari al Badustan. A notch above Sammed's place, it had a front desk rather than the counter of a coffee house. There was no air conditioning, and everywhere she heard the whirring of fans. A word with the man on duty and she went upstairs.

Najya Khoury stood in the doorway, and her expression of confusion lasted only a moment before it evolved into warmth. She had obviously just washed her face in cold water. Ringlets of hair still held droplets, and her partially open shirt showed a V of moisture from the middle button up to both shoulders.

"I'm sorry to just appear this way, but you did say that I should look you up if I needed anything. I do, and it's sort of urgent."

"What's happened? Forgive me, but you look terrible." Najya led her into a hotel room only slightly lar ger than the room at Sammed' s, but better furnished. "Can I of fer you something? A cold beer?" She nodded toward an ice chest in the corner of the room. "Harry always has a supply."

"No. No, thank you. I just need to talk, ask a few things." She half smiled. "And who better to turn to than a complete stranger you met in a hammam, right?"

"For God's sake, talk to me then. Come, sit down. Tell me what's going on."

Valerie looked around. The one chair in the room was piled with photographic equipment. The only free surface in the room was the bed. She sat, smoothing out the bedcover on both sides of her . Her throat was dry, and for a moment she couldn' t think of a suitable opening remark. She coughed. "Can I have a glass of water?"

"Of course." Najya took the bottle of water from the nightstand and poured some into a paper cup." Sorry, paper is all you get here."

Valerie drank it and held the empty cup tapping it nervously on the bottom.

Najya took the cup from her and waited patiently, still standing.

Valerie rubbed the side of her mouth to keep her lips from trembling and spoke, fi nally, when she was composed. "A…uh…a close friend of mine…a sort of brother…an American…opera singer…" She felt suddenly foolish trying to establish the details of his identity before she even began. "He was killed a few days ago in a sort of religious riot."

"You mean the shooting at the Evangelical Church? I reported on that. That young man was your friend? Oh, I'm so sorry ." She was silent for a moment, obviously drawing connections. "But didn' t you also know one of the victims in the Luxor train wreck?"

Najya sat down next to her on the bed. The ringlets of hair were dry now.

"Yes. The first one was Yussif Nabil and the American was Derek Ragin. They were part of the same family . That is, they were the adoptive and natural father of a child, the child that I need to get your advice about."

Najya leaned in solicitously. "Of course, but—"

"It was unusual, I know ," Valerie continued, "that the two men

should be friends that way, but that's not why I'm here."

"Yes, I understand. But I'm wondering how you're connected with them."

Valerie closed her eyes. This wasn't where she wanted the conversation to go. "Through Derek, the natural father with whom I was very close."

Najya was already elsewhere. "Two sudden violent deaths in one 'family,' as you call it, just weeks apart. That's more than suspicious. Are the police involved?"

"Yes, of course. But what I came about is the baby. I need to ask about international law. You said you studied—"

"I did. Many years ago. What do you want to know?"

The frown of concern that settled on Najya's face was comforting. The look of someone who understood life's complexities and who could be confided in.

"Well, Derek's father—stepfather actually—is an American preacher, and he arrived in Cairo with him. He's still here. Now that his stepson is dead, he wants to take his grandchild back to the United States, to be raised as a Christian. And he has a lawyer with him."

"A lawyer? A man's son is killed in a melee, and the first thing he does is set his lawyer on a custody claim?"

"Well, he's investigating the death, of course, but it was clear even when he arrived that he wanted the little girl back in the US. Since Derek was shot, he's claiming that the child is in danger here and would be safer with him outside of Egypt."

"He sounds dreadful."

"He is, and I can usually stand up to men like him. But when it involves the law and the courts, I don't know. And after everything else that has happened in just a few days, I'm sort of at the end of my rope."

Najya touched her lightly on the shoulder, as if considering an embrace, then stood up. She walked away for a moment, then returned with the paper cup, this time containing a shot of whiskey. "Here, drink this. I know it's a cliché, but it does take the edge off. I want to hear more."

Najya was next to her again, wonderfully close. Valerie could smell the soap she had just washed with. She nodded silently and downed the whiskey in a single gulp. She coughed from the first shock, then felt the warmth spread through her chest. Najya was right; it blurred the pain.

"He was all I had for family for almost ten years. He saved my life once, brought me back to life, at the risk of his own. He was the purest soul I ever knew."

Najya brushed a strand of hair out of Valerie's face, her deep brown eyes sweeping over her like velvet. "I know what you're feeling. My brother was killed in the street during the first intifada for the crime of throwing rocks at a tank. I know the hole it rips in your chest, and I'm so sorry. If it's any consolation, the pain is all yours, not his. And you can do a lot for him—in his memory. What do you think he would have wanted?"

Valerie tried to chuckle, but it came out a brief snort. "He would have wanted a full chorus and orchestra, at leastAnd an opera if I could manage it." She wiped her nose again. "But I know for sure he would have wanted his daughter to be raised in Egypt with her own mother. Right now both of them are living here with Auset's parents."

Najya took the cup and set it aside. "Under any law I know, a mother has the right to raise her own child as long as she's competent. She *is* competent, isn't she? I mean she doesn't talk to ghosts, does she?"

"No, of course not." Valerie looked away, thinking *not any longer, anyhow*. "So what should she do?"

"Well, I never actually practiced law, and international treaties generally deal with states, not individuals, except as to what state an individual belongs. The child could be considered a US citizen due to her father, but she's also, of course, an Egyptian. It will be very difficult for a stepgrandfather to claim custody of a child in the care of her mother and real grandparents. I think this man is all bluster. Still, stranger things have happened, so you'd better check with someone who's actually a practicing lawyer."

She sifted through objects in a large canvas shoulder bag at the foot of the bed and fished out a thick calendar. From a pocket at the back of it she shook out several business cards. "Here. Try this guy. Nitzan. He's good. A Jew, so he'll be a disinterested third party. Plus he's smart." She copied the information onto a scrap of paper.

Noting two numbers on the paper, and only one of them with a Cairo area code, Valerie folded the paper into her shirt pocket.

"If I were staying in Cairo, I'd go with you to see him, but I have to leave tonight for my home office. I'd like to follow the case from there, though, so please keep me informed. My telephone number is

also on the paper."

Valerie studied the splendid Arab face. The narrow, forward-set nose, the slightly oval eyes from Mongol genes that floated through the northern Arab population, warm black-brown eyes lined by thick lashes. A fine line of dark hair also grew down in front of her ear. Details she hadn't noticed when Najya was half naked. "I'm grateful for your help. I don't know what I would have done—"

"Please, it's nothing." Najya said quietly and extended a slender hand toward her, slowly.

It seemed to take minutes, but finally the errant hand was at Valerie's face, and the fingertips brushed lightly along her chin line until her thumb touched the corner of her mouth and rested there. All she had to do was move her head the tiniest bit and the thumb would sweep over her lips.

Keys clattered behind the door; one slid into the lock. Najya's hand jerked away as if scorched. She stood up as the handle turned and the door opened.

"Hello, Harry." Najya was composed. "We've got a visitor, but I believe you've already met."

Valerie saw a smile flicker over his face for an instant, though it could also have been disdain. Or maybe he was one of those men who got excited at seeing women together.

He set his backpack down on the bed and hooked his thumb over the edge of his pocket. "Good afternoon, Ms. Foret. Have you come to claim this room too?"

Valerie stood up calmly and focused on him for the first time. He was well muscled, like a man who worked out obsessively, but his manner and bulk seemed at odds with his pale face and too-pretty almond eyes. Something about the overall man was off-putting, not the least of which was the knowledge that he was having sex with Najya Khoury.

Valerie glanced around as she moved toward the still open door. Her sweep took in his camera equipment, beer chest, their luggage, and finally Najya herself. "No, I know that all this belongs to you."

She patted the shirt pocket where the scrap of paper was. "Thank you for the information, Najya. I'll keep you posted."

Valerie walked through the doorway, passing Harry. "It's all yours now."

29

Muslim Widow

The door opened once again to Fahd's stony face.

"Is everything all right?" Valerie asked spontaneously, then felt foolish. There had been two deaths in the family, and a foreigner—a complete stranger—was threatening to take away their grandchild. Nothing was all right.

They were halfway down the corridor then, and she could see into the garden. It was peaceful, as before, and the usual garden birds still lit on the fountain rim. A few swooped back and forth between the fountain and the table, apparently waiting for crumbs. Auset was busy serving tea to her father and to a cleric.

The mullah was an imposing man. Even sitting he seemed lar ge. He wore a loose abaya, the same shade of dark gray as his full beard. Both were offset by a white turban. He was saying something to Auset as she fi lled his tea glass, although he didn' t look directly at her . She said something in reply that Valerie couldn't hear and then returned to the kitchen.

Valerie touched Fahd's arm. "If you don't mind, I'd like to go and help Auset."

"Yes, Miss. As you wish." He led her past the surprised men to the open doorway, then withdrew.

Auset looked up from her tea tin. "Oh, I'm glad you're back. I could use someone to talk to."

Valerie set her backpack on the fl oor. "I've got good news. My journalist friend gave me the name of a lawyer who can help us. But she said your case sounds strong anyhow."

Auset took the paper, appearing sullen.

Valerie sat down at the work table. "Who's that cleric?"

Auset poured tea into two new glasses and handed one to Valerie. "A mullah from my father 's mosque. I'm surprised he'd even come here. He disapproves so strongly of my Jewish mother."

"He's here because of Carter?"

"Yes, to give the Quranic solution. Everything, of course, has a Quranic solution."

"Why is he advising your father?"Valerie held the hot glass by the top and bottom and took a sip. "You're the one who's threatened."

Auset's lips slid sideways. "That' s the way they do it. 'The man is the shepherd of the family .' That means my father is in char ge of everything, even my children."

"So what do you suppose he' s advising? It might be good to know." Valerie realized her tone was as cynical as Auset's.

"Well, I'm damned sure going to fi nd out." She drew Valerie to the corner of the kitchen where a side window looked out toward the tea table. The wooden slats of the shade could be tilted downward, as they were today, both to keep out sunlight and to block visibility from the outside. Sitting close to the window , however, they had a partial view of both men, though only from the chest down. They could hear their voices clearly, but see only the bottoms of their two gray beards moving up and down in conversation. Though the mullah was younger by a decade than his host, his longer , fuller beard seemed to signify a superior authority, and his word was, in the literal sense, the law.

The beard of al Fakhir was talking. "I speak only to you and to no one else of my shame. I trust in your confi dence as well as your knowledge."

The longer beard nodded assurance, and al Fakhir continued. "Yussif, may his soul rest with God, was not the father of my grandchild. The father of my grandchild was a foreigner , an American, but like Yussif, he was killed. Now the father of that American lays claim to the child. What does the Quran say in such matters? Which claim is the greater in this case? That of the mother 's father or the father 's stepfather?"

The mullah tapped softly on the table with lage fingers. Dark hairs curled on both sides of each knuckle. "Both Quran and Hadith declare women to have primary right to custody of children if they are of sound mind and good character, if they are good Muslims and their children are Muslims. But if she keeps the company of non-believers, there is an impediment and the woman may forfeit the right to custody."

"This only confuses the matter , for my daughter does keep the company of non-believers, as I do myself, and the father of the father is a Christian."

The dark-haired hand lifted to the gray beard, stroking wisdom from it. "The claim of a non-believer on a Muslim child is, on the face of it, inadmissible. But if the father of the child is a non-believer, the secular courts may disregard Islamic law. That would be unfortunate. You must protect your daughter from this taint. It would be wise to find a Muslim husband for her as soon as possible."

"She is of an independent nature," al Fakhir said. "Even before she went to New York to study. And the child, although she is the joy of our house now, will make it hard for her to remarry."

"A child is always blessed in the eyes of Allah, must be cared for, and must never suffer the sins of the parent. But if the mother is wanton, there is always the surgery."

"No." Al Fakhir answered quickly. "That was suggested many years ago, but it is not my way. And she is too old for that now anyhow."

"Then she must be made to marry again as soon as possible," the mullah said.

"But she is in mourning. And she has a strong will. I have never imposed my will on her in these matters. Perhaps I should have."

The clerical fingers still tapped. "It is the man's duty to lead the woman, and certainly his daughter. She has already proven herself reckless."

"How long must she mourn before she can remarry?"

"The Prophet, peace be upon him, has spoken clearly on the *iddah,* 'Such of you as die and leave behind them wives, these shall wait, keeping themselves apart, four months and ten days.'"

He paused, letting the obstacle become obvious before he offered a strategy. "But it is not a sin for a man to declare his intentions during that time, to wed her afterwards." He paused again and let the logical next question arise by itself. He clearly already had the answer.

"There is a good man in the mosque, older and a widower. He has children who need a mother, and I think he would agree to the marriage."

"I am not sure I can convince my daughter to accept a husband whom she does not know."

"You do not need to 'convince.' It is your duty to give your grandchild a father to protect her from the claims of this foreigner."

One of the garden birds, the size of a robin, but yellow, suddenly

landed between the two men's hands. The mullah covered his tea glass with one hand and with the other swatted the bird away with enough force to knock it from the table and out of view of the window.

As if the intrusion of the bird had concluded the conversation, the mullah stood up from the table. His hands were still visible, hanging paw-like at the side of his dark gray robe. "You have your solution," the gruff voice said. "I will approach the man and inform you of his answer You can then make the arrangements."

He moved away from the table and his last audible words were "Four months and ten days. This is God' s will and God Almighty knows best."

Al Fakhir followed the cleric away from the table and out of sight.

Inside the kitchen, Auset stood up as well and leaned against the window frame. "I can' t stand it," she said fi nally out loud. "I'm surrounded by wolves."

30

Retribution

He stood in front of the glass case that held the Barque of the Sun. In the midst of the jostling crowd he occupied his own sphere of concentration. His hands lay fl at on the glass top, in spite of the Do Not Touch sign. He stared, full of loathing, at the parallel rows of animal-headed gods that flanked the orb of gold. Every sigh of admiration from the crowd was like a barb that prodded him, reminded him of their ignorance and of his mission. In their childish oohing and ahhing, they did not know they looked on the time of the beast, did not appreciate how it threatened them.

To grovel before beasts again and set humanity back thousands of years. Who but perverts would come up with such a religion? He would not put it past them to even copulate with dogs. They were an abomination—he savored the Biblical word.

The call had come to him to set aside his job, where he was unappreciated anyhow, and his family , which was nit-picking him to death, to rid the world of them. His decision to answer the call had hardened his will, purifi ed him somehow—and given him a vast patience. He had waited a long time before acting, had carefully followed each of them until he knew their ways. He was their shadow , their nemesis, their just executioner.

A tiny part of him also felt that he was evening the score, achieving a final revenge, if not on the boys who had once used him, then on others just like them. He had long since for gotten the boys' names and even their faces. All he remembered was the humiliation as they made him play the whore. Perverts, all of them—even if they did later marry—and they had tried to make a pervert out of him. Well, he was a man now and had already dispatched one of their kind. He would soon get rid of another, to both punish a crime and eradicate a dangerous cult.

The blood of his heroic ancestors pulsed through him and warmed him.

31

Egyptian Museum

The last thing Valerie wanted to do was business, but she had to at least make a gesture of it. No matter that she had lost three loved ones and the rest were in jeopardy. She couldn't walk away from "The Priest's Collection," as the museum called it. She had already surrendered much of the glory of the discovery to the university as a whole. She had felt guilty despoiling Rekemheb's tomb until she realized he himself didn't care. The artifacts had served their purpose, assisting him into the underworld. Since he had a sort of new life watching over his living family, he was finished with them.

The days of discovery were a warm but distant light somewhere at the back of her bereavement, and she ached when she recalled them now. What life Rekemheb had, as a ka, was now snuf fed out, just like that of the descendant who carried his image. She had lost them both in a day: the sweet man who had been called with her into the treasure-filled tomb, and the odd, slightly stiff ancestor who had welcomed them.

Bereavement numbed her as her own sudden orphaning had not, for at six, she hadn't understood what death was and had kept waiting for her parents to reappear. By the time she grasped that they never would, the wound had covered over, and she had learned how to be solitary. While the few nuns who were kind to her saw to her physical needs, she transferred her emotional needs to the figures in her imagination.

She exhaled slowly, as if to expel the dreadful feeling of abandonment, and climbed the stairs to the Cairo Museum. She would take care of business for an hour and then return to Auset, who seemed to have a strength she herself lacked.

"Ah, Doctor Foret. How nice to see you again." Chairman of Antiquities Fuad Rashidi strode toward her just as she walked through the door. The two years hadn't been kind to him, for he had lost even more of his hair and had developed jowls. Jameela, his errant wife, was almost certainly directing all her favors elsewhere.

"We have added a few new things to the exhibit since you were last here." He extended his arm to lead her to the collection along a

corridor of which she knew every centimeter. They had gone scarcely ten paces when a man called out from the other side of the lobby.

"Sayyid Rashidi, I am sorry. The curator is on the telephone. He said it's urgent."

Valerie was relieved. "It's quite all right, Dr. Rashidi. I know my way, of course. I'll wait for you there."

As he hurried away, she looked at her watch. Six thirty. The public would be gone by now anyhow, and she would have the place to herself.

She entered the familiar high-ceilinged exhibit hall and strolled around the periphery, eyeing the funerary treasure that she knew in every detail. Strange how it now seemed both precious and worthless. Precious because it was all that she had left of them, priest and man, and worthless because it was not them.

There were the familiar objects: the statue of Osiris; the gold-painted wooden bed on slender animal legs and with lion heads at the upper end; chests of wood and ivory; fans, newly fitted with ostrich feathers; alabaster vessels of a dozen sizes and shapes.

The exhibit was well done, the four walls expertly painted with copies of the tomb illustrations. On the north side was the calendar with its twelve thirty-day months ending in July. On the east, a seated pharaoh received the kiss of wisdom from the god Amun. The south wall held a scene of Pharaoh Meremphah bestowing a gift upon the kneeling Rekemheb, and on the west wall the Great Balance weighed the heart of the deceased in the underworld.

She strolled toward the center of the hall. Encased in glass was the centerpiece of the collection that drew the visitor's eye like an icon. The breathtaking Barque of the Sun *was* an icon of sorts.

Gold leaf was hammered over wood nearly a meter in length from swanlike prow to the high, curved stern. At the center, the naos-cabin housed a sphere of solid gold. The sun god Ra in his essence and glory. Ten painted wooden gods sailed in state with him. She remembered the overseer's boy, Ibrim, who had been slapped for touching the barque, and Volker Vanderschmitt, who had been the one to slap him. Vanderschmitt, who had killed her and then died a terrible death himself.

Something about the display annoyed her, and she moved to the right angle of light to see it. Some fool had left handprints on the top,

she noticed, and she wiped them off with her shirtsleeve.

She pivoted away from the display toward the left. Ah. This must be what Rashidi was so proud of.The empty sarcophagus was set along one wall, its cover removed and replaced by a sheet of Plexiglas. She recognized the elaborately ornamented coffin, of course, but what took her by surprise was the gauze-wrapped dummy within it. She would have laughed at the theatricality had it not been for the painted mask on the mummy's head—painted with the face of Rekemheb, which was also the face of Derek.

She felt her eyes pool again, and alone in the quiet hall, she could almost hear the voice of Rekemheb, reciting once again the words of the scribe god's prophecy:

A child of your line will bring you forth into the world again in the hundredth generation. Then you shall be witness to these things: the Balance, the Book, and the bearing of the Child. This is our hope against the Aton, rising in the West.

She whispered back, "Rekemheb, what's happening to us, old friend? I've done all those things. I've stood before the Balance, written the Book, and we both were there when Nefi was born. So if we're the hundredth generation that the scribe god was talking about, we're just about wiped out. I guess the gods will have to start looking to the hundred and first."

It was a bitter joke, but then the thought itself gave pause. A vague realization began to take form, like a dull light in her head that began just then to burn more brightly. She held up ten fingers, each for a century, and counted forward from Rekemheb's generation in New Kingdom Egypt.

Valerie calculated. If each generation is twenty years, and fi ve generations are born in a century, then fi fty generations would make up a millennium, and a hundred would be roughly two thousand years. But two thousand years after the reign of Pharaoh Meremptah would be about 1000 AD. The realization was staggering.

The familiar face looked impassionately at her through the Plexiglas as she whispered the revelation. "You lived a thousand years before the birth of Christ. We *can't* be the hundredth generation after you. You knew it all the time, but you never told us. The Child of the hundredth generation was born in the Early Middle Ages."

She made another circle of the room, breathless, ordering her thoughts. She had to talk to Auset.

Then she saw it.

A small display case against the wall near the entrance. She knew its contents because she had put them there herself. A collar of gold and turquoise, hammered gold bracelets, slippers, finger and toe covers lined up in order of size. But next to them, in the corner, lay something that did not belong there.

Rekemheb's amulet, the amulet that Derek had brought back to Egypt and which Auset had taken from his suitcase. It could not be a copy, for Antiquities did not even know of its existence. And it could not possibly be the original that she had seen in Auset's hand the day before. She stood in front of it, paralyzed.

"Dr. Foret, please forgive the interruption." Fuad Rashidi stood in the entranceway.

"Oh, I'm sorry, Dr. Rashidi, but I was just on my way out. I can't stay long today. But please, take a look at this." She directed his attention toward the display case. "Can you tell me what this is? The amulet, I mean, there in the corner. It wasn't part of the collection."

He stood at her elbow, and she could sense his bewilderment.

"I confess, I don't recall it, and I certainly should. That's strange. It has no tag either. I must look in the catalog."

"Yes, yes, please do that. In the meantime, I'm truly sorry. I have a very important meeting," she said over her shoulder to the baffled man. "I'll telephone you." She quickened her pace until she was almost running.

Her head pounded with questions. Who or what had brought the amulet from its hiding place to the museum? Were the gods toying with them? And most importantly, had the gods sent forth another chosen Child a thousand years before Nefi?

32

Jerusalem

Amhara shaded Reni's face with a cloth as she herself squinted toward the Kidron valley.

"There it is, Sayyid Husaam," Sharif said unnecessarily as they reached the top of the hill. "Al Quds. The Holy City."

Husaam stroked his beard. "I should be relieved, I suppose, but I would rather be in Damascus." From their elevation, he surveyed the landscape. "The Kidron valley is greener than I remember itThey must have had good rain this year . We can camp just down there between the wall and the brush." He looked toward the western end of the wall. "There's a pool not far from the southern gate. Siloam, they call it.The men can water the animals this evening and be done with it."

The Cairene and Negev caravans made two clusters below the walls of the city. The men unloaded the camels and separated the freight as they had every evening in the desert.The women started two adjacent fires for the cooking, then pitched the goat-hair tents around them.

Amhara unrolled the lar gest rug for Husaam to sit on in front of his tent. "How long will we have to stay outside the city, Father?"

"Not long. Only until I can send a message to the emir for permission to enter. I won him more than one good deal in past years, so I'm certain he will grant us quarters. In the meantime, you should keep to the tent with the other women."

Amhara looked over at the Negev women who were heating their cauldron of *fuul* beans over the larger fire. She was weary of the noise and bickering and longed for the family tent they had shared before, with Faaria on one side of the curtain and her father and Sharif on the other. But since the two caravans had joined together , the Husaam tent had become a place of business and male talk, and the half dozen women of both camps were relegated to a single tent.

The double caravan did feel safer, however, and the monotony of the daily trek was alleviated by talk, even if it was trivial. And when they camped now in the community of women, a group cared for the children, so that each woman, in her turn, had a bit of rest. Only the

sleeping arrangements were tedious, for Amhara hadn't had an hour alone with Faaria.

She unfastened the sling that held Reni on her back and laid the drowsy infant down beside her father. "Here. Please take her. I'll be back in just a moment." She looked around for Faaria and saw her finally, hobbling the camels.

She joined her, standing over her as Faaria bent down to tie the sisal cord loosely above the animal's knees. "Father said we have to stay with the other women until we go into the city. But that shouldn't be long. It will be different once we're inside."

Faaria was gruff. "Let's hope the emir actually remembers your father, and this isn't just wishful thinking. Then let's hope he likes him enough to offer us rooms." She dropped her voice. "Will we ever be alone again?"

Amhara knelt down beside Faaria and said softly, "There's a place where we can go alone before dawn, the pool of Siloam. The shepherds won't go there to water until after morning prayers. Would you like—?"

Faaria dropped long eyelashes. "Oh, yes, I would."

❖

Ludolf of Tournai drew his *khuffia* closer around his head so that it covered him like a Bedouin's turban, and only his eyes showed.

The scouting party had been well organized, with four men riding ahead to survey the land for food, water, and wood. A knight was not needed to accompany them, but Ludolf had nonetheless volunteered. He had grown impatient with the bickering among the commanders and longed to reach the end of his three-year pilgrimage.

Now he would be among the first to see the precious goal of all their labor before it was transformed by battle and fire.

All afternoon it was a gray spot on the horizon, which appeared and disappeared as he rode over the hilly landscape. But then, as he crested the ridge of what he knew was the Mount of Olives, he saw it from above.

The Kidron valley was greener than he had imagined, with herds of goats grazing on the rocky plain. They would be useful to feed the army when it reached the city, he noted. A caravan seemed to have just

arrived; he could see the camels being unloaded and the low black tents set up around the fires outside the city walls. He briefly resented the very normalcy of Saracens setting up their household before the city of Christ.

Jerusalem. The most precious place on earth, a place that he had carried in his heart for three years. He had studied every image of it, read every passage in the Bible, listened to every tale, and it seemed he knew it already. There on the one side was the Tower of David and, across from it, the dome of the great temple. And between them—his heart seemed to leap—were the smaller and more precious domes of the Church of the Sepulchre.

The late afternoon sun shone from deep in the west and poured a rich orange light over the city, as if burnishing it for the believer. Here is where God had descended to earth. Where His incarnation had walked and preached and been tormented for men's sins. Deep in the brickwork of its streets, droplets of His sacred blood still lingered.

Ludolf's hand came involuntarily to his heart. His chest tightened and he burst suddenly into tears. He dismounted and fell upon his knees and prayed in a trembling whisper.

Overwhelmed, he knew that he could not return to the Frankish camp that day. The other scouts would be turning back now to report where the armies could best encamp and strike the city. But he would spend the night in fasting and prayer beneath its walls.

A line of trees and low brush ran southwest and he followed it, crossing over the ruins of some ancient wall. As he approached a copse of trees around a pool, the shepherds watering their sheep ignored him. In the gathering darkness, his face and hair were covered by the headscarf, his leather jerkin concealed by loose Saracen clothing, so he felt neither threatening nor threatened.

He threaded his way through the low trees and finally dismounted to avoid being brushed from the saddle. Then he saw a piece of paradise. At the center of the copse the rectangular pool lay placid, catching the last rays of evening light. On the one side rock formed a natural wall, and on the other, wide steps of crumbling brick led gently down to water level. Yes, he recalled now; the maps the invading army carried had showed a spring on the south side of the city but gave no indication it was enclosed in such lush greenery.

The water was sweet, as he knew it would be, and after he quenched his thirst, he brought his horse to the edge to drink. By the last light he led his mount back into the brush to avoid attracting attention. He savored the moist air and the chirping of the cicadas and wondered with a sudden shudder if this could have been the Garden of Gethsemane. But no, the Frankish maps showed the sorrowful garden on the eastern side, and he was on the south.

He loosened his saddle and tied his horse on a long leash so it could graze, then undid his bedroll.The night was gentle and the ground beneath the trees was soft. Warmed by the joy of achievement and by the sense of lying so close to the city of Christ, he fell asleep. He dreamt he guided a great boat across the waters, and at his back, the Holy Spirit burned in a sphere of golden light.

33

The Pool of Siloam

Allaaaah uakbar! The sound of the first call to prayer insinuated itself into Faaria's unconscious. As a non-believer, she shut it out at first. But something deep inside her recalled that it signaled the short precious period before daylight, the stolen time.

Her eyes flew open. She reached toward one of the dark forms that slept on the carpet around her and touched it soundlessly. Amhara jerked to wakefulness and sat up. Next to her Reni still slept, sucking her fist. The Negev women would feed her along with the other children, and she would probably be content for a couple of hours before she would begin to cry for *Ummi*. In silent agreement, Amhara stood up at the same time as Faaria, and they stepped from the tent into the transparent darkness.

The sky was still cobalt, but dawn was close and there was just enough light for them to creep among the tents. A handful of men from the caravan knelt in prayer. Their foreheads pressed to the ground, they faced the opposite direction as the two women sprinted westward.

"Are you sure there's no one here?" Faaria whispered when they reached the circle of trees.

"It's too early . The men will be at prayer for awhile, and then they'll eat. There's time, I'm sure."

"All right. Come here then." Faaria drew Amhara to a spot just beyond the stone steps that led into the pool and in front of two trees. The pool itself was still black and uninviting, and the flocks would not water there for another hour.

The wall of trees around the pool blocked the faint light af forded by the dawning sky, and each woman saw the other only vaguely.

"I have waited half a hundred days to do this," Faaria whispered. She took hold of the face she could barely see and pressed her lips on it. In the cool air of the grove, their two mouths were a center of warmth that radiated downward. They stood together in a tight embrace for several minutes, until Faaria broke the kiss and whispered into Amhara's hair, as if she could be overheard. "I know the sweet thing

that's at the end. Let me touch you and take you there, habibti."

"Yes, yes," Amhara breathed, opening her abaya.

Faaria stepped back and pulled her long galabaya over her own head and undid the cord to let her trousers fall to the ground. For a moment they looked at each other, pale bodies ghostlike in the half light.

"Hurry, habibti." Amhara stepped into her arms again. "I am afraid the shepherds—"

Faaria covered her mouth with another kiss, deeper and more urgent than the one before. Then she drew her down onto the patch of grass between the trees and the stone steps. They lay side by side for a moment, warming themselves on each other, breathing each other's scent.

Faaria inched down and took Amhara's full breast in her mouth. How glorious, how dizzying it was to know her this way. If this was wickedness then she was lost, for she would not stop herself. Her hand moved down the softly curving belly to the forbidden place, and Amhara opened to her.

A wave of excitement spread through her, bringing the wonderful tight heat to her own sex, and she buried her face in Amhara's neck. A thousand times she had imagined how it would be to touch her this way, and she had been right. It was passing wonderful. What she had not imagined was how easy it would be, how they would both fall so quickly into wild abandon.

Oh sweet heaven, to feel Amhara press against her and slide her hand down beneath her belly.

She lifted slightly to letAmhara's fingers go to the forbidden place and…ohh. What delicious madness, to set two fires burning—the one she fed with her hand and the one that flickered between her own thighs from the demon serpent that slipped inside of her. Fire and serpent. In her delirium the infernal images combined, and she surrendered to perdition.

Like brushfire it caught them both, young bodies that had craved too long, and they writhed and strained until the thing erupted. Faaria felt it first in Amhara, then in her own shuddering rapture.

"Oh, habibti," Amhara whispered. "I knew it would be like that. I knew you could make me happy that way."

"You did the same for me." Faaria chuckled softly. "Shameless

woman. You knew exactly what to do. How did you know?"

"What do you think, you silly person? Of course I knew . You are just like me."

"Not exactly. For example, I don' t like this, but maybe you do." She leaned over and nipped at Amhara's breast.

"Oh!" Amhara yelped. "No, I don't like that. But maybe you like this."

She tickled Faaria along her ribs, causing her to giggle. Then they fell again into an embrace, silent with gratitude.

❖

Some bright sound awakened him, and he opened his eyes to the first light of dawn. He listened, perplexed, thinking it was birdsong, then realized it was girlish laughter. He threw off his blanket and stood up.

There at the corner he saw them, two Saracen women. He crept closer, concealed by the foliage and the pre-dawn dimness, to a vantage point where he could see them clearly. One was slender and boyish, her hair scarcely reaching her shoulders, and the other more voluptuous.

He peered through the brush, rapt, trying to make sense of the spectacle. For they were lying on the ground, naked and locked in an embrace. The short-haired one lay half over the other one, and their mouths were pressed together.

He'd heard stories back in Flanders that the Mohammedans copulated with animals. This, he concluded, must be another form of that perversion.

The boyish one lifted herself up, resting her weight on her elbow, and the voluptuous one who still lay on the ground became fully visible. His heart pounded at the sight of the woman' s full breasts and the triangle of hair between her thighs. Three years it had been since his oath of celibacy, three long, blood-soaked years, and he knew he should withdraw or lechery would undo him. His Christian conscience told him he looked on wickedness, yet he could not tear his eyes away.

He watched, both thrilled and horrifi ed, as the taller one slid her hand between the legs of the other . He thought he heard her moan, and he wanted to look away but could not, so powerful was the grip of sin. The offense was both to God and nature, a stone' s throw from the Sepulchre of Christ. Not only did they desecrate a holy place,

they polluted him, for he felt his resolve weaken, as if a witch's hand caressed his sex.

"Abomination!" Outraged, he burst from his hiding place.

The two defilers leapt to their feet and stood quaking as he advanced. Then the taller one stepped in front of the other and barked something at him in their vile language.

"Satan's whore," he spat back, and knocked her on the side of the head with his fist. She felt to the ground stunned and moaning.

The other woman clutched her black robe around herself and backed away.

Savoring the game, he cornered her between the branches of a tree, and their two bodies touched. Her eyes were wide with fear, but she did not struggle as he encircled her throat with his hand. He might have heard the faint sounds of movement behind him, of something being pried from the ground, but he did not care.

His pulse racing, his manhood hard against the Saracen witch, he croaked, "A pity you are not a Christian. I would fill you full of children and you would serve me while you bore them, one by one." Oh, he could smell the spices in her hair He thrust against her, his head swimming with lust. He could hear his own breath and hers, and closed his eyes for one delicious moment.

White-hot pain exploded in his head as the rock crashed against him from behind and knocked him sideways. The woman slid away from him and he collapsed against the tree. It took several moments for him to regain his senses, to realize his khuffia had slid off his head and his hair had sprung out. When he could stand up again, the two witches had vanished.

He would have chased them down and killed them, but the sound of shepherds returning with their flock prevented pursuit. He knelt quickly at the pool's edge, splashed water on the cut behind his ear, then set the khuffia back in place.

He tightened his saddle and rode off, back to the Flemish bivouac at Asur. Seething, he recalled the pair of witches that had been found in his own woods. Wild women, unbaptized, who lived in squalor with their animals—a pack of foxes and rabbits and cats, and even a crow that did their bidding. They confessed under torture to fornication with the devil and were given to the fire, but the event had unnerved him. He had their house burned, along with such of their cats and rabbits as could

be caught. It was shortly afterward that his wife had died in childbirth, and he was certain something of the witches' spell had lingered.

Evil was persistent. The Christian lands themselves were ever threatened by it. All around them savages and infi dels pressed in, and the evil seeped ever through the cracks. One had to be on guard against it always—and when possible to strike before it manifested.

The pope had called them to defend the Byzantines, but for Ludolf this crusade was a private thing. He drew a connection between the witches' spell that killed his wife and the evil that they marched against in the Holy Land. And he could not abide to see a cat.

34

Flight

At the entrance of the museum, Valerie peered down the length of the street looking for a taxi. Then she saw Auset's parents, at the foot of the stone steps. They saw her too at the same moment and climbed toward her, obviously upset.

Her heart sank. Was there some new disaster?

Mahmoud al Fakhir stood in front of her, panting from the sudden climb. Hannah came up behind him more slowly , looking no less anxious.

"Is everything all—?"

"Doctor Foret. Do you know where my daughter is?" He showed no emotion, but his hand trembled until he gripped the metal banister.

"No, I don' t." Her excitement and confusion about the museum revelations gave way to alarm. "I left her at home. Didn' t she leave a note or anything? How did you know where I was?"

Al Fakhir scowled, clearly in no mood to be questioned in return.

"We went to your hotel fi rst," Hannah volunteered. "They said you might be here working. We thought she might have decided to join you for a while, for a trip perhaps."

"A trip?" Valerie was speechless. "What kind of trip?"

"I don' t know, but our granddaughter is missing too." Hannah clasped her hands together like a school teacher, but the anxiety on her face was anything but prim. "Are you sure you don't know—?"

"You were with her yesterday ," al Fakhir persisted. "Did she tell you of any plans?"

"You mean with respect to Reverend Carter? I gave her the name of a lawyer to contact and told her that her legal position was strong. She was angry when I left, but that's all."

"Angry? Why?"

"Sayyid al Fakhir. It's not my place to discuss your relationship with your daughter . But surely you were aware that she was furious about being pressured to marry someone from your mosque."

Al Fakhir's anxious face became stone. "You are quite right, Dr. Foret. It is not your place." He turned around abruptly and descended the stairs again. At the bottom, he glanced up and waited for his wife to follow.

Hannah laid a hand on Valerie's forearm. "You do not understand our family. If my husband could not force Auset to marry when she carried her child, he cannot force her to marry when she is a widow. He knows this, and it is difficult for him. He must balance his faith on one side and his family on the other."

"I'm sorry. Auset may have overreacted, but she didn't tell me anything. I really don't know where she is."

"We found this." Hannah held out something toward her, something wrapped in linen and tied with a cord.

Valerie held it for a moment before she realized that it was Rekemheb's statue.

"What is it?" Hannah asked. "Why would she leave this note on top of it?" She held out a postcard with a picture of the pyramids on the front, and on the back, in hurriedly scribbled Arabic, "Don't worry about me. I'm fine. Please give this to Valerie."

"A doll with the face of Derek, dressed as an Egyptian priest? What does it mean?" Hannah unclasped her hands, imploring. "Please, we are very worried. So many terrible things have happened."

"It's just…a souvenir," Valerie lied. "It has no special meaning." She unwrapped it and felt, to her surprise, that it was warm. From Hannah's hand or pocket? It seemed too warm for that. Then she saw the tiny piece of paper tucked under the wooden arm and withdrew it.

She frowned. "It says, 'I'll call Derek,'" Valerie read out loud.

Hannah's face registered relief, then confusion. "Derek? How can she call a dead man?"

Valerie rubbed the side of her face for a moment. It made no sense to her either. Then she slapped her hand to her belt. "Of course! His phone. I keep forgetting to turn it on." She opened it and waited. After a moment the phone light shone, and a few seconds later, the message signal sounded. She held it to her ear.

Her chest tightened as she heard her own desperate messages to him, messages that he had never erased and probably never even heard. Then, at the last message, she sagged with relief.

"Auset's all right. She' s gone to the one place she knows she'll be taken care of, even without money—and where Reverend Carter can't lay hands on her ." *Or anybody else* , she thought to herself, but didn't say out loud. Valerie clapped the phone shut. "She's on her way to Jerusalem."

35

Proof of Faith

What have you done? *What have you done*!"

Valerie felt rough hands shake her shoulders and yank her out of deep sleep. Struggling first with dream panic, she finally reached consciousness.

"Nekhbet!" She shrugged off the hands and sat up. "What are you talking about?" She went on the of fensive. "What do you mean, what have I done! What have *you* been doing? Rekemheb is lost, Yussif and Derek are dead. Auset has fled to Jerusalem. And what have we heard from the gods? Nothing!"

Nekhbet would not be interrogated. "Al Quds. Jerusalem!" She spat the words. Whatever the name, it is the worst possible place. A malevolence follows her. You must fetch her back immediately."

"Of course there's a malevolence. Even *I* figured that out. So tell me who or what it is? You're a goddess, you must know!" She almost said "for God's sake," then realized the absurdity.

"I know only the past, which accumulates in endless memory But in your world and time, I see only what I set eyes on. Surely this thing is inspired by the Aton and will have even greater power in Jerusalem."

"Well, this 'malevolence' doesn't need any more power than it' s got. It's already succeeded in killing two of us," Valerie retorted. "So, what really happened to Derek and Yussif? They died for the gods, didn't they? Because the chronicle is finished?" She realized that all her questions already held the answers.

Nekhbet nodded. "In part. The Aton struck fi rst at the ones who were not protected."

"Not protected? What the hell does that mean? Who *did* you protect, then? I must be one of the lucky ones. Or am I the next one out? What about Auset? Are you planning to raise the baby by your godly selves once they get her?"

"Be silent. These are childish words. Did you think it would be easy to defy the Aton, who dominates half the world? Did you think He would stand by while you plant the seeds of the old religion? The Child

is under my wing, but we did not anticipate harm to the rest of you.We were mistaken."

"Mistaken." Valerie said the word with contempt. "Y es, so it would seem. Well, now that Yussif and Derek are taken, will they live as kas? It's the least you can do."

"Sarcasm does not become you. And neither do your idle flirtations."

"Flirtations?" Valerie scowled at the non sequitur . "Y ou mean Najya Khoury? What's she got to do with anything?"

Nekhbet looked at her darkly, and Valerie remembered her kisses that she had misread as desire. But they had had nothing to do with passion and had merely torn her apart and scattered her all over Egypt. She felt both cheated of what she longed for and like a fool for longing for it in the first place.

"Najya is none of your business. Besides, you're changing the subject. I asked you about Yussif and Derek."

"The subject is Jerusalem. The Aton is strong there. Though he is divided against himself, every brick and stone contains him, and we are powerless. You must bring her back."

"The Aton is strong everywhere, and there are more immediate threats here. Surely you are aware that Derek' s father is claiming custody of Nefi."

"He is harmless. Bring her back." Eons looked out through her eyes.

Valerie wavered. The very presence of the goddess took hold of her and excited her , vastly more than any woman had. But what in mortal women was inebriating, was in Nekhbet a toxic dose. She stood her ground. "You'll have to tell me why."

Nekhbet exhaled exasperation and pressed her exquisitely curved lips together. "Because the kas of Yussif and Derek depend on it. They stand before the judges even now , but cannot pass into the underworld."

"You mean because they don' t know the incantations? But no one's going to know them. They're antiquated, meaningless spells."

"It is not the incantations. That is the least of it. The scales have weighed their heavy hearts, and the judges know thatAuset has gone to the city of the One God."

"You're saying that if I bring Auset back to the fold, the judges

will let them pass? Is that the deal being offered?"

Nekhbet moved, lithely, in an arc around her, feet not actually touching the floor. "Nothing is being offered. It is not a transaction." She opened her hands. The gesture reminded Valerie of paintings she'd seen of female saints.

"See it from our eyes. Our two living believers are full of doubt, and the mother of the Child has thrown off our protection and fled to the city of the Aton. You are the last one, and you quarrel with me. If you are so embittered that you cannot win over a single new believer, we have nothing to hope for."

"I wrote your chronicle. Isn't that enough? You also want me to proselytize?" Valerie thought of Jehovah's Witnesses, knocking on front doors and handing out pamphlets on the street.

"This one thing would show the judges that the words of Jehuti live." Nekhbet fell silent for a moment, then took another tack. "Perhaps you will better understand if you see for yourself where they are now." She held out a dark, white-nailed hand as if inviting her to dance.

Valerie remembered the hand and its pale fingernails, and she understood the invitation. Nekhbet was offering the god-kiss, the embrace that had opened her soul and given her the vision of all Egypt. Foolish mortal that she was, she had learned too late that the kiss, for all its stunning effect, was emotionless. Nekhbet did not love her—did not love anyone.

"No," she said softly. "I don't need to see them. Derek saved me from death once. If you tell me this is the condition of their rescue, that I must bring a new believer, I'll try. I owe him this."

"All right, then." Nekhbet seemed unprepared for the refusal of the kiss. "I'll leave you to it."

"All right," Valerie repeated and waited for the goddess to disappear, as usual, after making her point.

Instead, Nekhbet leaned forward and lightly pressed her lips on Valerie's mouth, for a second only, not enough to spark the vision or stir desire. A brief, bewildering kiss, like some awkward, inexperienced girl. Then she did disappear, leaving in the empty place where she had been, the sound of her command.

"Go to Jerusalem."

36

Al Quds

Archers stood atop the wall, and below them a phalanx of guards lined both sides of the Eastern gate. Only one of the heavy doors was open, and the entryway was packed with people trying to enter. Donkeys brayed and men shouted within the swelling mass at the gate that oozed as a thin trickle into the city. Husaam and his household stood before the guard, waiting to pass scrutiny.

"Let them enter!" An impressively accoutred officer and a standard bearer rode across the courtyard toward the gate. Behind them, a groom led a string of two horses.

Faaria pulled Amhara and Reni away from the hooves that clattered on the stone pavement.

The officer drew up before the sergeant of the guard. "These people are the guests of the emir," he announced as the line of horses swung around behind him. After an acknowledgement from the guard, the officer assisted her, Amhara, and the baby onto one of the horses and signaled that Husaam should mount the other one.

Faaria glanced anxiously back at her brother, who was still held along with a white camel at the checkpoint.

"What about that one, sir?" The guard pointed with his thumb toward Sharif. "We are under orders to send them to the Dung Gate."

Astride the emir's horse in his new status as guest, Husaam appealed to the officer. "*Minfadlak,* sayyid, we have obeyed this most reasonable of orders. Our drovers have taken the rest of our caravan to the southern gate. This beast carries gifts for the emir."

"Admit them," the officer ordered, and Sharif led the camel inside. With surprising speed he couched the camel, mounted it, and brought it to its feet again. Meanwhile, the officer drew his horse alongside Husaam. "On behalf of the emir, Idris ad Dawla, I am here to escort you to the Citadel."

"I thank you and my family thanks you. I look forward to speaking with the emir." Husaam appraised the officer's rich costume and seemed pleased.

Faaria knew why. The prosperity of the host always reflected favorably on his guests.

The officer led them through a tunnel-like archway into a street just wide enough for two horses to walk abreast. "Do you know Jerusalem, Sayyid Husaam?" the officer asked.

"A bit. I was here when the Turks were masters. I remember the plentiful souqs and craft markets. Much better than we have in Cairo."

While the men talked amiably, keeping their horses close, Faaria glanced back again to assure herself that Sharif was still behind them. He swayed serenely on his white mount, occasionally running his foot over the square shapes in the red woolen camel bags.

She turned back again to watch the standard bearer who rode next to them and seemed to struggle to keep a dignified bearing while his standard kept catching under the window screens that jutted from the walls.

Suppressing the urge to laugh, Faaria studied his costume. Over a linen undergarment he wore a wide silk coat patterned with geometric designs and tied at the waist by a sash. A short sword in a silver scabbard was tucked into one side of the sash and a smaller curved dagger into the other. On his rather pretty head, a short conical cap was wrapped with swaths of silk in yet another color, and a long section of it was draped across his chest and thrown over his shoulder.

"We do not know this city, sayyid. Can you tell us, for example, what that is?" She looked toward the enormous wall that ran parallel to the road they traveled.

He finally tilted his banner permanently forward in line with the horse's neck and turned his attention to them. "That is the north wall of the Temple Mount, which held the Temple of Solomon. What you see above it is the Dome of the Rock." He pointed with his free hand, so that the silk of his coat sleeve hung down handsomely. A band of embroidery around the upper arm held some inscription in calligraphy, though she couldn't read it. "Holy places for both Jews and Muslims. But the road we ride on is the path on which our savior bore his cross."

"Our savior? So you're a Christian," Faaria observed. "The emir has a Christian in his service?"

"Several. And his physician is a Jew. I cannot say the brotherhood here is all that warm, but we manage. It must be so. The city is sacred for all of us."

"Are there any sites of the old religion? Of the many gods?"

The standard bearer laughed. "For the pagans? No, of course not. Though there are stories about a temple to Venus deep under the Church of the Sepulchre."

They reached the corner of the mount and he pointed left again. "Down there is where the Jews pray . In a moment we will cross the Al Wad and go past the Church of the Holy Sepulchre, and behind that, on the opposite wall of the city, is the Citadel, where my master awaits us."

Faaria shook her head, puzzled. Believers of three faiths, worshipping within sight of each other , each one convinced the other two were in error. Didn't anyone find that comical?

❖

Subdued by awe, Faaria and Amhara followed the servant to a bench at the end of a long dark corridor. The narrow space was unpleasant until they saw they sat before an elaborate grillwork. The pattern of carved arabesques was in fact cut through the wall so that, sitting in their darkness, they could peer unobtrusively into the stateroom on the other side.

Faaria was uncertain why they had been allowed to witness the audience rather than kept waiting outside as she had feared. It appeared that Husaam al Nouri carried such authority that his women, too, were accorded certain privileges.

The audience room was impressive, suggestive more of a palace than a citadel. It was lit at all four corners by multi-ringed candelabra that hung on long chains from the ceiling. A long L-shaped divan filled the corner of the state room opposite the grillwork wall. Wide, flat cushions were placed in a row at the back of the divan, and cushioned stools stood in front of it.

As they watched, a servant carried in a brass tray with a tall snorkled coffeepot, glasses, and a dish of sweetmeats. A boy dragged over a round wooden table for him to set the refreshments on, and they both padded away soundlessly.

A moment later, the emir arrived with his ministers. Idris ad Dawla was a striking man, though none would call him large. The height of an average man, he had the demeanor of one accustomed to command. He

walked close by the grillwork wall and faced it briefly, as if he did not know they were behind it. Ridiculous, of course, Faaria thought. What commander would keep a spying room without full knowledge of who was in it?

She liked his face. The deep grooves that ran from the side of his nose diagonally into his full black beard gave strength to his mouth and lent him an air of authority even when he was silent.

He dismissed his ministers and greeted his guests standing. With genuine warmth, he gripped Husaam's upper arms and held him at arm's length.

"Old friend. I am pleased to see you again. How fares your trade in times like these?"

All three sat down as the servant poured coffee from a high-spouted copper ewer.

"*Alhamdullilah*, Emir," Husaam replied. "Every caravan investment brings the risk of ruin until delivery, but for the moment we prosper enough to offer you this gift."

Sharif presented a slender leather volume to the emir with a slight flourish, while Husaam took a polite sip of his coffee.

Husaam set his cup down. "I know the emir's love of verse, though this will certainly not be the usual fare. This Persian mathematician Khayyam has made a name for himself in two languages. You will find his philosophy daring, but I believe the emir appreciates daring, in his poets as in his officers."

Ad Dawla ran his hand over the cover of the book with a smile and set it aside. "Thank you. I will read it at my leisure, though I fear I have little enough of that now. You know, of course, about the scourge that sweeps down from Europe. We must consider that they will soon arrive in full force before our gates."

"More than soon, sayyid," Sharif interjected. "My sister was fetching water at a pool just outside the city wall and was set upon by a man with yellow hair who spoke a strange language. There is great likelihood that he was a scout from the Frankish army."

Ad Dawla crossed his arms over his chest. "That the Frankish kings are already sending spies…that is alarming. We sent emissaries to them and offered complete freedom of religion in Jerusalem. All men may visit, as pilgrims, unmolested, as long as they are unarmed. And still they send spies."

"But Jerusalem has been open to pilgrims since the Fatimids have reclaimed it. Do you think they will accept your offer?" Husaam looked sceptical.

"It is unlikely," ad Dawla replied. "I anticipate a siege, although I had hoped it would be longer in coming. In any case, we are bringing in all the grain we can and will burn what we cannot. We will block or poison the wells outside the city—all but Siloam, which feeds our own cisterns. I will dispatch the catapults where we are most vulnerable and prepare the Greek fire."

"A great pity, isn't it?" Sharif set down his coffee. "The Franks have marched all this distance to reclaim what they essentially already had."

❖

There was a frenzy of activity in the souq, as people rushed to buy food to last through the siege that all knew was coming. Though carts of grain and livestock still trickled in from the surrounding villages, the freshly slaughtered meat and new produce were bought immediately, and olives, which kept indefinitely, were soon impossible to find.

Sharif accompanied the women on what they feared would be the last day to shop.

"Ufff, Sharif. You smell of camel." Faaria linked her arm in his. You've been visiting the stable again."

"For the books," he said under his breath. "I hid them under the camel straw. If we ever get out of this, they're our fortune." He perused the sparse and rotten produce that remained on the market cloths.

"Well and good. But for now, we need things like this." Faaria held up a large bundle of dates tied in a cloth. Is anything left at the grain merchant?"

"No, but ad Dawla's men have taken several barrels of it to the Citadel. If it comes to that, we'll have grain to eat, though nothing else."

"Can we try to find flatbread?" Amhara asked. "It'll keep a long time and Reni can eat it. She's been so good. She never cries, even in all this strangeness." She shifted her from one arm to another. "Look, the poor child's in rags. I'd planned to buy her a shirt in Damascus with our new money."

Faaria grinned. “I was waiting for you to say just such a thing.” From under her shirt she produced a gauze-wrapped package and handed it to Amhara.

“Oh, habibti, what a beautiful thing.” Amhara unfolded the brick red smock and held it up against Reni’s chest. “It’ll fit her perfectly!”

Her face lit up, and she pressed a damp finger on the embroidered panel in the front. “Burd!”

“Yes, darling. It’s a bird. A yellow bird. Say thank you to Auntie Faaria.”

Sharif took the bundle of dates from her hand. “You may have a child of your own soon enough. Idris ad Dawla has spoken with Husaam about taking both of you as his wives.”

“Idris ad Dawla? She snatched the dates back, suddenly truculent. “But we’ve known him for only ten days, and besides, I don’t want to marry anyone.”

“You couldn’t do better. He’s an Egyptian and wants both of you. At a time like this, women need a strong man to take care of them. There is no one stronger than Idris ad Dawla.”

❖

Faaria and Amhara sat on cushions in the corner of the spare upper chamber of the tower.

“Are you afraid?” Faaria asked.

“Of course I am. Terrified.”

“I’ll protect you, you know, if it costs me my life.”

“Oh, habibti. You’re just as weak as I am.You know what happens to women after a battle.” She drew the blanket over the shoulders of her sleeping baby. “And children.”

“I know, but I trust Idris ad Dawla. He’s a fine commander. At least Sharif says so. But whatever happens, I want to be with you, even if we die.”

“Samek says that lovers can be together in the afterlife if they have likenesses. You know, carved in wood. If we come though this, I’ll have such things made of us, of Sharif, and of my father and Reni, too, so that we can be together forever.”

Faaria offered a weak smile. “A good idea. I even know a wood-carver in Cairo. Now we must only survive Jerusalem.”

Amhara stood up respectfully as Husaam and Sharif entered through the narrow doorway.

"Sit down, sit down. We'll come and join you." Husaam dropped onto the cushion next to her and raised one knee to lean on. "I have looked to our goods, but I think they are lost," he said, wan. "If ad Dawla can negotiate surrender, they will no doubt be part of the ransom. If he cannot, and the Franks attack, it will all be lost in any case." He gazed mournfully up at the opening in the stone wall through which sunlight poured in milky beams.

Sharif raised a slender hand. "Ad Dawla's Sudanese are superb archers, and the city walls are strong. The Franks will surely negotiate. And I've hidden our most valuable things."

Husaam shrugged. "If God so wills it."

At the other end of the room ad Dawla entered with two lieutenants. In the days since they had seen him he had let his beard grow, as if to add another layer of protection before a great hand-to-hand battle.

His green surcoat, of embroidered leather, hung to his knees over his linen britches. A sash of embroidered silk wrapped twice around him covered his breastplate and held a sheathed dagger. A diagonal strap held a sword on his back, its elegantly finished hilt just visible above his shoulder.

His helmet was peaked, as if it had been poured molten and cooled before the last drop at the center had fallen. The steel was engraved with Quranic phrases, and the helmet itself was held in place by a bright blue-green turban. By his colors alone, he would be seen on the ramparts.

He approached them, laying a hand fraternally on Hassaan's shoulder. "Take heart, old friend. Jerusalem is well prepared. We have troops on guard at every corner of the city, and the food supplies are ample. In any case, the Citadel remains the center of our strength, and no matter what happens, your two women should stay here."

A loud knock came from the narrow door, and then it flew open. The handsome standard bearer rushed in, breathless. He handed a message to ad Dawla, who read it silently before he crumpled it.

"The Franks have refused conciliation," he said grimly.

The messenger still stood at attention, and ad Dawla asked him, "Is there something else?"

"Yes, sir. You must come and see."

Ad Dawla followed him, and his officers filed out behind him. Weary of the long confinement, Faaria and Amhara followed them out onto the platform where ad Dawla's archers stood along the parapet. In the momentary hush, Faaria could hear the banners fluttering.

Then she looked toward the north, and her breath caught in her throat. Black along the distant horizon, like a swarm of locusts, the Frankish armies flowed toward them.

❖

Five weeks it had been, five weeks in which the Franks had attacked again and again, and each time been thrown back. Finally it seemed that they had given up, for they had drawn back into their camps and been ominously silent for days.

Faaria stood behind the merlon and gazed at the Frankish camps scattered through the Kidron valley. They were building more siege towers to replace the ones they had lost to the fierce resistance.

Sharif came up behind her. "I'm sorry, sister. It's time for you to go inside again. They're bringing up the pitch and straw."

She drew back against the wall and watched as four soldiers, two in the front and two in the back, labored up the stone steps carrying an enormous cauldron suspended between them. The pitch was cold and viscous, but she knew it would be set over a fire on the platform until it bubbled and could cook a man.

Behind them, two other soldiers carried bales of straw, and a line of boys followed them with wooden dowels and spools of cord.

"They're going to make throw-torches, aren't they?" Faaria grasped her brother's arm. "Let me help."

"No," the sergeant who guided the cauldron-bearers said. "No women on the walls. She'll be in the way."

Husaam al Noori appeared from the other side. "Let her be, sergeant. I know this woman, and she can tie a knot faster than any of these boys. She'll free up a man for the heavy work."

The sergeant nodded and drew her by the arm over to the cauldron. "Soak the straw in the tar, like this." He demonstrated, sweeping a bundle of the dry stalks into the syrupy pitch and wrapping it like a skirt around a wooden dowel the length of his forearm. "Then tie it up good like this."

"Yes, yes, I know." She took the roll of cord from him and began to work.

Husaam gathered up several spools of twine and set to work at Faaria's side. "This is my cord, you know. Good twisted flax, for Damascus carpets." He unwound a length of it and cut it with a small curved blade. "Too good to be thrown burning at the Franks."

Faaria wrapped the cord twice around the straw at the head of the wooden rod and tied it fast. "We're all too good to be thrown away in this stupid battle." She swiped the straw torch once through the pitch and laid it on the platform at her feet.

Husaam cut off another length. "I don't mind dying so much myself. But I worry about my family. Sharif was going to make us all rich."

"Well, we're together, sayyid." Sharif laid down another bundle of wooden dowels. "If any survive, they'll tell the story of the others."

"Yes, stories." Husaam shook his head. "Apity, my friend, that we could not deliver the stories in your manuscripts."

"They're not lost yet, sayyid. They're in the saddlebag under the straw of your own camels. Let's hope that whoever reclaims them knows their value."

Husaam shrugged. "Pray God they don't fall into the hands of the Frankish barbarians, who know nothing of science or poetry."

Sharif looked up at the indifferent sky. "Pray God? At the moment God doesn't seem to favor our science or poetry either. Do you suppose He favors the Franks?"

"You have to wonder what kind of God would—" Faaria stopped. There was something ominous in the air. Something more than the sound of wind and the low buzz of men's voices. She peered over the wall again and was appalled.

Sharif came to her side and leaned on the parapet wall. "Unbelievable. They're singing, and marching barefoot—in the middle of a siege. They're mad!"

As the Frankish soldiers in the thousands circled the city walls, the murmur of their voices wafted upward on the breeze. To the defenders the words they sang were unintelligible, all but the constant refrain of "Hallelujah."

Faaria murmured to herself, "A madness that will destroy us."

37

Jerusalem

Valerie descended the wide stone steps of the Old City to the Damascus Gate and threaded her way through the lines of tourists. The noise, a buzzing cloud of Arabic hawking and polyglot tourist chatter, was familiar. The souq was much like the Khan al Khalili in Cairo, but for the omnipresence of Israeli soldiers.

She checked the instructions that Hannah had given her . Auset's mother knew the Old City intimately; it had been her playground during her youth. Auset's grandparents had been shopkeepers in the Jewish quarter, but Hannah had suggested Valerie might be more comfortable in a hostel called Funduq Farisi, in the Arab quarter. Not that any place was more than a few minutes away from any other place through the winding medieval streets. But the Arab quarter was livelier , she said, had more fresh-food stands, more shops. Hannah could be forgiven for thinking she would spend much time shopping.

Funduq Farisi. There it was. A narrow doorway in the Khan el Zeit, the Olive Market, barely visible between two densely packed market stalls, one with a thousand varieties of candy and the other with coffee mugs and plates and other household minutiae stamped with the icons of Jerusalem.

A staircase led up to the reception area of the hostel, and when she walked through the second door she stopped for a moment, impressed. She stood on the ground floor of a caravanserai, or rather a remodeling of one for modern expectations. Rising in a quadrangle around her were two galleries, one above the other , punctuated by archways in the medieval style. Clearly the hostel had been adapted—with the addition of plumbing and electricity—from the skeleton of an ancient merchants' inn, a caravanserai. What was missing, she noted, smiling inwardly, was the smell of camel dung in the courtyard.

"It's about time you arrived."

Valerie spun around to see Auset lounging against the registration counter. "Be glad I arrived at all!" Valerie dropped her backpack to the floor with relief. "I'm glad you got my message. But this all would have

been much easier if you'd warned me, or *anyone*, of where you were going."

"I'm sorry. It all happened too quickly" Auset gave her a quick hug. "I didn' t want my parents to know . I was afraid they'd call the police, or that my mother would even come herself to try and bring me home."

"Well, you ended up scaring the hell out of them."

"I was depending on you getting the message on Derek's phone."

"I did, fi nally. But you scared the hell out of Nekhbet too. She showed up suddenly again and insisted I come here to get you out of Jerusalem." Valerie spoke over her shoulder as she signed the register and took her room key.

Auset picked up the backpack. "Why should I leave? What was Nekhbet's problem?"

They walked side by side up the stairs. "She didn't explain much, just said that the Aton was powerful and the Egyptian gods couldn' t protect you here."

Val's room was a modest cubicle, sparsely furnished and already stifling hot at mid-morning. Valerie opened the single window and saw to her pleasure that it looked out over the city toward the golden Dome of the Rock.

"They couldn't protect us in Egypt!"Auset snapped back. "Where were they when Yussif and Derek were killed, and when Rekemheb' s mummy was smashed?"Auset dropped down on the one simple wooden chair in the room. "Look, I get it. I know that the gods get strength from their believers, like…who's that little fairy creature who flits around in Peter Pan?"

Standing in the slight breeze from the window Valerie unzipped her rucksack and unpacked toiletries. "Tinkerbell."

"Yes, like Tinkerbell. But no one believes in them anywhere.They were very flashy at Dendara when they swarmed in overhead at night, but for taking care of us, they *are* useless."

"I think we're supposed to take care of *them*. But listen, we have more important things to talk about. The amulet, for example. Did you give it to the Cairo Museum?"

"Of course not. How could you even ask? It' s hidden in my room."

"I saw it at the museum. In a glass showcase."

"Impossible. Maybe it's a second one that you didn't know about."

"There's nothing in the tomb I don't know about. I cataloged every item in the collection. The amulet was on Rekemheb's mummy. There can't be a second one."

"Then I don't know. And I'm sorry, but right now, I care much more about Yussif and Derek. Did you ask Nekhbet about them?"

Valerie rubbed her neck and felt the trickle of perspiration run down the center of her back. A shower was going to feel good. "That was the first thing I asked her. She said that both men are in the Hall of Judgement, but the judges won't let them pass until we get more believers to replace them."

"What?" Auset's face darkened. "They're blackmailing us now too? Those men were murdered because they got roped into this prophecy thing anyhow, and now they're denied the reward of the new religion unless we get more converts? To hell with that!"

"I think—"

"And the new believers?" Auset was on her feet now, the better to vent her fury. "Are *they* going to be blackmailed too, blocked from the afterlife unless *their* relatives bring in a few more souls?" She blew out a long breath and leaned against the wall, her arms folded under her bosom.

Valerie nodded tentative agreement. "When you put it that way, it's pretty outrageous, isn't it? But Nekhbet knew we'd be outraged and pointed out that the deaths of the men are a blow against them too. All that's left now of the prophecy are you and me. Two bitter, cynical women who are *this* close—she held up thumb and forefinger a few centimeters apart—to renouncing the whole thing."

"Closer than that," Auset groused.

"So they're desperate too, and the kas of the two men are their only leverage to get us to act. I've already agreed to try a little proselytizing. I know a few urban pagans in Brussels who would be open to their religion, even enthusiastic. But I can't contact them until you leave Jerusalem."

Auset sprang up, hands on hips. "That just sounds like another kind of blackmail. Nefi's happy here, and before I drag her back to Cairo, and to the claims that everyone's making on us, I have to know it's better there than here."

Valerie had no good answer ready and knew when to stop arguing.

At the sudden lack of pressure, Auset softened. She reached for the doorknob.

"Look, my creepy uncle and his wife are visiting tomorrow, and I have to help my grandparents get everything ready. You know: shopping, tidying up. I'll try to get away tomorrow afternoon to give you a tour of the city. We can talk about Nekhbet's worries then."

"All right, but I'm warning you. I'm not leaving without you. In the meantime I need a shower."

"Yes, you do." Auset smiled for the first time and let herself out.

❖

The bathroom, Valerie saw, was typical of the accommodations she'd enjoyed lately—that is, miniscule. But as long as there was warm water—there was—and the drain wasn't blocked—it wasn't—she was satisfied. She showered blissfully, noting however that the ten-centimeter chip of soap was wearing thin and would serve for one wash only. Fine. She had no plans for the rest of the afternoon and could buy more.

In clean clothes and with the warm air drying her hair, she ventured back into the dense activity of the Khan el Zeit. The sheer volume of its merchandise displayed on every wall and surface and dangling overhead, the bombardment of colors and sounds, all were a comfort, a reminder of vitality in the face of bereavement. She let the sensations wash over her like a wave: the cacophony of hawkers calling in Arabic, Hebrew, and English; the haggling customers; the smells of sheesha smoke and cigarettes; the oils for sale in the next shop.

A shuffling street-sweeper pushed refuse in front of his broom along the center of the street toward the block of harsh sunlight where the tunnel opened to a square. She startled as a cart rumbled past her drawn by a single man, no different from its biblical equivalent except that its tires were rubber Grit dropped from it onto the street he had just swept and fell back into the cracks between the bricks. Two thousand years of grit.

Derek, she thought with a wan smile, would have hated it. No matter. She would have dragged him here, made him appreciate what

the souq was—civilization's first hub of commerce.

She studied the people: the swarthy faces of the Arabs, the slightly paler ones of the Jews, the—by contrast shocking—whiteness of the Western tourists, and she knew none of them would be Derek.

A hand touched her back.

38

The Holy City

She flinched from the touch and spun around, one hand lifted in defense.

"Oh, I'm sorry ," Najya Khoury said. "That was stupid of me, considering what you've been through."

"That's all right." Valerie laughed nervously . "I'm just a little jumpy. I never expected to run into you in the Old City."

"But you told me you were coming in this morning, and I was on my way to your hotel. I wanted to give you a tour of the Old City before anyone else does. Have I interrupted anything?"

Valerie felt reprieved. "Yes. A day of morose wandering. A tour is just what I need to take my mind of f things." She grew serious again. "I'm really glad to see you."

❖

Najya cleared her throat as she pointed with an open hand. "And this, mesdames et messieurs, is the Eastern Gate, which has had five or six names over the centuries: The Lion's Gate, Jehoshafat's Gate, St. Stephan's Gate, Mary's Gate. It has been knocked down and rebuilt, closed and opened up, but is in all cases the entrance to the Christian quarter."

"So, what's that wall there?" Valerie played the tourist.

"The north wall of theTemple Mount. What you see above it is the top of the Dome of the Rock, from which Mohammed visited heaven." She pointed with her entire arm, the enormous size of the wall seeming to require an equally large gesture.

Then she pointed toward another lower structure built around a pool of water . "And over there is the Bath of Bethesda, where Jesus healed the sick. Oh, and the road we are walking on is theVia Dolorosa, where Jesus carried his cross."

"A lot going on in one place."

"You have no idea. Every brick and stone has got something

'going on.'" Najya touched her sleeve, guiding her to the left. "Come on, we'll start with the Jews."

❖

"So, that's the western Wall. It's higher than I expected." Valerie stopped behind the fence that separated spectators from active worshippers, who seemed to enter from under an archway at the side. She scanned the yellowish granite blocks that rose high overhead. Each block was about a meter high, and tufts of grass grew in the spaces between them.

"It's part of the Temple of Solomon, isn't it?"

"No, only a part of the wall that supported the hill under the temple. This wall, by itself, had no religious importance. The whole mount is essentially a Jewish shrine, and over the centuries, Jews prayed next to the southern Wall, eastern Wall, and even on the mount itself, wherever the authorities allowed them to."

On the one side, several bearded men in black coats and wide-brimmed hats were lined up facing the Wall. As they rocked back and forth murmuring, the long curls that corkscrewed on both sides of their heads swayed in countermotion. On the other side, a lone man read from a small leather-bound book. A black leather strap held a little box against his forehead and wound around his left arm to his middle finger. A fringed shawl covered his head and shoulders and hung down his back.

"What's that little black thing on his forehead?" Valerie squinted, trying to make out the tiny object.

"They're called tefillin. Little boxes with rolls of parchment with quotes from the Torah. There's another box on the left arm also tied with a strap that winds around his arm to the middle finger."

"Kind of like the rosaries we had to hold when we prayed in my convent school. You had to hold them a certain way and recite the Hail Marys and Pater Nosters in the right order."

"Yes. Everyone has their magic." Najya glanced at the Wall again. The man in the shawl was leaning forward now, his head pressed against the stone. "And their sorrow," she added. "It's a schizophrenic city."

Najya touched her arm again and led her away. Valerie followed, noting that this time it was not just her sleeve that Najya touched. The spot on her arm still felt warm.

A few minutes later they stood under the colonnade and gazed across the court toward the entrance of the famous octagonal structure. "The Dome of the Rock," Najya announced. "Seventh century. One of the most important Muslim shrines. It was built by Byzantine Christian architects, and the Temple Mount beneath it is Roman-Jewish, but who's counting."

At the entrance they took their shoes off, pulled their scarves over their heads, and entered the cool semi-darkness. The dome rose high overhead, drawing the eye immediately upward. Below it, piers and pillars formed a circle around the rock and marked out inner and outer ambulatories. At the center stood the Rock, a heavily pitted granite formation. Najya leaned on the stone balustrade that encircled it. "According to tradition, this is the rock where Mohammed leapt off to visit heaven, along with Moses and Jesus."

Valerie looked around at the circle of archways. "Wouldn't it be wonderful if *that* were the tale that everyone celebrated. Think of how different history would have been." She peered upward, as if through the ornamental tile work of the ceiling she could actually see the three prophets ascend together in a shaft of light. "A nice image. A shame no Muslim Michelangelo ever made a fresco or oil painting of that!"

"Muslim sacred art, such as it is, doesn't portray people, and certainly not the Prophet."

"I understand, but you have to wonder what happened between *that* peaceful image in the Muslim mind and the deep seething anger that's there now?"

"You know as well as I do that the creation of the state of Israel on land that was Palestine created the current rage. But before that colonialism caused it, and before that, the Crusades."

"Crusades? They were eight hundred years ago."

"Don't underestimate ethnic memory. If Christians get emotional about the Crucifixion and the Jews about the destruction of the Temple, how much more should Muslims be bitter about the Crusades, which are historically documented in detail?"

Valerie looked into the middle distance for a moment. "I dreamed once about a crusader. He killed a man in front of me, and I even remember the dead man's name. A merchant, Husaam al Noori. It probably helped that I was dozing in his mausoleum in the tomb of his scribe Sharif al Kitab. Strange that after two years I still remember both names."

They had circled the Holy Rock and wandered outside of the shrine. At that moment, loudspeakers in the courtyard sounded the call to prayer. Valerie glanced at Najya. "Should we leave?"

Najya shook her head. "It's all right. The ones who pray worship mostly at Al Aqsa mosque."

A few men remained in the courtyard. They stood in place facing southeast, with their hands to their ears, and began to murmur . The words were blurred, but Valerie had heard them a thousand times and knew them by heart: "*Bismillah Arrahman Arraheem."*

They strolled to the middle of the square, away from the praying men, and Valerie took up the theme. "I don' t know much about the crusaders. The nuns in my convent school taught that they were heroes and martyrs."

Najya's voice was scornful. "I don't think so. Your own historian, William of Tyre, gives a hair-raising account of the slaughter. I can give you a copy of it, if you like."

Valerie studied the somber , distant expression on Najya' s face. The golden dome behind her caught the midday sun and sent it back in a sudden blinding flash. Awash in the reflected light, Najya Khoury was for an instant surrounded by gold, an icon of Muslim women, aggrieved and mourning.

"No, you don' t have to do that. But on behalf of my European Christian ancestors, I apologize."

Najya smiled gently. "On behalf of my Jerusalemite ancestors, I accept."

"*Jerusalemite* ancestors? I thought no Muslims survived."

"A few did. The emir, for example. My family insists we are his descendants."

"Very impressive. But how—" The "Hallelujah Chorus" sounded in a high, tinkly register . "Oh." She slapped her hand to her belt. "I can't get used to this thing." She fumbled the object of f her belt loop as it chimed "and he shall reign forever and eeeeever…" She flipped it open and held it to her ear.

"Auset? Oh, of course. It would have to be you, wouldn't it? Lunch tomorrow? With the whole family? Oookay. What time? Should I bring something? Uh-huh. Well, then…all right. Yes, that'll be fi ne. Bye." She clapped the phone shut with the same fl ick of the wrist she'd seen Derek use, smiling to herself for an instant as she remembered it.

She directed her attention back to Najya. "So, what's next? Have we seen everything important?"

Najya laughed. "You really *aren't* religious, are you, or you couldn't ask that question. Everything in Jerusalem is important." She looked to the side down the Via Dolorosa. "We haven't seen the Church of the Sepulchre yet. But you know, it's a big church." She glanced at the sky. "And it's getting late."

Valerie touched her forearm. "Oh, I'm sorry. You've given up your whole afternoon for me, and I haven't even thanked you. Well, I'll let you go then. I'm sorry to assume—"

"No, that's not what I meant. It's just that instead of dragging you to yet another holy place, where neither one of us will worship—I thought we could have dinner. I actually live pretty close to the Old City, on Sama'an al Sadek, five minutes by taxi."

With a twinge of guilt Valerie wondered if she could be doing something useful that evening to convince Auset to leave. She couldn't think of anything.

"I'd love to."

39

Najya Khoury

It was a small apartment, Valerie thought. No, she amended, it was more an ordinary apartment made small by the floor-to-ceiling cliff of books on one wall and the clutter of heavy objects hanging on the other one. On the third wall, in front of the windows, a desk was covered with a computer monitor and piles of papers. An equal number was in and around the trash bin.

Najya walked into the kitchen while Valerie perused the library. One whole bookcase held law books: treaty law, Ottoman law, Israeli law, directives of the British Mandate. The adjacent case was more appealing. Half a dozen histories of Jerusalem, in Arabic, Hebrew, and English. Art books, studies of the pharaohs, of the Babylonians, of Fatimed Egypt, of the Crusades.

"Do you read anything past the twelfth century?" Valerie called into the kitchen.

"Yes, on the bookshelf by the window. I hope you like tabouli and babagenouj. It's what you're getting. I also made a salad," Najya called back.

"Sounds delicious." Valerie examined the current reading material: D.H. Lawrence, Finkelstein, Mandala, Reinhart, Chomsky, Pappe.

Najya stood in the doorway with two bottles. "Red or white?"

"Red, if you don't mind. Looks like you're pretty political."

"You think?" Najya poured out a large goblet of merlot, handed it to her, and returned to the kitchen.

Holding her glass, Valerie moved to the opposite wall. An elaborately woven red camel bag hung on hooks, its tassels nearly to the floor. Next to it was a collection of antique weapons. At the top was a Moroccan musket, its stock inlaid with silver. Under its barrel, a hammered metal powder flask hung on a silver chain. Below it was an impressive inventory of blades and scabbards, from full-sized scimitars to sleek daggers and sharply curved Yemeni jambiyas. She took a drink of the wine. "I've never had dinner in a terrorist's apartment before," she joked.

Najya came in carrying bowls of dips, tomatos, pita. "Oh, you like my wall? There's a lot of family history there. The musket, for example, was my great-grandfather's, and the scimitar on top is one of the things my brother brought back from Saudi Arabia. He claimed he got it from a desert sheikh in exchange for his best hiking boots, but with Saïd, I was never sure how much of his stories was fiction." She offered warm pita.

"Your brother. You said he was killed. I'm sorry. That must have been hard for you." Valerie took the bread and a generous helping of each of the dips.

"It was much worse for my father, who had made his peace with the Israelis. He felt completely betrayed."

"What happened? To Saïd, I mean. Tell me about him."

"He was a teacher, you know, at Al Quds University. Middle Eastern history. That's why he traveled so much. He had already published a few things, mostly translations of medieval works. He even found documents that support our family's assertion of being here since the First Crusade."

Valerie began to appreciate Najya's somber nature. What she'd misread as humorlessness was really a too close familiarity with life's brutalities, a familiarity she'd recently gained herself. "How was he killed?"

"He went to Nablus one weekend for a wedding. An IDF tank rolled in for some reason or another while they were celebrating, and the men threw rocks at it. It was a reckless thing to do because the IDF shot back with real bullets. The groom was killed too."

"Gods, I'm so sorry. I know what that feels like. The anger and sorrow together, you just choke on it. All for religion."

Najya cleared away dishes. "Not only religion. After thirty years of wars and intifadas, I don't know anymore where religion ends and greed and vengeance begin. Not to defend religion, mind you." She returned with the wine bottle and directed her to the sofa.

"Well, we've established what kind of Muslim *you* are." Valerie held up her wine glass.

"That's what happens when you let women go to school." Najya laughed softly. "Actually I do know Quran fairly well. My father made us study it. It never seemed to have anything to do with me, though, and the last straw was when I read Sura 53."

"The so-called Satanic verses, about the goddesses Lat, Uzza, and Manat. Yes, they are something of an embarrassment to the infallibility of scripture. A bit like Leviticus."

"Oh, I *am* impressed. A European Catholic who knows Quran. What other surprises do you have?"

Valerie smiled to herself.*You have no idea*, she thought. "Ironically the last time I talked about those verses and those goddesses was with Yussif, the man who was killed in the train explosion. He was still Muslim then and was troubled because he'd seen what seemed like a goddess in the night sky. We all did."

"You saw a goddess in the sky . I wish I'd been there with you. I told you I thought human beings naturally craved moral direction. Maybe we crave sentience in nature too."

"Have you ever thought how you would react if you saw one? I mean a goddess in the sky, or anywhere?" Valerie asked, cautiously.

"Uh, no. I can't say I have. It would play havoc with my atheism though, wouldn't it? Let me know the next time your goddess appears, and I'll tell you then what I think."

"There's more than one, actuallyYou know, in the nature religions, divinity is everywhere." She could feel her face getting warm. It might have been the diffi cult subject and the risk of sounding demented, or the wine, or even the proximity of an attractive woman she had once seen naked.

Valerie had taken pains all evening to keep from staring too long at any one part of Najya' s person, most particularly the golden-tan color of the skin of her neck, or the fi ne bones of her face, or even her narrow hips so flattered by cotton trousers. She glanced around the room. "So many books. Law, history, politics. Some pretty heavy meals here. What do you read for pleasure? Or for solace?"

Najya poured out the last of the wine into both their glasses. "Well, for pleasure I read Arabic poetry. While for solace, I read…" She reached past Valerie's shoulder and pulled a slender volume from the shelf. "Persian poetry. I'm sure you know Omar Khayyam."

"Of course." Valerie leafed through the Persian-English volume. "I only know him in French though. My favorite quatrain is " *Étrange passe la caravane de la vie*."

Najya sat down next to her as she turned the pages and studied the illustrations. "Yes, I like the ones about the caravan and the caravanserai

too. Maybe you're thinking of this one." She reached across Valerie's arm, the heel of her hand lightly brushing the fingers that held the book open at the edge. She leafed through several pages until she found what she was looking for. "See if this one sounds familiar."

Valerie was feeling the effects of the wine now, and the sphere of light in which they sat seemed to detach itself from the rest of the world. The *Rubaiyat* was at the core, drawing them together. Valerie held the narrow volume from below with her palm, and she felt the weight of Najya's hand that rested on it from above. It was almost as if, through the pages of the *Rubaiyat*, they were holding hands.

She licked her lips, tasting the residue of the wine, and began to read out loud.

> *Think in this batter'd caravanserai,*
> *Whose portals welcome and send forth each day*
> *How merchants, scholars, lovers, and their creeds*
> *Abode their precious hour and went away.*

Najya nodded faintly with the rhythm. "It's a nice image, the passing of generations, hundreds of them, from nowhere to nowhere."

"Not to nowhere," Valerie said. "Sometimes the later generation, the hundredth, say, or the two hundredth, may be expected to accomplish something. I, for example, am expected to accomplish something," she said dreamily. "I was supposed to have accomplished it already today."

"How very mysterious you are." Najya was sitting on one hip now, an arm thrown along the back of the sofa. "To accomplish what?"

Valerie already regretted having spoken. She'd been too anxious to interest Najya, who sat so close and smelled so wonderful. But it was a story that she couldn't tell her. "Look, I don't know you very well—and I don't want to involve you in something dangerous."

"Dangerous?" Najya looked perplexed. "How did we get from Omar Khayyam to dangerous all of a sudden?"

"I'm sorry. It was a leap, wasn't it? I just meant, I'm here in Jerusalem because of some generational obligation. And when it's done, I have to leave."

"I hope it won't be soon."

"I'm afraid it will. In just a few days, I think. But maybe we can

see each other again." A crasser voice in her head said *Idiot. Why drag this out? Just r each out and kiss her* . She felt herself staring again, obsessively, at the muscles that swelled so wonderfully around Najya's mouth, drawing attention always to her lips. *No, too soon*. She looked past Najya at the objects behind her.

On a table at the end of the sofa lay something she hadn't noticed. An expensive-looking Nikon with telephoto lens. "That's quite a camera you have there. Do you photograph much?"

"It's Harry's. He lent it to me for a few days. Actually I'm not a very good photographer at all. I just take snapshots to help me remember details. Harry's the professional."

At the mention of the man's name—twice—Valerie felt something inside her collapse and be replaced by..she wasn't sure what. A mixture of embarrassment, anger, even nausea. The cozy flirtatious dinner, the whole afternoon changed meaning. It was all just sisterly friendship, a girls' night out, everything she didn't want. And she had almost made a fool of herself. She looked at her watch.

"I'm sorry if I seem rude, but I have a lot to deal with in the next few days. And I'm sure you do too, so I won' t keep you any later this evening." She stood up.

"Oh, it's not at all late." Najya looked at her own watch. "But I can understand that you might be tired from travel and stress." She stood up next to Valerie. "Look, what about meeting tomorrow evening? I'd like to show you the Pool of Siloam. My grandfather was part of the team that renovated it."

Valerie hesitated. What was the point? Najya belonged to a man and Valerie was on his turf. In another life, before the bloodshed, she might have taken up the challenge, but not now . Now she was under threat and in a hurry. It would only make sense to say no.

"I'd love to. I have a lunch in the afternoon, but we could meet about six."

"Six would be perfect." Najya seemed unusually pleased. "You're going to meet Auset's family?"

"Her grandparents, who are orthodox, so the lunch will be kosher Is there anything special I should know? I mean besides not asking for pork chops?"

They were at the door now "Yes. Don't kiss the host. You Belgians

do a lot of that kissing thing, but it' s strictly taboo here. With men, I mean. So don't kiss any men, ever."

The word "kiss" on Najya' s lips seemed provocative; each time she said it, it was a tease. But Harry' s things were in her house. And Najya was one of Harry's things.

"I'll try not to,"Valerie murmured and walked dazed and confused into the corridor.

By the time she was on the street she remembered why she was in Jerusalem, and bereavement settled over her again like a fog.

40

Let My People Stay

At the last moment, Valerie wondered if she should have brought flowers. And now it was too late. She knocked.

Sephora Ibrahim opened the door. A woman somewhere in her seventies, she bent forward against the door jamb and squinted amiably through thick eyeglasses. Valerie's first thought was Golda Meier, but no, she amended. Sephora had a certain gentle sadness in her face, like a woman who had expected life to turn out differently.

Dr. Foret, please come in." She stepped backward, supporting herself on her cane. "So nice to finally meet you."

As she walked in, Valerie smelled onion and garlic. "Can I help in any way?"

"Thank you, dear," Sephora said. "We have a girl who cooks, and she is taking care of everything." She hobbled ahead down the hall to the dining room.

A man met them at the end of the corridor. Stooped and completely bald under a white kippa, he laid a palsied hand over his heart in greeting. "Itzak Ibrahim, Auset's grandfather," he said in thickly accented English. "Good afternoon, Dr. Foret. Auset has told us about the tragedy of your friend in Cairo. I am very sorry for your loss."

She was touched by his sincerity and by his bringing the subject up at all. He had to have known that Derek was the father of their illegitimate grandchild.

"Thank you, Mr. Ibrahim. I am pleased to be here." She laid her hand on her own heart, hoping that the rest of the evening would not be as awkward. She knew the taboos of conservative Islam, but not of Judaism, and wondered how soon she would blunder.

They entered the large dining room where another man and woman waited.

"This is my son Yehuda, and his wife Hadassah." Itzak's open hand trembled slightly as he pointed with it.

Itzak Ibrahim, with his short well-trimmed white beard and wizened eyes, was as engaging as his son was not. There was a family

resemblance in the eyes, and Valerie could see a hint of Hannah in all their faces. Though both men had declined to shake her hand, Itzak had sparkled warmth, while Yehuda's eyes slid off her and glanced elsewhere.

Hadassah was opaque; her expressionless eyes suggested a woman who pronounced no opinions, although a look of disapproval at Valerie's trousers had fluttered quickly over her face, then disappeared. She resumed unwrapping a large bouquet of cut flowers from a cone of wet newspaper. She had, Valerie noted, the perfect coiffure of an expensive wig.

Yehuda, for his part, wore the same black suit as the men at the Wall and had the same curled *payes* in front of each ear.

Valerie smiled toward her host and exhaled audibly when Auset appeared with Nefi in hand.

Nefi held out her arms. "*Khalti*," she said as Valerie knelt down and kissed her on both plump cheeks.

"Habibti!" Valerie lifted the giggling two-year-old into her arms while Auset brought a high chair to the table from the corner of the room.

The kitchen help brought in the meal and Valerie saw she was not a "girl" at all, but a woman in her fifties, Arab or Druze or—less likely—a poor and secular Jew. Valerie's first instinct was to assist her, but the demeanor of the others—including Auset—suggested they had a long established ritual, not to be interfered with.

With practiced efficiency, the woman swept repeatedly from kitchen to dining room carrying soup tureen, salad bowl, platter of warm pitas, and a wide tray with half a dozen sauces and pastes.

When the table was complete, everyone stood up. Itzak pulled himself up from his chair and spoke the prayer. "*Baruch atah Adonai Ehohenu melech ha-olam hamotzi lechem min ha-aretz*."

Valerie lowered her head in respect and tried to make out the meaning of the Hebrew words. It seemed a simple blessing on the bread.

Itzak lifted his glass of wine to his guests. "To family and friends. It is a blessing for an old man to have so many people at his table."

All sat down again and Valerie said to the host, "It is an honor for me to sit at this table. You are the second Jerusalemite I've met whose family has deep roots in this city."

"Who was the other one, dear?" Sephora asked as she handed around the bread. "Maybe we know him?"

"It is a woman. A Palestinian," Valerie replied, wondering if her remark counted as a faux pas. "Her family name is Khoury."

"Khoury." Sephora was silent for a moment. 'I do know that name. Yes. Someone named Khoury worked on the renovation of the Siloam Spring tunnel a few years ago. It was in the newspapers."

Itzak nodded agreement. "A few families here, Jews and Arabs both, have been in Jerusalem for centuries—maybe a millennium. The historical records say that crusaders murdered everyone in 1099, so the farthest back we can claim to date ourselves is the twelfth century."

Itzak's impish smile reminded Valerie a bit of Yoda.

"I like to think that my ancestor and the ancestor of my neighbor Abdul returned at the same time afterward and have been ignoring each other ever since."

Valerie laughed. "That would have been during the time of Salah-al-Din, wouldn't it? He took back the city from the Christians about a century later."

Itzak twinkled Yoda-like again. "Actually some Jews and Muslims managed to migrate back only a few decades after the fall under the brief reign of Baldwin III. You know, Semitic tenacity—on both sides."

"I should have warned you," Auset said, cutting up chunks of chicken for Nefi . "My grandfather adores medieval history and can match facts with anyone in the field."

"Semitic tenacity. Do you mean of Jews, or of Arabs too?" Valerie risked.

Looking up through remarkably thick eyebrows, Itzak tapped a finger on the table next to her hand to make his point. "Both are Semites, and equally stubborn. That's why neither side backs down. And I know the Arabs have their Jerusalem songs, just as we do. There is quite a nice one, by that Lebanese woman, Fairuz. '*Al radabu…*' He hummed a few bars of a lively tune. Do you know Fairuz? You look a little like her, you know." Sephora cleared her throat and he lowered the wattage of his twinkle. "Just to say I know the Arabs have their dreams and their roots too."

"Roots?" Yehuda took issue. "The roots of the Jews go back over two thousand years."

Valerie felt Auset tense next to her and changed the subject. She

turned to Hadassah. "I noticed the bouquet you were unwrapping. Where do you get such beautiful flowers in Jerusalem?"

"Oh, they are from our own garden," Hadassah said with obvious pride. "My husband grows flowers, mostly roses and carnations. We also have a vegetable plot. I love it that we can grow things on our own land—'make the desert bloom,' so to speak."

"Yes, I can understand that. Cultivating the land makes you feel part of it," Valerie replied politely, though she'd never planted anything in her life.

Yehuda's expression warmed slightly at her remark. "Absolutely. You feel a connection with your ancestors who worked the same soil." His eyes took on a distant look. "And when you feel close to the soil of Israel, you feel close to God." He stared off into space for a moment. "Sometimes I just stop and hold a clump of soil in my hand and say a prayer of thanks that God has brought us back home."

Valerie heard the ardor with which Yehuda had said "soil" and "home." It was a sentiment she would never feel, but could respect. She could imagine him standing, humble, in his garden, and for a moment she liked him. "Where do you live?" she asked.

"In Hebron," Hadassah replied and looked ready to be asked more about flowers.

"Hebron, in the West Bank," Auset interjected. "My uncle's lovely large garden and orchard that were given to him by God used to belong to Palestinians. Apparently God hadn't given it to them, but only lent it for a few centuries."

Valerie lowered her eyes and felt her face warm. Five minutes into dinner and she'd already opened the gate to a minefield.

Yehuda wiped his mouth and beard and laid his napkin down with ominous care. The warmth was gone now from his face. Valerie wondered if she should ask to use the bathroom and stay there until it was all over.

"It makes me sick to hear you always whine about Arab land," he said. "You should be damned glad your mother's family is safe in Israel. Six million others were not so lucky. If you hate your Jewish blood so much, go back to Egypt and put on the veil."

"Yehuda, mind your manners," Itzak said, raising the hand that held his fork.

A small voice in Valerie's head cried, *Shut up! Do not get into this!*

"I'm sorry," she said. "It was Germans—Europeans who committed the genocide. Not the Palestinians." Valerie looked at the pained face of Sephora and immediately regretted becoming involved. It was obviously an old family argument.

Yehuda tried a new tack. "They left a desert and we have made it into a garden." He pointed to the salad. "How do you like our Jewish tomatoes and artichokes?"

"Well, of course you have," Auset returned fire. "But not because of God. Billions of American dollars have allowed you to introduce agro-industry, using water from Palestinian wells. With that much money, the Palestinians could have done it too."

Yehuda opened his mouth to speak, but something clattered on the windowpane like gravel and distracted him.

Obviously relieved to get away from the ar gument, Itzak got up from the table and went to the window . "My heavens. It' s hail! How strange."

"Hailstones? In September? Well, it must be one of those odd summer storms," Sephora said from the table. "It will be over in a few minutes."

Itzak opened the window . "Oh, no!" He shut it as fast as he could, but it was too late. Flies and mosquitoes swarmed in, settling on everything.

Auset waved them away from Nefi's face and plate.

Hadassah laid her napkin over her plate, but fl ies had already landed in the serving dish, and she tried to spoon them out.

Yehuda ignored the buzzing pests. "You had the blessing of being Jewish, but instead of marrying a Jew and having a family like a decent woman, you went your own perverse way. Don't think this family isn't embarrassed by the dark-skinned bastard from a foreigner you have inflicted on us."

Itzak stood up. "Silence! I will not have that talk at my table. All of my family are welcome in my house and in my heart.Where did you learn such hatred, Yehuda? Hatred is not Jewish."

"Please, everyone, sit down." Sephora raised both hands in supplication.

A cry of horror came from the kitchen.

Itzak jumped up again, and Valerie followed him into the kitchen, where the serving woman stood at the sink.

"Blood. Blood came out of the faucet!"

Trickling from the faucet was a thin steam of reddish brown liquid. From a space under the window, flies and mosquitoes continued to find their way in. Itzak turned off the faucet. "Blood cannot get into the pipes. It is rust, or some growth in a broken pipe."

Clearly unconvinced, the woman backed away and seized a broom to swat at the tiny brown frogs that appeared under the sink.

"Come, come. It's only a summer storm." He led them out of the kitchen and sat down again at the table. "Please, children. We are four generations here. Let us have peace together."

With a clap of thunder, the lights suddenly went out. "An eclipse too?" Hadassah asked into the air. The lights flickered for several moments and then came on again. "It's like the plagues of Egypt!" she exclaimed. "What's next, I wonder."

Auset laid her arm over the high chair that held her first-born child. The expression on her face showed that, pious or not, she remembered exactly what came next.

❖

"You were a little hard on your uncle, weren't you?" In the doorway to the building, Valerie slid her arms into the straps of her rucksack. "I should think by now you'd know how to avoid quarreling with him. He's obviously passionate."

"They're all passionate. Israel could have had peace a long time ago if not for their passion. My grandparents are so loving, and all they ever wanted was a nice Jewish family that went to temple, ate kosher, and had lots of grandchildren. Bad enough that my mother married a Muslim. It took them years to get over that." She shook a tiny frog off her shoe and continued.

"But Yehuda has gone in the opposite direction. He's always been self-righteous, but now he's more Jewish than Jehovah. He thinks God gave all of Palestine to the Jews and wants the Arabs to be driven out, end of story."

"Funny, I know a Christian minister who believes the same thing." Valerie glanced up at the sky "Well, the hail cooled things down a little. And the vermin are thinning out, too. Strange storm, wasn't it?"

Auset shivered. "With everything that's happened, I get nervous

at every little oddity like that and wonder if it's directed at us. I mean, it was right out of Exodus."

Valerie scraped a bit of red-brown mold from the threshold. "Here's your 'blood in the water.' Itzak was right; strange weather, but not a plague from the One-God. Besides, if anything, shouldn't the natural forces be more on *our* side? Maybe it's a sign from *our* deities." She slid her foot along the sidewalk and chuckled. "If it is, then all they've done is made everything a little slippery."

Auset laughed softly. "So much for being saved by Rekemheb's gods. They couldn't even get plagues right." She reached over Valerie's shoulder and zipped up one of the pockets on the rucksack, an older sister gesture, although she, in fact, was the younger one. "Look, I've been thinking about what you said—about the judges, I mean, refusing the underworld to Yussif and Derek. It still sounds like extortion, a death threat to their spirits. I don't want to find out that the Egyptian religion is no different from the dogmas that are around here now—that it will make us act like Yehuda."

"I think the Egyptian gods are far too disorganized to inspire passion in anyone. And there's no dogma in animism."

"I suppose you're right, but I still keep imagining Yussif and Derek just waiting—like hostages—for us to do something to help them. So if Nekhbet says it depends on our leaving Jerusalem and finding people crazy enough to join us, then, okay, I'll leave."

"You mean all I had to do to get you to leave was suffer lunch with your uncle?"

Auset chuckled. "Thank you, dear. That *was* a real show of loyalty. But I also called the lawyer, the one whose name you gave me. He said there was no reasonable case Reverend Carter could make to have Nefi removed from her own country and her own mother. So I think we're safe."

"Your parents will be relieved, not to mention the gods of Egypt. When can we leave?"

"Well, my grandmother has to go to the clinic for her leg tomorrow and I promised to take her. I'll fly to Cairo on Sunday. But if Nekhbet really is worried, you can leave ahead of me and take Nefi. My parents would meet you at the airport and take her from there."

"One day shouldn't make that much difference." Valerie glanced at her watch. "Oh, I have to go now. Are you sure you'll be okay? I

mean, I didn't start a new intifada upstairs, did I?"

"No, it's still the old one. Anyhow, Mr. and Mrs. Sunshine will be leaving for Hebron in a little while anywayThey've got nine screaming children waiting for them at home. My grandparents go to bed like birds, at sunset, so Nefi and I'll have a nice quiet house all to ourselves. Go and meet your friend. We can talk more tomorrow." She embraced Valerie a second time and went inside.

❖

In a shop doorway at the bottom of the street, a man watched the two women separate and checked his watch.

41

Siloam

Valerie hesitated on the stairs that led down to the ancient pool. Her mind felt like a room crowded with people arguing past each other: anxious, indignant, bereaved, and all of them filled with a sense of dread. It was definitely not the right time for this.

And what was "this" anyhow? A passing acquaintance, a straight, apparently coupled acquaintance was showing her the Old City. There was no "this."

At the foot of the steps, a handful of people in Bermuda shorts stood around the pool. Then, from behind them, someone waved. Valerie waved back and descended the remaining stairs.

"Hello." Najya Khoury glided toward her both radiant and down-to-earth in a loose white shirt with sleeves rolled to the elbows. She touched Valerie's arm and guided her to the far end of the pool.

Valerie studied the shallow pool, no more than six meters wide and some fifteen or sixteen meters long. At its head, a high archway covered the beginning of a tunnel, and on the far side from where she stood, a stone wall rose several stories.

"I invited you here because my grandfather worked on this tunnel a long time ago, repairing the clay seams. I've always thought of it as ours. My family has been involved in maintaining a lot of the city's sites. I've got keys to just about everything."

"What particular miracles supposedly took place here?"

"None, actually. This was the city's main water source in biblical times. It was surrounded by trees up through the MiddleAges and must have been lovely." She glanced back at the Bermuda shorts group taking pictures. "The tourists will leave in a little while and we'll have it to ourselves. Sit down over here where the stones are flat." Najya brushed off imaginary dirt from the stone next to her. "So, how was lunch?"

Valerie sat next to her facing the pool. "Rather unpleasant, as a matter of fact. By the way, Auset says thank you for the lawyer's name."

"What happened?"

"Oh, it was Auset's uncle. A settler. From Hebron."

"Umm. The ones in Hebron are the worst. Really aggressive."

"He sounded just like Derek's stepfather. Come to think of it, he also sounded like the mullah that Auset's father goes to for advice. They all say the same thing."

"I think we had this conversation before, with fewer clothes on." Najya laughed softly.

In the late afternoon it began to grow dim in the canyon of walls that surrounded the pool. Najya's voice was as velvet as the light. "Have you accomplished what you came here for?"

Valerie took a deep breath. "Yes. I've convinced Auset to leave, so we'll be flying out right away."

"Whatever for? Didn't she also just get here?" Najya leaned forward, setting her elbows on her knees. "Is this connected with the two deaths? Please tell me if I can help with something. I thought we'd gotten to the point where you knew that."

As she spoke, the sun dropped behind the city walls, and for a moment, the cavern they were in was plunged in gloom. Then a row of lanterns flickered on along the four sides of the pool. They bathed the area in a soft orange glow that created an atmosphere of trust and intimacy, a place where one could say anything.

Valerie studied the dark, intelligent face. "Look, if I told you something bizarre, something that flies in the face of your knowledge and common sense, would you be able to suspend disbelief long enough to hear me out? I mean before you decided I was a madwoman and ran for your life?"

"Hmm. Excellent opening line. Well, to be honest I couldn't imagine running away from you under any circumstances. Besides, you're a well-known scientist, accomplished, brilliant. I could trust you quite far."

Valerie stared into the dusky tunnel and chose her words. "In the tomb," she began cautiously, "for which I am so 'well known,' I uncovered…well, forces. Entities that you would never expect, that don't fit in with anything you know."

"Are we talking about the supernatural here?"

"Well, I suppose… Let me start again. Certain elements of the ancient Egyptian theology are in effect, although we tend to see through them. That is, nature itself, on occasion, manifests itself in

personifications, and the Egyptians recognized them. They gave them names, portrayed them as half human and half nature, mostly animals." Valerie stopped. "This is the point where you get up and leave, right?"

"No, no. Still suspending disbelief here. Please go on." Najya's expression was studiously neutral.

"Well, I thought at first I was hallucinating. Believe me, I'm an atheist and a scientist. If anyone did *not* want to acknowledge the supernatural, it was me. But the four of us—a Christian, a Jew, a Muslim, and an atheist—all saw them. Anyhow, they want to come back, those gods, and they enlisted Auset, me, Derek, and Yussif to make that possible."

"And you learned all of this in the tomb?" Najya asked in a neutral journalist interview tone.

"No. It took a while to piece it all together, and in fact, we had hints much earlier, when Nekhbet began appearing."

"Nekhbet? Who's that?" Najya was leaning on one arm now, lightly brushing against her, and Valerie felt the warmth between them. She frowned, perplexed. She was being mocked, of course, but only gently. She was also being listened to, and she desperately needed to talk.

Valerie took a breath. "I guess I have to start further back. Nekhbet is the Vulture Goddess of Upper Egypt and one of the two divinities. The other one is Wadjet the Cobra, who protected the royal line. You can see their heads jutting from the front of the double crown of the New Kingdom pharaohs."

"And what is Nekhbet's connection with you?"

"Apparently, I'm supposed to be the chronicler, and so at the behest of the scribe god, Nekhbet was supposed to protect me. However, she hadn't shown up for two years, that is, until Yussif was killed."

"I see," Najya said slowly. "So you came to Egypt and now are in Jerusalem, basically on behalf of these polytheistic forces. And these forces are connected in some way to the deaths of Yussif and Derek?"

"It seems that way. And these forces, or rather the single force that stands to lose from the return of the nature gods, is the sun god. The ancient Egyptians called him the Aton."

"And the Jews called him Jahweh."

"Yes," Valerie said tentatively, then frowned. "You're taking this very well. I can't believe I convinced you so easily."

"Oh, I'm not convinced at all. It's total madness. But it *is* possible to have a rational conversation about the irrational. Even if this is all pure dementia, it' s consistent, and interesting. But going along with your story so far, I see that you have a problem."

"I have lots of problems."

The velvet voice laughed softly. "The one I mean is your choice of city. If you're trying to escape the One God, the one who gets to have His pronouns capitalized, you've fl ed to the mouth of the wolf. From the time that the temple mount was simply Mount Moriah, this city has been full of One Gods, all forms and permutations of Him, in every brick and stone. There was a short period under Tiberias when the Romans built a few pagan temples. But under Constantine, it was the One God again."

"You know a lot about Jerusalem."

"I told you, my family has been here for a thousand years, give or take a few. Remember, the family legend has it that one of my ancestors was here at the time of the First Crusade."

"That's right. The emir, you said." Valerie felt the conversation leading off on a tangent, but at least they were talking.

"Yes, Idris ad Dawla was allowed to leave with a small contingent. My family descends from him, and a lot of the men in the family carry the name Idris." Najya tilted her head toward her. In the cooling night air, Valerie could smell the faintest hint of perfume. Najya had put perfume on. For her. The full lips, a handsbreadth away, moved, and finally their sound reached her ear. "You were saying? About the Aton?"

"Well, that's it, basically. The Egyptian gods want to be recognized again, and we four were supposed to let the world know about them. Except that two of us are dead because of that mission, and if I tell this to anyone but you, I'll be laughed out of the profession. Even you're barely holding back a laugh. I can sense it."

Najya leaned back a fraction, leaving a space between them. Valerie felt the cool evening air on her suddenly exposed skin. "Y ou can't sense *anything* about me," Najya said.

"No. I'm sorry. I guess I don' t. It's just that I care…about you." She avoided the dangerous word 'for.' "I don't want you to run off until you know everything."

Najya leaned in again. "Listen to me. I know all about you. I covered the story of your discovery. I know it took you years of research

because I read your articles. I know that while you were mysteriously absent, your supervisor was killed in a sandstorm, and when you just as mysteriously came back, you oversaw the cataloging of Egypt's greatest find of the century. One does not laugh at someone like that."

She paused, the touch of her arm underscoring her support. "Besides," she said brightly. "There's a fantastic story here. And there's no way I'm leaving you until I find out what it is."

"And you don't think it's 'famous archaeologist loses mind'?"

"Could be. But whatever it is, I'm staying around for it."

"What about Harry?"

"Harry?" Najya seemed perturbed by the leap in logic. What's Harry got to do with anything?"

"Well, you have his things. You're sleeping with him," Valerie blurted.

"Slept with him. After a few beers on a hot day. Why do you care? Besides, if he hadn't gotten me the assignment in Cairo, I wouldn't have covered the train wreck and I'd never have met you. Being with him meant nothing. That sort of thing never means anything."

Valerie leaned back against the tunnel wall. "You're not in love with him?"

"In love?" Najya shook her head. "Romantic love may be a Western myth. How would you know it's love, anyhow, and not just sex?"

Valerie closed her eyes, remembering. "He…she…would be an obsession. Every event would be colored by the thought of them. Everything you saw or did you'd want to tell them about. Everything *they* did you'd want to know about." Her mouth curled up on one side. "Although it sounds a little stupid when you say it all in the plural."

Najya's voice was barely audible. "I've only ever felt that about you."

The remark was so matter-of-fact that Valerie almost missed it. "Me?" She studied the enigmatic Arab face. In the low light of the pool, it reminded her of a Bedouin woman.

But Najya Khoury was nothing like the Bedouin. "Since you found us in your room in Cairo, I've thought about you," she said.

"You knew who I was then, didn't you? Did you also know my… disposition?"

"Yes. Rumors of that sort spread quickly in journalistic circles. And then when I saw you in the hammam, well, of course I couldn't

help but think about…that."

"As I recall, we talked about religion."

"Did we? I don't remember. I kept trying to imagine you. With a woman."

Valerie leaned away in mock horror. "So while I was waxing philosophical, you were playing a dirty movie in your head."

"No, not exactly. I wasn't quite sure what women did, I mean beyond kissing. It was a sort of idee fixe, but I could imagine it only so far."

"Idee fixe," Valerie murmured. "How charming to hear French spoken with an Arabic accent."

They had run the subject to its end and both fell silent, looking away from each other. The orange ground lights reflected off the water of the pool and flickered like candlelight below their faces.

Najya chuckled softly. "If you were a man, you'd have kissed me by now."

"Please don't tease me, Najya," Valerie whispered. "I've got all the uncertainties I can handle right now."

"I'm not teasing. For the first time in my life I'm deadly serious. I just don't know how to do it."

"Do what?"

"Make love to you."

The words hung in the evening air like a fragrance. Valerie let them linger and settle around them. For a moment the declaration blocked out everything else in the world and created a precious private space. Then she breathed out softly, "Come back to my room with me and I'll show you."

"I think it begins something like this." Najya's mouth suddenly covered hers.

Valerie responded tentatively, with little explorations of lips and teeth and tongue. She stopped and broke away for a moment, for the sheer excitement of starting again, this time more ardently—offering, taking, giving back again.

Valerie touched the warm face, let her fingertips drift down to the pulsing throat. Their mouths began a sort of wordless dialogue, and they grew to know each other by degrees, each venturing a bit, then opening to the other.

Najya's hand slid over her ribs and up her back, enfolding her and

she felt Najya's breasts press against her own.

Valerie waited for the familiar rush, the sudden hot tightness in her sex, and the ur ge to take, quickly , before opportunity passed. But something unfamiliar happened. something drew her in, to a gentle back and forth in which she seemed to slowly lose the outline of herself. Like being underwater, in the embrace of something that was scarcely different from herself, drawing breath from it and giving it back.

She ceased to care about the danger and the dread, and surrendered to the thing that summoned her.

It was, a small part of her recalled, a little like the time she died.

42

Deus Lo Volt

Ludolf stood next to Godfrey of Bouillon on the highest platform of the siege tower. Still outside the range of Saracen arrows, he watched the battering ram roll up against the southern gate. Under the hide-bound wattle that covered them from arrows and flames, the rammers warmed to their task. Ludolf saw the end of the log as it swung back for each blow. The ironclad head, he knew, ate away at the wood with every thrust, and each deep thud seemed to reverberate through the ground and up to his own body.

"Like deflowering a virgin, isn't it?" Godfrey quipped.

Ludolf chuckled softly. "A Saracen virgin."

"We'll make her Christian soon enough," the duke said.

"Yes, and on this day above all. Friday, when they crucified our Lord. This could be the very hour of His death. How fitting that today we make the heathen answer for that sin."

"Well spoken, Ludolf. I will remember that," Godfrey said before his attention was diverted to the Muslim prisoners being dragged past them. "You know what to do, sergeant," the duke called down to the men below.

"Yes, my lord." The soldiers knocked the two captives to the ground and trussed each one compactly, knees to chin and arms around their shins. While they thrashed uselessly, the Frankish soldiers lifted them into the baskets of the catapults. At a signal from the duke, the counterweight was dropped and the men thrown high into the air. They tumbled as they arced, and if they screamed as they crashed onto the city walls, the sound was covered by the cheering of the Franks.

Then the siege tower was pushed forward. When it came into range, flaming arrows rained down on them, but the water-soaked hides kept them from igniting the tower.

It seemed like hours but was only a fraction of that when they reached the wall. Arrows flew at them like locusts and soldiers fell on both sides, but miraculously, Ludolf remained unscathed, though sweat and smoke stung his eyes and he could scarcely see. The wall was close,

so close, yet too heavily defended to permit a foothold.

Then finally it happened. "Look! Praise God. They're ablaze!" Ludolf pointed to the nearby tower on the wall where heavy smoke had caused the defenders to fall back.

"Who will be the first Christian on the wall?" Godfrey shouted, his heavy sword over his head, poised to strike the first Saracen within reach.

"Ludolf of Tournai!" He called out his own name as he leaped onto the wall. Euphoric, he slashed left and right as he ran, and neither arrow nor blade touched him. In a moment, the assault ladders were thrown against that part of the wall, and scores of Franks joined him on the parapet. Jerusalem was breached.

❖

Praise God! The Holy City was free!

Every Saracen man, woman, and child fled weaponless toward the Temple Mount, and Frankish soldiers struck them down at will. But Ludolf knew a city does not surrender until its ruler does, and Idris ad Dawla still held out within the Citadel.

Archers and knights were on the Citadel wall, but Raymond of Toulouse had told them to stand down. Ludolf threaded his way through the fighters to the cluster of knights at the forefront. At their center stood Godfrey of Bouillon and the white-haired Raymond of Toulouse.

"Ah, here is the first Christian knight to enter Jerusalem." Godfrey clapped him on the shoulder. "Have a care, my friend. Ad Dawla and his guard have retreated to the safest spot in the city and are shooting arrows from the tower. But don't worry. My Lord Count of Toulouse will have them cleaned out in no time." Then he turned and, to Ludolf's surprise, descended the stairs again with his knights into the city.

An arrow whizzed downward past Ludolf's head and struck a soldier on the wall behind him. He lifted his shield to his shoulder and waited for the count to reply. But Raymond was watching the streets below where troops under the other nobles were pillaging freely. One by one they seized the houses, great and small, and set the standards, banners, and shields of the new owner upon them to mark the claim.

"We're wasting our time here," Raymond said as a second arrow flew over his head. "I'm for leaving them in their tower to starve. What

do you think?"

Ludolf looked up at the impregnable structure. Vultures wheeled around it as they circled now above the entire city. He shook his head. "If what I've heard is true, that will take months. The tower holds vast stores. And as you can see, those archers' openings look down on all four sides. I don't think you want your men shot at every day."

"We can't leave him there and we can't force him out. What's left?" The count leaned his back against the crenellation in obvious frustration. "I suppose we can offer him safe passage in exchange for surrender. I doubt he'll trust us, though." He crossed his arms across his blood-soaked tunic. "I wouldn't."

Ludolf took a step forward. "He should. On this glorious day for the True Faith, let us be men of honor."

"Of honor?" For the briefest moment Raymond's brow furrowed at the word, while below the platform on the streets the armies rampaged. Then it passed. "Well said, Ludolf. Now, let's get this over with." He signaled to his sergeant. "Make the offer."

The sergeant shouted up to the tower and in a moment a voice came back. "For all of us? On your soul before Christ?"

Raymond shouted back, "Yes, on my soul before Christ. We are men of honor. Come down to the platform and we'll talk."

For a long time there was silence, and the vultures neared. One flew down to light on one of the merlons and would not be driven off. A soldier swung his blade at it and it fluttered away, only to light again on a ledge midway up the tower.

Then the narrow door at the base of the tower opened and four archers appeared, weaponless. When it was clear there would be no attack, they called back and four more joined them.

Finally, Idris ad Dawla, the Emir of Jerusalem, stepped out, and the Franks murmured among themselves. He had obviously fought on the ramparts, for his green satin sleeves and the tail of his bright turban were splattered with blood, and his face was sooty from the smoke.

He held his sword by the blade out in front of him, its ornate hilt tilted toward the victor, and he looked around to see to whom he should present it. Raymond of Toulouse stepped forward and received it with a slight dip of the head. With the brief surrender done, the last of the Saracens stood in the doorway, one woman in boy's clothing and another in a dark abaya carrying an infant.

Ludolf drew a sharp breath. It was the witches from the shepherds' pool.

"Your Lordship." Ludolf was suddenly hoarse. "Would you grant me one small boon, for being the first man on the wall?"

Raymond looked perplexed. "This is a strange time to ask, but all right. A boon. What would you have?"

Ludolf pointed toward the more voluptuous of the two, the one who carried the child. "I want the woman. That one."

❖

Faaria blinked against the harsh light as she stood in the tower doorway. The blurred figures silhouetted against the low afternoon sun slowly came into focus. Soldiers in chain mail and tunics bearing the dreadful blood-colored cross stood in a semicircle around the doorOne of them, white-haired and gaunt, and far too old to be in an army unless he led it, already held the emir 's sword. She did not know his name, only that now he held their lives in his hand.

She studied their alien faces. Under their unkempt beards, their faces were ruddy, at once pale and burnt by the sun. One of them, with yellow hair, stared more intently than the rest—and she recoiled.

It was the man who had attacked them at the pool of Siloam. Behind her, Amhara seized her arm at the same time.

The Frankish leaders spoke among themselves and reached some agreement. Ad Dawla stepped back and laid his arm around Amhara, who clutched Reni closer to her chest. Faaria realized that they were being negotiated for.

The white-haired one said something with the wave of a hand, and the blond knight seized Amhara's arm. She jerked out of his grasp and he reached for her again. Husaam lunged at him, Sharif directly behind him, but before they could take more than a step, two arrows flew with a sudden sharp sound. One pierced Husaam through the back, the arrowhead jutting out through one side of his chest, and he twisted sideways. Sharif cried out as the second arrow pierced his upper arm. Both men fell in front of her, Sharif to his knees and Husaam onto his back.

Husaam lay between brother and sister, gasping in shallow blood-frothed breaths. He whispered "Remember me," and his eyes rolled

back in his head. Wounded himself, Sharif leaned sobbing over the merchant's chest.

The knight had once again claimed Amhara and held her by her hair. Suddenly something large and black flew in his face. A vulture from the tower attacked him, curling its claws into his chain mail. It hung tenaciously for several minutes and pecked at his face.

Faaria and Amhara huddled together against the tower wall, awestruck. Someone shot the vulture with a crossbow and it flew away again, the iron bolt protruding from its body.

Then Faaria watched, paralyzed, as the knight reached in front of her face and snatched Amhara's baby by the arm into the air.

In a terrible long moment every perception struck her with crystalline precision: the orange afternoon sun, the acrid smoke that wafted up from the street, the distant savage sounds of the pillaging army, the closer voice of the Frankish commander that called out "No!" and the sight of the terrified baby dangling in the air over the battlement wall.

43

Countdown

He stepped out of the shower, his skin tingling pleasantly from the harsh scrubbing he had given himself. He dried his legs and feet so that he would not track water on the rug in the other room, then took another towel to finish the job in front of his bed. The clock on the nightstand read 10:30 p.m. He was right on schedule.

He glanced around as he toweled his back, making sure he hadn't forgotten anything. The room was spartan in the extreme, the way he liked it. That made it all the easier to scrub clean, which he paid extra to have them do every day. He hated dirt, which seemed to encroach on him at every unguarded moment.

He'd laid out his clothes on the bed and stood naked before the dresser mirror admiring himself. A real man's body—no doubt about that now. He was slightly aroused from the shower and from anticipation, and he knew he'd stay that way until the job was done. It would be his best performance. All three of them at once, if everything worked out. But the first two alone would be all right too. That would give him the chance to hunt the worst one of all, his prize, and she'd know the whole time that he was after her.

His clean socks and shorts emitted a faint scent of chlorine, reassuring him they were clean. It felt good to pull his shorts over his semi-erection, as if they were holding in his rage that he would soon release. He put on spotless khaki trousers, sharply creased, and a new white shirt. Tonight would be his tour de force, after all, and he wanted to look good.

He lifted his valise from the floor and emptied it of the tools he had used the previous night to break the lock on the iron gate. He replaced them with a flashlight, lengths of cord, paper, and pencil. Clean white paper. He debated for a moment whether to write the message himself. No, it would be much more convincing if the stupid woman wrote it. Her own shaky scribbling would be a powerful lure.

He was pleased with his choice of location. Would she appreciate the irony, he wondered. A dawn sacrifice to both the sun and the Son.

Too bad that everything would be wet from the pest-fi lled rain. He hoped he wouldn't catch a cold.

Last of all he laid his automatic pistol inside and zipped the bag shut. His shoes were polished, but he wiped them once more with a tissue before he put them on.

He left his room and bounced down the stairs with the light step of a cheerful man. The lobby was empty, he was pleased to see, except for the owner's cat, which jumped up on the counter just as he arrived. It raised a paw, maybe to scratch him and maybe not; he didn't wait to find out but swatted it with the back of his hand.The cat flew backward with a yowl and caught him with a single claw on his knuckle. A tiny bubble of red swelled from the puncture wound.

"Shit!" he yelled as the cat bounded away . Now he'd be of f schedule. He hurried up the stairs to his room again and kicked open the door. He took his shirt of f carefully so as not to stain it. Then he lathered his hand halfway up his forearm and held it under water as hot as he could stand. The last thing he needed was a damned infection.

Hurrying again through the lobby that was empty now of man and beast, he resolved to kill the cat when he returned. That would teach it.

44

Ecstasy and Agony

Valerie lay with her head next to Najya's shoulder and watched the rise and fall of her breasts as she slept. Stunning breasts, full and bronze, that swelled upward from the curve of her armpit and tilted outward, inviting caress. She studied the long muscle of Najya's neck that extended up from the collarbone to her ear, holding the gorgeous head that faced away from her. A swath of jet black hair lay across it, individual strands of it quivering each time Valerie exhaled.

Awestruck, she recalled the moment before climax, when she understood the meaning of "blood like wine," for every cell of her had been intoxicated. Then the airless peak when she had no words or even breath, only the heart-stopping rush when flesh seemed to ignite and all else disappeared.

But lovemaking had not stilled her desire, as it should have, as it always had before. It made her hunger more for Najya, for ever greater closeness, until she could inhale her, drink her in. Even now, after they had brought each other to ecstasy again and again through the hot night, she longed to press her mouth once more over the soft slippery places and to hear Najya moan with need and pleasure.

What was it then that percolated through contentment and still troubled her? How could a night of unebbing passion not make her happy, except that it demanded more of her than she was used to? It was as if something precious had been given to her, and now she had to guard against losing it. Something precious. Yes, that was it, she grasped in the last moments of consciousness. Her lips close to Najya's ear she whispered, or perhaps only thought, "*Je t'adore*" and slid again into the warm pool of sleep.

❖

The fluttering of wings penetrated her unconscious. Then the sound of her name called out—unmistakably—in anger. She opened her eyes—and sat up abruptly, holding her sheet to her chest.

"Nekhbet!"

The goddess took form beside the bed, so close that she had to look down. She was sheathed, as always, in a dress of countless minute black feathers that shimmered ominously. "You are ever following your appetites," she said coldly.

"And you are ever invading my privacy when I am satisfying them," Valerie countered. She glanced at the sleeping Najya, then questioningly at Nekhbet.

She shook her head. "She should not waken yet."

Valerie frowned. "Why not? Why don't you reveal yourself to her? Then you'd have your convert. She already half believes." She looked again at the sleeping Najya, who lay facing her on the pillow, as if she listened.

"No," Nekhbet said a bit too abruptly. "The gods cannot live on revelation. Not even the One God does that any more." She watched Najya for a moment. "Only what comes from the believer with its own force can sustain us, not her groveling before a spectacle. But you turn me from my purpose."

"Your purpose? Would that be to explain why you've abandoned us?" She lifted her watch from the nightstand and saw it was a little after 10:30 p.m.

"I warned you to take them away from here."

"I did what you wanted. I convinced her to leave. But it takes a few days to arrange."

"A few days is not soon enough. Every hour threatens. You must get her to leave immediately."

Valerie saw Nekhbet's glance travel down from her face to her exposed shoulders and chest. For two years she had hungered for just such interest, but now it confused her. "Why is Jerusalem any more dangerous than Cairo, where Yussif and Derek were killed?"

Nekhbet's expression grew cool again. "Because the Aton is all-powerful in this city. He can harm you only through his agents, but the worst of them is here. We do not know who that is, but we sense the malevolence that stalks you."

"You only sense it? Hell, I sense it too." Valerie snorted. "You really don't know any more than I do."

Nekhbet's lips pressed together slightly, as if unwilling to release

the distasteful words. “About your world, no. That is our weakness. The workings of this age are…bewildering. We only know the past, in its vast depth, and in painful detail.”

“Well then, you might have told me more about it. I had to figure out myself that we aren’t the hundredth generation of the prophecy. We aren’t, are we? Who *were* they, anyhow? *When* were they?”

A wave seemed to pass through the shimmering blackness that covered the goddess. “It is true. The prophecy has failed—repeatedly. You are only the newest attempt. We no longer count them. But the hundredth generation was the first attempt, and it failed in this city. It failed *because* of this city.” She paused as the announcement sank in. “If you have the stomach for it, I will show it to you.”

“Show me? Oh, you mean the way you showed me Egypt once.” For a moment Valerie held Nekhbet’s glance and felt a shiver of excitement.

“With the god’s kiss, yes.” She glanced again at Najya and her eyes darkened. “Though you seem to prefer the more carnal sort.”

Valerie looked back and forth between goddess and the woman sleeping by her side. “You don’t like her, do you?”

“She is nothing to me. Leave her for a moment and come here. I will give you the vision.”

Valerie hesitated, then drew the sheet up on her chest. “I don’t think so.”

Nekhbet said nothing, but exuded exasperation. “Do not be coy. This is a truth you must see.”

Valerie pulled the sheet higher. “Can’t you just *tell* me what they did wrong?”

“They did nothing wrong. It was *my* error, a disastrous one, born of the belief that revelation alone would be enough.” She gazed out the window into the Jerusalem night. “It is not.”

Then, astonishingly, Nekhbet knelt beside the bed. Valerie drew away. As much as she resented being abandoned, she also did not want to surrender again, to be emotionally overpowered by Nekhbet and hungry for her all the time.

“Please. Just tell me,” Valerie repeated softly. She felt Najya’s shoulder press against her back, but still the other woman did not wake. Not even when Nekhbet’s arms rose and the white-nailed fingers caressed Valerie’s face for a moment. Then, with what almost seemed

like passion, the divine mouth pressed hers again urgently and without tenderness. Valerie felt sudden scorching desire rush through her like flame through tissue, and she slipped into unconsciousness.

❖

She circled high overhead, held aloft on shafts of air warmed by the fires below. She saw that the walls had been breached and columns of smoke were scattered throughout the city. The invading armies poured inside, first through one opening and then from all sides. The blue or white tabards of the foreigners streamed like flecks of pigment along the narrow streets, confronted and then mingled with the motley colors of the defenders before advancing farther. The cries of clashing armies, of victory by one, for mercy by the other, rose up to her.

The smoke blew eastward and she dropped lower, sweeping in a wide arc over the western end of the city. Though the cries of slaughter rang from the streets below, on the Citadel walls there was a curious calm. A group of knights stood below a tower, and one of them called up to the defenders within. Soon they came out: eight men, their leader, then common folk: two men and two women with a baby.

She understood in an instant what she saw. It was the gods' Child, long prophesied and now manifest and surrounded by her family. But the gods had known too late of the malevolence that would sweep down from the north, and now the Child was caught in the sea of its rage. Did the invaders know what they had stumbled upon, or could the Child still be saved? Already a knight had seized the mother, but she resisted him. If he took her, both she and the baby were lost. Something had to be done instantly.

Surely, she could enlighten him as she had done countless dynasties of pharaohs. She was a goddess, he a mortal, no matter the force of his inspiration. She plummeted, catching her talons in his chain mail. The force of her fall drove him to his knees, and he thrashed until she found an opening to give him the god-kiss. It needed only the briefest touch of her beak. She showed him everything in a single vast landscape, letting the truth wash over him, and she knew he had the vision; she could feel him shudder with it.

On the one side wooded hills rose from a fertile valley cut by a river; on the other, savannah gave way to tundra and windswept dunes.

From one end to the other, the land teemed with life. Buffalos and gazelles grazed near spotted leopards, and even in the dry lands, rodents and reptiles crept among the tenacious brush. Overhead, birds swooped and cried out, their plumages of every color the eye could know, and below them, insects swarmed with their own melodies. Everywhere was sentience, and nature in its plenitude breathed welcome.

Framing the tableau like sentinels, the sister goddesses watched, the snake Wadjet and the vulture Nekhbet, each one with a woman's face and each one upon her tree. Between them on the shore stood Rekemheb, and the Child in his arms grew from baby to radiant womanhood. She stood for a moment with open arms, encompassing all around her.

The knight shuddered again, and the vulture waited for him to grasp that she had shown him paradise. Yet he resisted and his spirit thrashed, and she could not fathom why.

Valerie saw through Nekhbet's eyes and also through her own, tainted by the bitterness of the father's line, and Valerie understood. The embrace of nature held no comfort for the Christian knight. In his eyes it was not epiphany but nightmare, and when he dropped to his knees, flailing, his soul was not enlightened, but appalled.

Before him, rising up from a shore, the landscape seethed. Every soulless creature of the fallen world—horned beasts, great spotted cats, and countless wild things—crept toward him. Snakes, lizards, toads slithered among them, while overhead crows and predatory birds circled and shrieked. Even the trees hissed threats, while the wind and the water over which he floated were full of menace.

At the forefront stood a dark-skinned man, nude but for a white kilt and shorn but for a single braid on the left side of his head. The devil surely, and the creature that sprang from his arms and grew to womanhood before his eyes could only be his spawn.

Then revelation came. Yes, it was the devil's portal; there was the proof. On his left side stood the forbidden tree, the woman-headed serpent twisted in its boughs, and on his right, the black-winged Angel of Death.

It was the garden of temptation, and the creatures calling to him were the enemies of God. Yet they were beasts, and God had given him dominion over them. As if in confirmation, the sphere of light

behind him gave forth the one command: "Silence them that rise up against me."

Then Nekhbet/Valerie felt the iron bolt shoot through her, and she was torn loose from the howling knight.

She fluttered upward away from the other arrows and, aghast, saw the knight lurch to his feet and snatch up the Child. He held her for a heartbeat out over the wall. Then, while the mother shrieked he let the infant drop onto the stone pavement to be crushed under the horses' hooves.

Convulsed with horror , she ascended again above the Citadel and flew over the city in the spasms of death. She hovered over the Frankish knights as they slaughtered every creature in their path: Saracen, Jew, and Byzantine, everything that was not like them. Small groups huddled in the doorways or fled into the houses, mosques, and temples, but always they were found and hacked to death. In the narrow passageways where the blood could not escape, it gathered into pools from the dismembered bodies and stained the horses' hocks and the stirrups of the knights.

Then finally it was dusk and the Frankish men could no longer see friend from infidel. They sheathed their swords and set to looting what had not already been claimed.

The vulture looked again to the Citadel and watched, choking with sorrow. On the ground where the Child had been trampled, jackals had gathered. They did not eat, but took the broken infant body in their jaws and trotted off. Then, by evening light, the victor and the last defenders crossed the same stone courtyard.

They passed before her in a brief cavalcade, black forms against the blood red sky. The Frankish general led them, his protective banner over all the others. Behind him, the emir led the refugees: eight weaponless guards and the two women, who rode together on one horse. The one in front rode silently; the other sobbed, collapsed against her back. Last of all, in angular silhouette, a man perched high on a camel, its white coat, even in the darkness, outlining the bulky camel bags that hung on its side.

45

Allies

Defeat, expulsion, night. She thrashed, wracked by silent sobbing and by the iron bolt that pierced her chest.

The innocent Child, their hope for all the world, was crushed in an instant because of her . She had misjudged the immutability of his rage and had provoked him to infanticide. Her heart broke at the realization.

The vulture's kiss had killed the Child.

❖

"Valerie. Wake up. What is it?" A familiar voice penetrated the pain. Hands caressed her face and she opened her eyes.

Najya reached across her and switched on the table lamp by the bed. "You were crying in your sleep, habibti. What's wrong?"

Valerie sat up, shaken, and ran a hand through her hair that was clammy with sweat. "I saw it," she said hoarsely. "It was awful."

"You had a nightmare, that's all."

"No. It wasn't just a dream." She rubbed her forehead and looked inwardly for a moment, then took a long breath. "She was right. If I had known, I wouldn't have had the stomach for it."

"She? Who? What are you talking about?" Najya was sitting up next to her now. With the sheet across her waist, she looked as she had in the hammam. How much had happened since then, ten terrible days ago. Valerie was still reeling.

"I'm so glad you're here." She leaned her head on Najya' s shoulder.

Najya kissed her hair, then her eyes. "I'm glad I'm here too. I told you I'd follow you." She stroked damp hair out of Valerie's face. "Talk to me."

Valerie pressed the heels of her hands over her eyes, piecing together the images. "I saw…" She stopped, then started again. "Jerusalem had fallen. The last Saracens were fighting from the tower

in the Citadel, and the crusaders convinced them to surrender. The emir of the city, his guard, and two women came out. Two men also, but the crusaders killed one of them. The baby too. Oh, Najya, they killed the baby."

Najya was silent for a moment. Then, she spoke quietly. "You can't have known that. History books only talk about ad Dawla and his guard. Nowhere do they mention the women or the baby. How could you have dreamed what only my family knows?"

Valerie drew her knees up and rested her forearms on them. "I keep trying to tell you. It wasn't a dream. It was from Nekhbet. She was here, while you slept. And if you accept a dream that's impossible, why can't you accept the possibility of Nekhbet? At least for the moment."

Najya leaned against her. "All right. For the moment. I'm sorry. I promised to suspend disbelief. Tell me more about the…scene. We'll figure this out."

Valerie stared blankly into space, letting the images emerge from memory. "There were the crusaders: Godfrey of Bouillon, Raymond of Toulouse, I think. I remember *their* names from history books, though. And I read about the emir, though I don't think I ever knew his name. The ones who surrendered, does your family story tell who they were?"

"The emir was called Idris ad Dawla, and he is the ancestor I was telling you about. We don't know the name of the two women, but they were his wives, one of them presumably my maternal ancestor. The other two men were merchants, at least the one who was killed."

Valerie took her shirt from the end of the bed and pulled it on as she stood up. She pushed the hinged window out as far as it would go. A slight evening breeze blew in, relieving the stuffiness of the room.

"There was another scene, at dusk." Valerie stared at nothing and tried to recall the details. "All of them were leaving the city, all but the one who was killed. The emir, the women, and another man behind them riding a white camel and carrying…I don't know. Something large and bulky in his camel bags."

"Yes, he appears in my family story too. A merchant, or scholar, and what he carried out of the city—stolen or rescued, I don't know—were books, precious manuscripts. They made him rich when he returned to Egypt. If you dreamt all those details, it is beyond coincidence. What else was there?"

Valerie closed her eyes. “The slaughter” She shook her head to try to dispel the memory. “Jackals had gotten into the city somehow , and they were carrying away the baby’s body. She brooded a moment. “Of course,” she whispered, “that’s what she meant.”

“Darling, you’ve lost me again.”

“The Child of the gods was killed here in Jerusalem, by fanaticism, and by…a misunderstanding. And nothing has changed today but the degree of bloodshed. We have to send Nefi back to Egypt immediately. I’ll go and get her tomorrow morning.” Valerie took Najya’ s closed hand and brought it to her lips. “Habibti, I swear to you…on what we shared last night, I’ll be able to prove all of this to you eventually. But for now, you have to trust that what I tell you is real, however bizarre it sounds. Lives depend on it!”

Najya covered Valerie’s hand with her own. “Because it’ s you, and because of last night, I believe you.”

They both startled at the sound of knocking at the door.

46

Malleus maleficarum

Itzak Ibrahim stood in the hotel corridor, eyes directed toward Valerie's feet in apparent embarrassment at standing before a strange woman's bedroom. One hand lay over his heart in a gesture of apology; the other held a rolled piece of paper.

"Forgive me, Dr. Foret, for disturbing you in the middle of the night, but my granddaughter is missing. I wanted to call the police, but I found this." He unrolled the paper with palsied hands and she took it from him.

Alarm struck her at the first line. She struggled to keep her own hand from shaking as the various possibilities flew through her head. One thing was certain though; it wasn't a police matter.

"No, it's not necessary to call the police. Everything's fine," she lied. "I'm sorry that she's caused this unnecessary concern. It looks like a mutual friend of ours has had an emergency and she's gone to her. She probably didn't want to disturb you."

Itzak raised his eyes from the floor for a moment, registered shock at her scant covering, and dropped them again. "But why didn't she leave a note in a language I know?"

"I…uh…I'm sure she didn't expect you to find it until the morning. She must have thought you'd simply telephone me and didn't imagine it would cause you so much worry. It was foolish of her, and I'll tell her so."

Appearing to be reassured, he made a slight bow and backed away his hand once again over his heart. "Then I'm sorry to have bothered you, and thank you for your help, Dr. Foret."

"That's quite all right, Mr. Ibrahim. Please don't worry. I'm sure everything's fine. Good night." She shut the door and listened until she heard no more sound of him outside. Then she spun around. "Najya, this is it. This is the test of how much you trust me. Gods, how I need you to trust me."

"Test? What's going on?" Najya stood by the bed, the sheet wrapped toga-like around her. "The note. What does the note say?"

"She wrote it in French or , more likely , someone forced her to write it. I don' t even think she speaks French." She unrolled it again under the table lamp.

"*Ils seront sacrifiés—lorsque Aton sera dans les cieux. Là ou le Messie un jour apparaîtera. Là même, la décendance de Rekemheb s'éteindre à jamais."*

"I'm sorry. My French isn' t that good." Najya leaned over her shoulder.

"They shall be sacrificed—when the Aton rises in the sky. There where the Messiah will one day appear. Thus is the line of Rekemheb extinguished forever." Valerie sat down on the bed and read the note again to herself. "It' s an announcement of an execution, just what we were talking about a while ago."

"I don't understand."

"Auset and Nefi have been kidnapped. Whoever has them is going to kill them when the sun comes up. And they forced her to write this note specifically for me."

"How do you know it's not an ordinary psychopath?" Najya began to get dressed.

"He calls the sun the Aton, a term that hasn' t been used in three thousand years." She read the letter for the fourth time. "'There where the Messiah shall one day come in.' What does that mean?" She clenched and unclenched her hand.

Najya stared out the window that overlooked the dark city. "This city has got messiahs and prophets everywhere," she muttered. "Via Dolorosa, Church of the Sepulchre, Bethesda—"

"But wait." She turned around. "The Messiah is supposed to enter the city one day through a double archway called the Golden Gate. All three religions see it as the place of Last Judgment. The Messiah is supposed to open the Gate of Grace for the Righteous and the Gate of Mercy for the repentant sinners."

"Can you get us through it? You must know how."

"No one can go through it, and you can' t even see it from inside. It's a big hollow block. It's got a flat roof, an interior with nothing but columns, and the outside wall has been bricked up for centuries."

"All the easier to hide someone there, then." Valerie pulled on her trousers and tied her shoes while she talked. "We'd better hope they're there. We haven't got time to search the whole city."

She reached into the bottom of her knapsack and lifted out a small holstered revolver. She opened the cylinder, confirmed that it was loaded, and closed it with a flick of her hand. "I hate carrying this," she said, hooking it onto her belt. "The last time I took it out, terrible things happened. Still, there's no way I'd confront this madman unarmed, whoever he is."

Najya took a step back. "A pistol? My God, Valerie. Why can't we just call the police?"

"I told you this was a hard test. The police can't help. It's bigger than that." She fished out a small flashlight, clicked it on to test it, and slid it into her pocket.

The corridor was poorly lit, the hour late so that only the night lights were on. "It's not a simple kidnapping by a lunatic. Yussif and Derek were killed by the same person who smashed Rekemheb—and for the same reason."

"Rekemheb?" Najya stayed at her side as they descended the main stairs to the empty souq. "Isn't that the name of the priest whose empty tomb you discovered?"

The door to the hotel swung shut behind them and left them in the midnight alley.

"It wasn't empty. He was there. Not just his mummy, but also his ka—his spirit. I told you this was going to require a lot of suspended disbelief."

"No more than the rest of the Egyptian theology that you've already gotten me to suspend it for. So what has destroying Rekemheb got to do with the kidnapping?"

The tin shutters that covered every shop in the tunnel-like Souq Khan al Zeit gave back a faint echo to their footfall and voices.

"He's the link. When he was alive, as a priest in the court of Meremptah, he heard the prophecy that his descendants would bring the gods back. The sequence of attacks—first on his mummy, which killed his ka, and then on the two fathers—shows that someone, something, is set on wiping out all his descendants."

They emerged from the tunnel onto the Via Dolorosa.

"Wait. Descendants?"

"Derek, me, and ultimately Nefi, the Child. And I'm sure now that Nefi is at the heart of it. Someone is removing the rest of us, one by one, to get to her."

Rats scurried along the sides of the narrow street just ahead of them as if to clear the way of obstacles. They quickened their pace.

"But why Nefi? She's just a baby."

"No, she's not. She has a connection to the wild things that the rest of us don't have. More importantly, she inherited some kind of mission that we don't understand yet. Nekhbet presented her to the gods the night of her birth and said the Child would always be under her wing. But I can't see what good it's done. It hasn't kept her from being kidnapped."

They were almost running now.

"I know a way to the gate that won't attract any attention. This way." Najya pivoted right onto the Al Wad and left on the Aqabat Tekeyah. "We have to go across the Temple Mount."

Inside the grounds of the Dome precinct, Valerie felt less visible. Though the vast open court off to their right was bathed in light, and the golden dome itself shone, the row of trees along the north wall behind the lamps afforded them cover. Where they ran on hard-packed soil they made speed, but where they met stone, they had to slow to keep from slipping. The rain and infestations of the previous day had made every exposed surface slick with slime.

Then they were on open ground again, grass-covered, exposed, but no one apparently bothered to guard empty space. Somewhere a dog barked but, mercifully, not for them.

"There it is." Najya halted suddenly, panting. "The double portal," she said between breaths. "Still waiting for the Messiah."

It rose high and dark overhead, more a massive stone tower than a gate and scarcely welcoming, for man or god. Its two inside portals were covered by rusted iron gates that stretched from ground to archway.

Valerie shone the flashlight beam through the bars into a cavernous space. Two rows of columns supported the roof, and nothing inside moved. "There doesn't seem to be any place to hide people. Is there a warden's room anywhere that I can't see?"

"No, only a stairwell to the roof."

Valerie ran the flashlight over the entire gate. "Look, the lock's been cut. I guess that gives us our answer. They're here."

Najya tugged vigorously on the iron rim. The gate swung toward them with a metallic groan, scraping along a groove that had been made earlier.

Inside the gate chamber the fl uttering and squeaking in the darkness told them that small creatures fl ed from them along the fl oor and overhead. The columns cast ominous shadows that moved like wheel spokes as the fl ashlight beam swept across them. Against the far wall, the outline of the exterior gates curved over their two walls of bricks.

Valerie tried to imagine the hall fi lled with joyful celebrants shouting and throwing palms as the Messiah entered. The pretty image was difficult to sustain in sight of the grime on the walls and the smell of mold. The whole city smelled musty now, she noted, since the vermin-filled rain.

"There's nothing here…and no place to hide," Valerie concluded.

"Except in the stairwell, over there." Najya pointed toward a narrow door in the farthest corner. They shone the light beam through the doorway and, pivoting around, up the stone staircase. Then they heard it. Laughter.

"So. You solved the puzzle," a male voice called down to them in English. "Well, it wasn't a very difficult one. Come on up." The faintly accented voice sounded familiar.

As they climbed the stairs, Valerie drew her pistol and held it behind her. She stepped out onto the rooftop, her foot slipping out from under her for a second on the slimy surface so that the fl ashlight beam went wild. Then she caught her balance.

For a moment she saw only a black form silhouetted against the paler night sky. Valerie swung the light beam on him.

"What the hell?"

47

Ils sont Sacrifiés

Najya walked toward the hulking figure in the flashlight beam. "Harry? What is this? What are you doing?"

"Hello, Najya. You're looking good. How's your new girlfriend treating you?" He moved slightly to the side of Auset, who was tied up at his feet. Nefi squatted petrified and silent next to her mother, clutching her arm.

Najya stopped, her eyes seeming to measure the distance between Harry and herself, between him and the edge of the roof. "You haven't answered my question."

Slightly ahead of her, Valerie also stopped, acutely aware of the fact that she and Harry both had guns. But hers was pointed at him from a distance while his was pressed directly against Auset's head. "What's this all about? What do you want?"

He laughed out loud. "So many questions." He turned his face into profile for a moment, like a preening film star. "You still don't recognize me, do you? Well, I always was the handsome younger brother. Volker was the odd one, and ten years older."

"Brother?" It took Valerie a moment to absorb the information. "Volker Vanderschmitt had a brother?"

"Yes, I'm surprised he never mentioned me." For a second, the sarcasm left his voice and he seemed disappointed. "Well, no matter. The important thing is that he knew what you were—and how dangerous—and he died trying to stop you." He raised his free hand to shield his eyes. "Take that light out of my face or I'll shoot it out."

She dropped the beam to his chest, and by the ambient light she could still see both his face and his crouched victim.

Auset sat effectively immobilized, her hands tied under her knees. A cloth gag covered her mouth, though it looked as if she'd managed to work her jaw halfway free. She watched the exchange between Valerie and Harry, but made no sound.

Valerie concentrated on his face. He *was* better looking than his

Akhnaton-faced brother, but his cold, dead expression seemed far more ominous than Volker's aloofness.

"But you must know, he died in a sandstorm outside El Khar ga. There was an investigation afterward. It was in all the papers."

"He was eaten by vultures," he answered in a monotone.

"I'm sorry about that. But it's what happens in the desert."

"He followed you there, but you came back, and he didn' t. Don't lie to me like you did to all the others. I know the real strory . You were under his authority, but you didn' t like it. Instead you went on a rampage, and when he tried to rein you in, you killed him and left him for the vultures. Did you think there would be no consequences?"

"Rampage? What are you talking about? It was nothing like that."

He seemed only then to take note that she pointed a pistol at him. "Put that stupid gun down. Kick it off the roof, or I'll put a bullet through her the way I did Derek." At the word "her" he pressed the tip of his automatic to the side of Auset's head.

Jolted by the murder confession, Valerie searched for alternatives and found none. No matter how accurately she aimed, it would not be good enough, while *his* shot would be deadly. She laid her pistol down in front of her and nudged it over the edge of the roof with her foot. She heard Najya exhale in a sigh that spoke for both of them. Now all they had were their wits.

"He was killed in a sandstorm," she persisted. "I wasn' t even there. And besides, what have Auset and her baby got to do with what happened to Volker?"

He snorted. "Did you think this was all just a little vendetta? Revenge for the family honor? Oh, no." He expanded his chest and set his pelvis forward like a gladiator stepping into the arena. *Morituri salutant*, she thought, ironically, but he was there to do the killing, not the dying.

"I know about this sick little religion you're trying to get started. Animal worship. Something we left behind us thousands of years ago."

"How do you know about that?" Valerie was astonished. "Y our brother didn't know anything about it. Nobody does."

He smiled coldly, obviously pleased at being able to surprise

her. “Volker wrote me about you stealing the mummy. He was sure something strange was going on, and he was getting close. That’s why you killed him, isn’t it?”

She shook her head. “You’ve got it all twisted around.”

He continued, ignoring the remark. “After I found out about it, I began to do a little research. About the excavation, about you, and one thing led to another. I’ve been following you for two years.” He tilted his head back, to deliver the last blow. “I even read your demented manuscript.”

“My chronicle? That’s not possible.”

“Of course it’s possible. How many drafts did you go through and discard before you submitted it?”

“You went through my garbage?”

“Never mind how I got it. But it revealed everything about you and your filthy cult.”

His words hit her like a blow to the chest. He was the first person, the only person, to read her revelation. He was the test case. “But if you read the manuscript, then you know how your brother died. You know everything! You know about Rekemheb and the coming of the gods!”

Her head began to swim. Was her chronicle so inept that it could convert no one—just another fantasy novel on the market? She would have been humiliated if fear had not taken up all the room in her mind.

“Yes, your lunatic fantasy. It made my skin crawl to read it. I smashed your mummy just to prove nothing would happen, and I was right. You didn’t even notice. To get you here, I had to move down the list to the next one in your little family of perverts. Two of you queer, and *this* one…” He pushed Auset’s head again with the gun barrel. “Fornicating with a black man. And your talking animals. Do you think anyone is going to believe that crap?”

She tried another tack. “If it’s such crap, how is it harming you? Why are you so worked up about it?”

“Because it’s evil, and somebody will always fall for it. For generations my family has fought for the right—in the military, the government, even in the church. I may have been slow to accept the family mission. I was a weakling, a pretty-boy. But Volker’s death changed everything. It made me a man—a man who had the courage to deal with you and your sort.”

"My sort?" She tried not to look at Auset, but out of the corner of her eye she could see that she was slowly changing position, preparing something. Harry didn't notice.

"Yes, all of you 'rights' screamers. Immigrants, feminists, eco-terrorists, homosexuals. Now your little cult wants everyone to become atheists and worship animals. You won't be satisfied until you've dragged us all down. Someone has to stop you."

"Stop us from what, exactly? We haven't done anything." She was stalling now, letting Auset do whatever she was planning.

"From increasing your disgusting little cult. No more children of Rekemheb—no more cult. It's as simple as that."

He glanced toward Najya. "Sorry you had to get mixed up in this, but you were a very good lure. And now you've gone and become a believer, haven't you?" He shook his head. "Women are so gullible."

Najya seemed dazed. She stared at him, engaging him. Nothing in the world seemed to interest her at that moment but Harry. "Yes, it *is* a pity. We had something good there in Cairo, didn't we?"

Auset, meanwhile, had drawn up one leg until her knee touched her chest.

Najya's voice went dark and velvety, and the still night air carried it to him. "All I believe in is my work. You should know that by now. But Cairo *was* good. I'd hoped we could do another assignment together." She edged sideways, causing him to pivot around and put Auset directly behind him. "It's a shame we can't…"

Valerie saw the ploy and edged to the right as well, holding his attention.

He was clearly flattered, just enough to be off guard for a moment, and as he tilted his head again for his reply, the gun barrel dropped a few centimeters. "I guess there's something about a real man. Women always like—uff!"

Auset's foot had shot out suddenly, knocking his leg out from under him. He caught himself right away and only went to one knee, but in the few seconds it took him to refocus, they were on him.

Their combined force threw him backward onto the ground. He still held the gun but could not raise his arm. Valerie lay across the right side of his chest and grasped his wrist. She pounded it on the brick until he lost his grip and the pistol slid off his palm to lie between little pink shoes.

Furiously, he arched his back and managed to roll toward the left, but Valerie and Najya still held him fl at to keep him from scrabbling back toward the weapon that lay at the feet of the child he planned to kill.

Auset thrust her chin out and freed her mouth from the gag. "Pick it up, darling," she said, sounding both soothing and ur gent. "Ummi says it's all right to touch. Pick it up, habibti."

Timidly, Nefi grasped the gun with two hands by the barrel and held it in the air like a tomahawk.

Harry was on hands and knees now, dragging himself toward her. His outstretched hand was a few centimeters from the little feet. "Throw the gun over the edge, darling. Throw it away . It' s nasty . *Bisurah*! *Bisurah!*" Auset urged.

Thrown of f balance by the weight of the gun, Nefi toddled awkwardly toward the edge. "Be careful, don't go too far," Auset called after her "Put it on the ground, habibti, and push!"

Harry rolled onto his back again and managed to free one arm. He delivered a powerful punch to the side of Valerie's head, stunning her, then slid out from under her and Najya and flung himself toward Nefi.

He snatched the pistol by its handle with a grunt of triumph, but his momentum carried him to the edge. He tried to crouch again to slow himself, but the mold-covered bricks gave him no purchase, and he flailed as first one foot, then the other slipped over the edge. In a last desperate movement, he grasped Nefi 's arm and pulled her with him into dark, empty space.

48

Heartbreak

Nightmarish. They hurled themselves down the stairwell to the inner gate, then dashed along the inside of the city wall all the way to the next opening at the Lions' Gate. Hysterical, inconsolable, Auset staggered behind them, gasping, her incoherent sobs reduced to a desperate wet breathing. The run seemed to take forever.

From the Lion's Gate they doubled back along the same wall on the outside of the Old City, stumbling over the irregular ground. Valerie rushed ahead with the flashlight, pushing all thought from her mind.

At the foot of the double gate was a Muslim cemetery surrounded by an iron railing. Valerie cleared it, barely breaking stride. The others followed a minute later, and the three of them ran stumbling among the ancient tombstones.

They found him immediately, at the foot of the wall, the hollow at the back of his skull revealing how he died. Valerie might have felt a twinge of sorrow for him if his death had not also been a murder. She swept the light in a circle around him, her chest aching with dread. But she found no small broken body near him.

"He had her by the arm. She can't have fallen anywhere else. Or crawled away," Valerie added, sickened by the thought.

Auset rushed among the stones calling her baby's name, sobbing, dropping to her knees, then staggering to the next dark spot.

Valerie saw no point in trying to hold her back. They were all living the nightmare vision she had seen just hours before. The shattering thought came to her. Were they forced actors in an ever-recurring tragedy, the casting of the gods' Child from the adversary's walls onto the rock below? Would it always end this way?

Najya leaned over Harry's body again. "Wait. Look at his right hand, the one that grabbed Nefi. He's holding something else." She pried the object out of his clenched fingers and Valerie shone the light on it.

The white plaster statue of Venus de Milo glowed up at her. She turned the bottom up and saw her own name. It was the statue that

Derek had given her, the one that should have been at the bottom of her backpack at the hotel.

❖

"That's impossible."

Najya took her by the shoulder. "Didn't you say that Nefi was 'under Nekhbet's wing'? Couldn't she have taken her in some way—and left this to tell us where?"

"Take her? How? Snatched her out of mid-air?"

"I don't know. But she's a goddess. Can't they do things like that?"

Valerie winced with uncertainty. Could it be that simple? What if they were wrong and Nefi lay somewhere, critically injured, in the darkness? Could they leave her there while they followed some vague promise? Valerie felt madness creeping in. "Where, then?" she almost whined. "What the hell sort of clue is the Venus de Milo? We're in bloody Jerusalem, not Paris."

Auset still scrabbled around in the brush, calling Nefi's name, choking.

Every sound pierced Valerie's chest like a blade.

Najya clasped Valerie's hand that held the tiny statue. "Listen to me. You said trust is everything. You said that Nekhbet had sworn to protect Nefi 'under her wing.' Isn't this *your* test then, and not mine? If you trust her and her promise, then the Venus is the message. And if it's not, then we both go back to being atheists."

"All right. All right. So tell me." Valerie's hand was shaking. "How is Venus the message?"

"This is a long shot, but there *is* a Venus temple—at least the ruins of one—in Jerusalem."

Auset sat now, her arms around her knees, trembling. "What if she's here some place? A baby's bones are soft. She could still be alive. I won't leave her. It'll be morning soon. We'll be able to see her."

Valerie looked back and forth between them. Go or wait? Her brain felt torn in two. Finally, she crawled over in front of Auset.

"We were made a promise, and this promise is everything. If it's true, we'll find Nefi. You were at Dendara. You saw Nekhbet carry Nefi on her wings. That's got to mean something. This is the test for all of

us—to remember that night." She paused for a breath and said, with a certainty she did not feel, "Nefi is in the Temple of Venus."

Auset was limp, seemingly incapable of willful response. She covered her face with her hands, her pale fingers jutting through the strands of her disheveled hair. "All right," she rasped weakly. "I'll go."

Valerie looked toward Najya, who, of all people, had argued Nekhbet's case. "And where might that temple be?"

Najya was already on her feet, brushing dirt from her trousers. "Under the Church of the Holy Sepulchre."

49

Church of the Sepulchre

I can't believe you have the key to the Church of the Sepulchre," Valerie said.

Najya stood before the wide wooden door of the portal and tried to fit an iron key into the lock. "I told you my family's been part of this city for generations. My father is one of the doorkeepers." The key refused to turn and she yanked it out.

"A Muslim with the key to a Christian church?"

"It's been that way since the Middle Ages. A Muslim porter locks the great doors at night and opens them again in the morning. The same two families have been doing it for centuries."

"Please…hurry." Wild-eyed and disheveled, Auset rocked from one foot to the other, her hands clenching and unclenching like restless things.

Helpless to assist otherwise, Valerie glanced around the courtyard, surveying the surrounding buildings for signs they might be watched. All was silent. She directed her attention back to the portal. "It doesn't look much like a church."

Najya chose a second key. "It's really a collection of chapels, sanctuaries, tombs, and shrines. And six different sects maintain them." The second key head was also too large.

"Damn." She let the second key fall back on the ring and tried a third. "It started with Constantine, who sent his mother Helena to pick a spot for a church. She chose the Temple of Venus, she said, because she found a piece of the True Cross here. A coincidence, of course."

"Please. Can we skip the history lesson and just get inside?" Auset pressed her forehead on the oaken door as if she could will it open.

The key slid into the aperture and Najya turned the lock slowly, exhaling relief. She opened the door, wincing as it creaked at every centimeter.

The interior was dimly lit from bronze lamps that hung in a row of truncated amphorae over a wide stone. The moment they were inside

they heard the sound, the musical murmurings of a chant from the western end of the church.

"I was afraid of this," Valerie whispered. "All-night service."

Najya listened for a moment. "It's from the rotunda," she whispered back. "We should be okay. We're going in the opposite direction." She led them to the right, along a dark corridor Halfway down, they passed a stone formation that jutted up through the floor to the ceiling and formed a portion of the church wall.

Valerie stopped and studied the pale, pockmarked formation. "What's this? A rock in the church?"

Najya stopped next to her. "You *are* a terrible Catholic. That's Calvary, where they crucified Him."

"Please, can we hurry?" Auset rushed ahead of them, then waited, rocking with impatience for Najya to lead the way again.

"It's that way, around the ambulatory." Najya led them past another dark chapel on the right. A narrow staircase lay just ahead at the foot of the curve.

"We have to go through the chapel of St. Helena right below us. There's a smaller chapel below that, where she supposedly found the True Cross. Any Roman ruins will be there."

"Maatha tafaalani huna?" a gruff voice called out, startling them all. The speaker stepped into the light, a black-clad, heavily bearded orthodox priest. He switched to English. "What are you doing here in the middle of the night?"

Najya recovered first. She produced a press card, which would have been unreadable in the poor light even if he had accepted it, which he didn't. She assumed a measured tone, both apologetic and self-confident. "Excuse us, Father." She added his ecclesiastical title. "I am Najya Khoury, daughter of Shafiq Khoury ibn Idris, the doorkeeper. We are doing historical research and were trying not to disturb the service."

The priest was unimpressed. "At 2:30 in the morning, the church is not open for anything but worship. Not for anyone. The doorkeeper knows that. You will have to leave—both of you."

Both? Valerie resisted the urge to look around for Auset. "Uh…we do apologize. Both of us."

"This way." He extended a black silk-encased arm in the direction

they had come. “Immediately—or I will call for assistance.”

Najya was the consummate professional. “That won’t be necessary, Father. We were finished anyhow and can show ourselves out. Thank you for your help.”

“This way,” he repeated the gruff command, urging them ahead of him down the ambulatory to the portal, then out. Behind them, the bolt slid into the great lock with a thud of finality.

Valerie leaned against the door. “This nightmare just won’t end. And poor Auset. She’s hiding some place, half mad, and now locked in. We’ve got to get back to her somehow.”

Najya fished out the key ring again and slid one key after another along the metal loop. Finally she held up a small one, half the size of the portal key. “I thought this was here. It’s the key to a maintenance entrance on the other side. It will get us in, but we’ll have to get past the service again.”

“Then we’d better hurry.”

❖

They crept from column to chapel to column again, trusting in the fervor of the worship service to keep attention away from them as they flitted along the periphery. Every bend and corner in the church held danger, and they did not dare to use the flashlight.

“So now, here we are, back in the corridor where we started, and without Auset,” Valerie whispered. “And what if we’re wrong? It tears my heart out to think we might have brought her here for nothing, while Nefi is lying outside the walls.” She covered her face for a moment. “Gods. How could it have come to this?”

Najya took her by the arm. “Don’t mourn yet. Down there is the Chapel of St. Helena, and it’s even lit.” They were on the stone staircase now, and her voice echoed slightly against the stone walls.

At the foot of the stairs they looked up into a large square crypt. Its roof was supported by four inner columns that formed another square at the center. High overhead, small semicircular windows looked out at ground level on three sides. Dozens of bronze amphorae hung on chains from the ceiling, though none gave light. Rather, a soft glow emanated from the massive glass chandelier at the center and from small lamps

attached to the two chapels on the eastern side. The floor was covered with an elaborate mosaic.

"One more level down—at least." Najya pointed to narrow stone steps that dropped into darkness. She took a turn with the flashlight and clicked it on as they descended.

At the bottom, she swept the light beam in a wide curve. It illuminated a roughly cylindrical space carved in bedrock. The rough-hewn rock was covered with Plexiglas panels. Directly across from the stairs was a tiny chapel with a simple Latin altar and, above it, a large bronze statue of a woman holding a cross to her shoulder.

"No chance that's Venus, is there?" Valerie remarked.

"No. More St. Helena, of course. This is the place she's supposed to have found the cross. Grim, isn't it? But this is where it stops." She strode to the near end of the row of Plexiglas panels. "But behind this partition is an opening to yet another chamber, maybe several. Archaeologists know that they're here, but the religious groups that control the church aren't interested in excavating them. They're pre-Christian."

Najya was already wedging herself behind the first panel and shining the flashlight along the rock ahead of her.

Valerie followed and edged forward in the darkness behind her. She heard Najya's sudden intake of breath, then the clattering of the flashlight falling on stone. They were engulfed in blackness. "What's wrong, Najya. Are you all right?" Blindly, she slid along the rock face. Her right shoulder slid off the wall into a vertical opening, and she dropped to her knees. She groped helplessly in the darkness until she felt a curved back. Najya was kneeling.

"What is it?"

Valerie bumped her head on the rock, but forced herself to calm, to wait, feeling Najya, seemingly unharmed, under her hands. Then her eyes began to adjust to the darkness, and over Najya's shoulder she could slowly make them out. Finally she heard their voices. Her fear and dread evaporated in an instant, and she too broke into tears of relief and gratitude.

50

Temple of Venus

Valerie found the flashlight finally, clicked it on, and pointed it toward them. At the center of a circle of broken columns, Auset stood with her arms around both her living child and the one who held her, the ka of Yussif Nabil. On both sides of them, like best men at a wedding, were the kas of Derek and Rekemheb. They turned slowly and gazed unblinking into the light.

Derek had on his dark "church suit," though his clean white shirt was stained at the front with a wide circle of blood. Yussif was in the galabaya he'd worn on the fatal train trip to Luxor and would wear now forever. His face was expressionless, as always, behind his beard, but his eyes glistened with tears. Nefi 's head was on his shoulder , though she slept, and her feet dangled under his forearm in little pink shoes.

Derek laid his cheek onAuset's head and placed a kiss somewhere in her wild hair , then looked again at Valerie. "Hi, sweetie," he said quietly.

"So, it was you after all." Valerie entered the cave-like chamber and embraced him, tingling when her cheek touched his, as from a faint electric charge.

"What did you…? How is it possible…?" she sputtered.

The ka of Derek Ragin chuckled softly and took both of her hands in his. "Calm down, girlfriend. We'll explain everything."

She stepped back to appraise him. She could see the dif ference now between him and Rekemheb, though the ka radiance shone from both of them. "I see you made it past the judges after all."

His mouth twitched toward the side. "Only just. The scales doomed us both for our heavy hearts. Jehuti spoke for us, but even he had to make a deal with the judges. He promised them a new believer to show the prophecy was still on, but of course that depended on you." He hugged her again. "I knew you could do it."

"You've answered one important question. No, you don't need to be mummified."

"Yes, but since we're not,Yussif and I are sort of temporary We're

going to need some statues quickly before…you know. Before we fall apart." His eyes lit on Najya, who still stood, frozen, at the entrance. "Who's your lovely friend, sweetie?"

"Oh, I'm sorry." Valerie took Najya by the arm and drew her forward. "Derek, may I introduce Najya Khoury: journalist, Jerusalemite, and…the believer who saved you. Najya, this is Derek Ragin, my opera-singer friend. And that…" she nodded toward the embracing couple. "That, of course, is Yussif."

"Hello, Najya. Welcome to our side." Derek leaned over and kissed her lightly on the cheek.

She jumped at the spark of contact with the afterlife and drew away. "A pleasure, I'm sure. But you know. I'll…just stand over here out of the way while you all get reacquainted." Her glance slid to Yussif, who still whispered comfort to Auset, then to the third apparition.

He was bare-chested, as always, with his hands behind his back, but the smile on his usually somber face was new.

"Najya, this is Rekemheb, Priest of Hathor and our ancient ancestor, Derek's and mine."

"I finally meet your mysterious priest. Hello." Najya offered her hand.

Rekemheb took the hand, which seemed to send another jolt of otherworldliness up her arm, and bowed from the waist. "We have been doubly blessed. Our new sister is also very fair of face."

Najya smiled uncertainly, then glanced sideways at Valerie. "Is he flirting with me?"

"Maybe. But I don't think he's right for you. You know…dead and all." Valerie addressed the ka again. "Why didn't you show yourself in your tomb? I was certain the statue ceremony had failed."

"I could not. I was too far gone and I had no substance. I gathered it slowly, but it was days before I could even move an object. And I had to do that, a very precious object, as you saw. That was more important than comforting you."

"The amulet. That was you, then. In the museum."

"Yes, to keep it safe for the Child. We could no longer leave it with you."

"Why not?" She dropped her eyes as the answer became self-evident. "Oh. You expected me to be killed too, is that it?"

"I'm afraid so," he said with unexpected candor. "Auset had just

fled to the city of the Aton and you would soon follow. We could not protect you." Then he added, "It was Nekhbet's wish."

"Ah, Nekhbet. Of course." Then she heard the fluttering in the next chamber, and at the edge of the circle of light she saw the great black wing.

"Nekhbet."

At the sound of her name, the goddess made a faint gesture, the smallest motion of her hand, and the chamber glowed. No lantern was visible, but the walls themselves emitted a soft amber light. Nekhbet stood before what might once have been a statue, but only the plinth remained.

Valerie ventured into the second chamber and confronted the familiar harsh beauty. She understood Nekhbet now and grasped the fragility of the prophecy. It could fail. It *had* failed once; she had seen it through Nekhbet's agonized eyes.

They were like an old married couple that had come full circle. Valerie had passed through desire for the Bedouin, to abject awe of the goddess, to recriminations, and finally to a deep, abiding sympathy She no longer needed Nekhbet to love her back.

"The hieroglyph for 'protection.' I understand it now." She let herself fall into the fathomless coal black pupils. "I wish I could have seen you snatch her out of mid-air."

"I was not always so skillful," Nekhbet replied with quiet remorse.

Najya had followed Valerie into the second chamber and now stood beside her. She stared, rapt, at the entity who seemed to stand, but, in fact, hovered a centimeter above the ground.

The moment was as intense as it was awkward, and the air crackled, with what? Jealousy? Confusion? Valerie thought of the scene in the hotel room. She shook her head, shutting an internal door on the whole painful dynamic, and extended a hand in each of their directions.

"Nekhbet, this is our first new believer, whom you have…uh… seen before. A journalist. As the Book of the Dead says, she 'lives on truth, and none may testify against her.'"

"Be careful where you walk. This is a hallowed place." Nekhbet's reply seemed a non sequitur, and Valerie was disappointed. But then the goddess dropped her eyes to look between them, and her expression changed to tenderness.

Nefi stood there, looking somber and troubled, as no two-year-old should ever be.

Valerie and Najya both made way for her, and she placed herself directly before Nekhbet. Taking hold of the black feathery garment just above the divine knee, she tugged gently, her little lips trembling.

"Netjeret nebu. Tcheni," she intoned solemnly.

"What's she saying?" Najya whispered.

Without taking her eyes from goddess and Child, Valerie whispered back, "She said 'Where is the yellow bird?' Don't ask me what it means."

"It is there, darling." Nekhbet pointed to a corner of the chamber, to a stone tablet that lay flat on the ground. Covered with dust and streaked with the damp soil of the chamber, it had escaped their notice.

"Lift it up," she said to Valerie. "Please."

Najya and Valerie knelt by the tablet and brushed the dirt away from its edges. When they had exposed enough of the stone to take hold of it, they wrenched it upward onto its side. In the hollow of packed earth beneath rested a simple wooden box.

"Open it," Nekhbet said softly.

Valerie pried up the cover with shaking hands—and nearly dropped it again.

A tiny skeleton lay curled at the center. Its skull was cracked, and the tiny bones of its hands were still closed into fists. Its tattered smock, hidden from the light for centuries, still had its rust red color. At the front, an embroidered panel showed a yellow bird in flight.

Valerie felt a wave of unendurable sorrow.

"The hundredth generation," Nekhbet said.

"I know." Valerie touched the smock with the tip of her finger. "So this is where the jackals brought her. I'm glad." She closed the coffin again and laid the tablet tenderly back in place. There would be no need to ever open it again.

Nefi stood now at the foot of the gravestone, her own fists clenched against her chest. She began to cry, with the weak, fearful sound of an abandoned baby. Behind her, Auset too looked ashen.

"Do not cry, Child." A male voice suddenly spoke. Rekemheb had entered the chamber, and his customary faint radiance seemed to increase at the center of his chest as he wafted near. He knelt on one knee before Nefi and carefully uncurled one of her fists.

"The bird you dreamt of is not gone," he said soothingly. "Look." With that he scooped his hand into his own glowing chestWithdrawing it, he held a bird, the size of a small parrot and as radiant as he was, perched on his knuckles. "You see, it is my ba."

Nefi stared at the creature, eyes glistening, then held out a fi nger to touch it.

Rekemheb smiled with both his faces, on his ka and on his ba. "Now I will show you something even better."

With a deft twist of the wrist, he seemed to set his ba-bird on some perch back inside himself. He held out his empty hand for a moment, like a magician about to do a trick, then slid his fi ngers into the same place on her chest as he had on his own.

Enchanted, Nefi looked down as Rekemheb withdrew his hand and held it up to her. A budgie-like creature glowed at the center of his palm, lighting her face like a lantern from below. She watched it, rapt, her mouth forming an "O," then kissed its narrow head. The ba-bird opened its wings slightly and fluttered.

"This is yourself, my precious one, and this is how you will come to us one day. But not for a very long time." Rekemheb let the ba-bird slip again into the infant chest. Nefi giggled softly, as if tickled, then grew solemn again as her ancient grandfather kissed her head in turn. "Remember us, darling, and never be afraid," he said, and as he stood up again, he faded away to nothing.

Nefi sighed once and, like the exhausted baby she was, she raised her arms to be picked up by her mother.

"It is time you took her to her proper place, and we returned to ours," Nekhbet said, drawing a conclusion to the spectacle.

Auset was not satisfied. "So, what do we do now? Is this going to go on forever? The Aton can strike her a thousand ways, everywhere we go: not just madmen, but lightning, sandstorm, plane crash. I hate this and I want it to stop."

Nekhbet raised a hand. "The Aton in all his names is no force of nature. He is held aloft solely on the wind of men' s belief, like their nations and their exalted offices. His power to harm is only through his believers. You must be on guard against all those who represent Him too aggressively. But we will look after you. The Child is always under my wing. Return to Egypt."

"And Derek's stepfather?" Auset added a final objection, but her voice lacked conviction.

"His threat was small, as you surely knew." Nekhbet clasped her hands in front of her in school-teacher fashion.

"And what about Nefi's father…fathers, actually. They will be all right?" Valerie knew the answer, but wanted confirmation.

Nekhbet backed away, apparently finished with the audience. "You know well you must make a likeness of them, and you must do it soon, before their forms are taken back into the earth. Now go, my patience wears thin."

She looked again at Najya, her expression unreadable. With the sound of fluttering wings, she assumed for an instant the shape of the great vulture, then a hollow of colorless air. An instant later the illumination in the chamber flickered out, and they were plunged into total darkness.

❖

"Damn. I hate it when she does that," Valerie groused, fishing in her pocket for the flashlight. She clicked it on and saw that the others had already moved toward the first chamber.

"They've all gone," Auset said. "It's just us now." Nefi had fallen into exhausted sleep, and Auset shifted her higher on her shoulder.

Valerie touched her on the back. "Are you all right, Auset? After everything that's happened?"

"Yeah, I think so." Auset sighed. "I was a little crazy there for awhile, but I'm okay now. I have Nefi back and soon, I hope, Yussif."

Valerie swept the walls of the chamber one last time with the flashlight beam. "Then let's get out of this hole." She pointed the light beam toward the crevasse leading from the underground chambers back to the lowest chapel. Auset went ahead, and Najya walked by Valerie's side.

"The story of a lifetime, and no one on earth will believe me," she muttered.

"I know what you mean," Valerie said as they slid along the Plexiglas panels and into the stone chapel. At the top of the stairs, the chapel of St. Helena was now dark, though a dull blue-gray came from

the hemispheric windows high above them.

On the second stairway leading upward, Auset took a last look at the pit from which they had just emerged. Valerie stopped with her. "Do you trust Nekhbet now, after all this?"

"I don't trust any of them. I'm so sick of religion and religions. Those gods and their priests and mullahs and rabbis. They throw you into despair from which they offer to rescue you again. I wash my hands of all of them."

"I know what you mean. As a scientist, I choose no religion, but unfortunately, religion keeps choosing me."

At the top of the stairs, Najya took the flashlight and went to offer assistance to Auset. The corridor that led to the portal was dark, as the rest of the church was now . Only the pale granite of Calvary loomed again before them on the left. Najya directed the fl ashlight along the stone floor of the corridor as she and Auset passed the great rock.

Two steps behind them, Valerie halted suddenly. "Oh, no."

51

Ecce Homo

She was full of dread, yet sick to death of dreading. She should have known. There was no way an alien deity like Nekhbet could penetrate so sacrosanct a place without provoking a response. This was it then.

His long hair was matted with blood under the crown of thorns. He was nearly naked, a ragged, bloodstained cloth around his hips the only covering. His pale white body was terrible to see, bruised and lacerated, and he hunched slightly. He did not speak, but only breathed painfully as a man exhausted and broken by torment.

Auset circled back, clearly impatient. "What is it?"

"She sees something," Najya answered. To Valerie she said, "There's no one there. Only some dust from the rock. Come on, you're exhausted. We're *all* exhausted."

Valerie stepped even closer, until she stood only a meter from him, but still he did not speak. Or perhaps he did and she could not hear him, for his lips moved slightly. She waited, oblivious to the anxious voices of her friends. Finally she touched him. She flinched from the shock of the touch and the realization that he felt exactly like the pagan gods when they had touched her and opened her spirit to another place. But his place was a place of agony.

"I thought I was free of you," she said to him softly. "Now I have to believe in you again."

The man of sorrows held out his own hands which, like those of Rekemheb, held a light of their own. They trembled, and blood ran from the palms along his fingers. He rasped, "No. You only make it worse."

"I don't understand."

The Savior shook his head, feebly. "I am only a part of Him who lives also in His believers. But in his believers He is set against Himself, and His right hand smites His left." The voice was soft, but hoarse as if his throat, like every other part of him, was raw.

Valerie shook her head. Fighting between sects who claimed the

same God was no revelation to anyone. “What has that got to do with us? We aren’t Christians.”

“You must tell them.” He spoke slowly, his head thrown back slightly, forcing every word over the open sores of his mouth. “I was a teacher, a healer, a maker of wine and bread. I too was a Child in the temple.” He paused a moment with closed eyes.

She couldn’t tell if it was from the exertion of talking, or whether he was recalling a time of celebration rather than pain.

He opened his eyes again, and they were filled with tears. “The stories that men tell are not of my righteousness and joy, but of my martyrdom. They could have chosen the healer or the winemaker, but they pray instead to the cross that tortured me. They pray to this.” The Christ touched his side where the ribs were visible under his translucent skin. Blood oozed from a long diagonal wound into the cloth around his hips.

“Tell them, please, to stop.”

The stories that men tell. Valerie thought of the scribe god’s warning of the power of the word. She wondered if the two forms of god could ever talk to each other, whether Jehuti could solace him. No, she realized, the One God had torn himself away from all the others.

“*Je suis désolée*,” she said, in the language of her childhood prayers, with more piety than she had ever felt as a believer. “I will try to explain to people. Though I don’t think they will listen.”

He seemed to slump and his hands dropped to his sides. He looked up at her one last time, and she noticed what beautiful eyes he had, with lashes like a girl’s.

“No, they won’t,” he whispered. “They want the martyr.” Closing his eyes again, he withdrew, pressing his back to the rock of his Golgotha, the “place of skulls.”

“Wait,” she said, recalling the anxiety of her first communion. “Please. Are my sins forgiven?”

He looked at her for a moment, as if not comprehending the question. Then he shook his head. “I am not the judge,” he said, and faded back into the rock of Calvary.

Finally, she heard their voices.

Najya laid a hand on her shoulder and shook her gently. “Come on, darling.”

She led her the rest of the way out of the church, and it was not

until they stood before the portal that Valerie spoke. "Did you see him? Did you hear what he said to me?"

Najya laid her arm around her back. "Whatever you saw and heard, we can analyze it later. I'm so tired I can't talk any more."

Auset shifted the quiet baby to her other shoulder . "Yes. I have a wet two-year-old in my arms, and I haven't slept in days."

Grainy-eyed and dazed, Valerie stepped between them and slipped her arms through theirs. In the cool predawn air, their physical warmth on both sides of her was a deep comfort. "Y es, for god's sake, let's go home."

52

Remembrance

Faaria leaned on her stick and peered with dim eyes at her brother as he shuffled from the courtyard of the newly finished mortuary of Husaam al Noori. Though he was older than she, age had been kinder to him, she realized. Well, he had also not borne six children. She, on the other hand, now felt every one of her nearly seventy years and had been under a pall for a year since the death of Amhara.

"It's beautiful, Sharif. A pity it will stay empty though, while Husaam's bones lie some place in Jerusalem."

"Not completely empty. I've had the masons build a modest tomb in the back, a simple sarcophagus, for me. If I can't lie by his side in death, I can lie by his monument."

"Fair enough. Though I think his spirit would have been content with less splendor. Since you have no children to spend all your money on, you can spend it on mine."

He took her arm and they hobbled together, two bent figures, back to the main road of the necropolis. "Your children are doing quite well, Faaria, and do not need me. Do not begrudge this tribute to Husaam, in whose household we both found someone who loved us. Besides, the money that I've earned all these years began with the sale of his great manuscripts. When I saved them from Jerusalem, I knew they had value, but I did not know how much."

"Jerusalem," Faaria mused. "What a horror. I have almost erased the nightmare from my mind. And would have sooner if the vizier had not constantly called my husband to account for the loss of it."

"Idris ad Dawla could stand up to the vizier as well as any man, and no one would think to blame him for the Frankish savagery. He had the force of character to free us all from Frankish hands, even Amhara, whom they coveted," Sharif mused out loud. "And fate has been generous to us all since then, hasn't it? Idris ad Dawla honorably regained a place in the court and was given land for his service. That's a good ending to the story."

Faaria smiled at the stooped figure of her brother, who seemed to

always harbor optimism. Perhaps the books gave him another happier world to live in. "But the story is *not* ended. It never is. You know as well as I do that the Franks are marching now on Cairo, and there will be another battle before the year is out."

"The Franks have overreached themselves this time, though," he countered. "The caliph's army is strong. Moreover, haven't you heard of the great soldier from the East? Salah al Din, he's called, and he is already on the march behind the invaders."

She shook her head. "I am too old now to worry about coming battles. I care only about my children and grandchildren now."

The servant stood by the horses, and after he handed the reins to Sharif, he helped Faaria into the saddle.When they were both mounted, Sharif took up the thread of the conversation.

"Yes, and all of them are doing well. Your sons are prosperous and your daughters have good husbands. I was worried for awhile about your oldest, Samia. She was just like you, a wild thing, and I thought she'd never marry. Idris got her settled down finally, but now her daughter is just as bad. What a lineage you have produced!"

Faaria laughed along with him. Yes, there was a sort of lineage of odd women. She had concluded as much herself when her granddaughter at the age of eighteen, refused to marry the fiery young soldier her father had picked for her. When the reproaches began, Faaria realized they were the very same ones that had been made to her and then to her daughter, for being "wild." She knew, the way the men could never know, that all three of them—mother, daughter and granddaughter—preferred the tenderness of women.

The solution, as it turned out, was remarkably simple, once she had managed to convince the grumbling father. Given a sufficient dowry—and a dowry from the house of Idris ad Dawla was always sufficient—all they had to do was find some mild clerk or merchant who would be content to let his young wife have her way. As long as she bore him a few sons over the years and did not publicly shame him, she could have her "tender friendships" as she wished.

Faaria felt a sudden pain in her chest and could not tell whether it was ailment or simply longing for Amhara. Oh, how she missed her. She brooded on the thousand sweet nights that they had shared in ad Dawla's harem, first as passionate lovers and then, in advancing age, as companions. If their husband sensed the intimacy between them,

he never resented it, content, it seemed, with their constant tenderness toward him.

Amhara had done her duty and given birth to a son soon after they returned to Cairo and began what would be a large and robust family. Motherhood became her, though she never quite lost the melancholy over her lost infant. Faaria had caught her now and again staring into space, as if looking for a sign from the gods who had promised something and then failed her. And when Amhara had taken her last breath, a year ago, they had shared the same fierce longing, that their two spirits would embrace again in the afterlife.

❖

Finally they reached the house, and the two servants came to help Faaria from her horse. She asked for some tea to be brought to her room.

Her sleeping room was cool, and she removed the hijab with a sigh. The pain that returned as she sat down was probably the indigestion that plagued her. But if it was not, then things had an urgency. With difficulty, she knelt on arthritic knees and drew two chests from under her bed, one in ebony and one half its size in alabaster.

The wooden one was full to bursting with all her family, and it pleased her to see them all together there.Amhara's sons and daughters and her own, and on the top, the layer of grandchildren. Off to the side, wrapped separately, were those of the first generation, carved in their maturity.

Samek had told Amhara of the spirit—the ka he called it—that returned to house in the image of itself. And so, in the faint hope of cheating death, Amhara had insisted that every one of their household, and everyone they loved, be carved in wood. Each one was taken upon their sixteenth birthday to the image maker to be recorded in a graven image. Sharif had heard of this practice and, though skeptical, he agreed. He insisted however that likenesses be carved not only of Husaam, but also of his old white camel that had brought them out of Jerusalem.

Idris ad Dawla was there too, of course, in the splendid armor he wore when he saved them from the Franks. She had let the image maker carve the Frankish knight as well, according to her description.Though she doubted the murderous invader would go to the afterlife where the

kas of the virtuous dwelled, she wanted to record him. If there was judgement there, or retribution, she wanted him to meet it in the bloody cross-marked clothing of his army.

She closed the ebony box and tied a cord around the hasp to hold it closed.

The alabaster chest was more precious for it held the image of Amhara. In the first year of their new life in Cairo, while the terror of Jerusalem was still fresh in memory, they had officially renounced the Father God in whose name a river of blood had been shed. But of the religion of the gods they knew little, only what Samek had explained—that the spirit could live on after death as ka. What was required was simply a life of righteousness toward nature and if not a mummy, then a likeness, in which the ka could house.

Faaria couldn't remember how they had found the image maker in the souq, perhaps by accident. But once they knew his craft, they went, each one to make a likeness of the other, vying in precision and using their own hair.

She lifted the Amhara doll from the alabaster chest and kissed it tenderly. As always, it seemed warm to the touch, but then, her hands always warmed at the touch of her, even of her mere image. Faaria didn't know if a spirit lived in it, or ever would but, just in case, their two likenesses would lie together in a single casket. She placed the precious figure next to her own and closed the lid for the last time. After she pressed the hasp in place, she took a candle and coated it with wax to seal it, wondering if it would ever be opened and, if so, by whom.

"*Jaddee*, are you all right? Let me help you."

It was Leyla, her favorite rebellious granddaughter, bringing tea. Faaria allowed herself to be helped to her feet and laid on her bed.

"I'm all right, dear. Look, there's something important you must do. Promise me you'll do it right away."

"Of course, *Jaddee*. I always do what you tell me."

She pointed to the two chests on the floor. "Take those to the image maker in the souq. You know the one I mean, the one who made the little statue of you on your last birthday. Don't let anyone take them from you. He'll know what to do."

Leyla looked puzzled for a moment, then embraced her. "Oh, *Jaddee*. I know you always do what's right for us." The look she gave through lowered eyelids told how much she understood about Faaria's

hand in her recent marriage, and about what the two of them had in common. “I promise.”

As the door shut, Faaria closed her eyes.The pain in her chest was more severe now. No, it was not indigestion. It seemed as if something struck her so hard she could not draw a breath. She thrashed a little, but made no other sound, only the softest whisper with her last exhalation. “Amhara, habibti.”

53

Of Spirit and the Flesh

Valerie and Najya lay together on the narrow hotel bed, facing outward as the midday heat penetrated sleep.

Valerie opened her eyes and licked already moist lips. She tried to lean back to let the air cool her damp throat but immediatel y hit the wall behind her . "Uff," she said. She rolled on top of Najya and lay for a moment in a long kiss, savoring the wicked pleasure of their two sweat-slick bodies. "Umm, I adore you,*cherie*, but I'm still going to be the first in the shower." She threw back the clammy sheet.

Najya threw an arm across the small ofValerie's back, but not fast enough to keep her from sliding off and making for the bathroom.

Valerie climbed into the miniscule shower platform and stood lathering under the spray of water while it evolved from cold to lukewarm.

Soon, Najya stood in the bathroom doorway , her bronze body glistening with perspiration.

Valerie paused for a moment and let her glance slide over Najya's body like a caress. "Gods, you're so beautiful. You make me speechless."

"Speechlessness isn' t one of your qualities, habibti. Anyhow, listen. It's daylight. We're awake and rational. Now , tell me the truth. What did we see last night under the Church of the Sepulchre?"

"Believe it, *cherie*. You saw the kas of Yussif, Derek, and Rekemheb, and the Vulture Goddess of Upper Egypt."

Najya leaned against the doorjamb. "She' s stunning, you know . Well, of course you knowYou must be in love with herI'd be.Although that seems like a form of insanity."

"She is, and I was, and it is. But there' s more to Nekhbet, of course. And more of*them*. The gods, I mean.And when you see them all together, it's beyond anything you can imagine. Like a Bosch painting, Auset says." Valerie let the water spray deliciously into her face.

"I haven't absorbed last night's events yet. I mean, one part of my

mind has recorded it, but the other part just goes on like before, denying the supernatural. That might be a kind of insanity too."

Eyes shut, Valerie spoke into the air in Najya's general direction. "I think it's actually a kind of *sanity*. I managed to push the supernatural out of my consciousness, even after writing a whole chronicle about these gods. I went back to being a scientist—rational, empirical—just to be able to function. But then Nekhbet appeared and that whole underworld opened up again."

"Underworld. Yes, there would be one, wouldn't there? You'll have to explain that place to me."

"I have a lot to explain to you, habibti. But we have time for that. You're coming back to Cairo with me, aren't you?"

"Yes, of course. I'm not leaving you alone for a moment. There's much too much going on. But listen, now, in the cold light of day, tell me what *you* saw."

Valerie soaped herself. "What I *thought* I saw—although I'm beginning to think I dredged it up from inside myself—was the crucified Christ."

"Oh," Najya said quietly. "It makes sense though, right there in front of Calvary."

"What I can't understand is why you and Auset didn't see him. That makes me wonder if it wasn't maybe a hallucination."

"Why should Jesus be any more a hallucination than Nekhbet? Anyhow, what did he say?"

Valerie stepped off the platform, dripping wet, and kissed Najya quickly before she reached for a towel. "That was the strangest thing of all. He said, 'Tell them, please, to stop.' He wanted to be remembered as a teacher, even a winemaker, not a martyr."

Najya stepped past her into the shower. "Of course he would. Who'd want to hang on a cross for two thousand years? What did you say to him?" She turned the water full in her face.

"Nothing reasonable. I was too dumbfounded. I just asked if my sins were forgiven. Shows you how much Catholic guilt was still cemented in my head. No surprise, though. I grew up in a place where crucifixes hung in every room." Valerie toweled her hair, already feeling her back drying in the too-warm air. She snickered softly. "If he'd stayed any longer I'd have asked him where I could buy some indulgences."

"Indulgences?" came from the shower. "What's that?"

"Oh, it's a Catholic thing. Remission from hell. They're no longer on sale though. Protestants cracked down."

Najya leaned out from the shower. "You laugh, but I think seeing him really affected you."

Valerie leaned against the doorjamb of the bathroom and watched the white soap lather stream down the sleek bronze body. She ran her hand down Najya's wet back to the curve of her buttocks. "You affect me too. You bring me back to earth."

"You can wisecrack, but I think you still have to figure out where you belong."

"I know that. I've signed up with the nature gods."

Najya stepped out next to her and wrapped them both in her towel. They stood for a long moment in each other's arms feeling warm, fresh skin, coarse cotton, and wet hair.

"Well, I've signed up more or less too, but I'm not sure for what. Just exactly how are the Egyptian gods going to make life any better for people—for Palestinians, for Jews wanting to live peacefully with Palestinians, for wretched people anywhere in the world?"

"In the short term, I can't see how they'd change that at all. They don't claim moral authority or omnipotence. They're just the spirits of things, and we have to take care of *them*."

"Then why worship them?" Najya's lips were warm on her shower-cooled skin as they kissed down the side of her face to the tiny scar. "They sound pretty feeble. For gods, I mean." She leaned against Valerie, her body asking a different sort of question.

Valerie pulled them back to the rumpled bed, answering both. "You're probably right. But it's a bit like democracy versus dictatorship. I'd rather have the spirits of wind, water, and wildlife all jostle for attention than have to grovel before an autocrat."

Valerie lay back and pulled Najya on top of her, belly to belly, breasts to breasts, warming again. She edged downward a fraction so she could press her lips under Najya's throat and feel the pounding of her pulse.

"And just how do you worship these gods?" Najya murmured into her ear.

The heat between her legs drew her mind elsewhere, so Valerie summarized the lesson. "Recite the chants, carry the statues to the light

at New Year, and revere nature." She felt Najya' s leg slide between her thighs, which had grown moist again, and she completely lost the thread.

Najya persisted. "What a choice. Vengeance and martyrs or sunlight and sex."

"Sex? Did I say sex?" Valerie breathed dizzily , the excitement between her legs spreading now to every part of her.

"Yes." Najya rocked against her in a slow rhythm and pressed the first urgent, penetrating kiss.

54

The Shop of Graven Images

Strange, I've been to this part of Cairo a dozen times, and I never noticed it." Najya stood in front of the tiny *mahal*, tucked between a kitchenware shop on one side and a tobacco and sheesha shop on the other.

The rows of mass-produced Anubis jackals, Horus falcons, and Isis mothers still stood at the front. The layer of reddish dust that had settled on them suggested they did not sell very well.

Valerie opened the door to the shop, and they ventured into its dismal interior.

"Ah, Dr…Foret, is it?" The shopkeeper approached them. "Y ou would like to have another likeness made." It was not a question.

"Yes, we would. Two of them. Of these men." Valerie fumbled in her shirt pocket for the wedding picture. "One of them is the man you copied last week. For the priest, remember?"

"Of course. For the priest. But this time it is for himself. He is… deceased," he added neutrally.

"How do you know that?" Valerie asked, startled

He studied the picture again, avoiding her glance. "For give me. I saw the picture in the newspaper. I am sorry."

Najya intervened, moving the business along. "So, we would like you to duplicate the first statue, but without the braid."

"Yes," Valerie added. "And of course you should omit the spear wound in the back." She added solemnly , "Please put a small hole… through the heart."

"And the other one?" He held the picture up close. "How did he die? Shall I include a mark?"

"A mark?" Valerie looked toward Najya for help.

Najya shrugged faintly. "I understand that he was thrown from the train, so the injury would have been internal."

The sculptor still waited for an answer , so Valerie added quietly, "No mark."

"Yes, certainly, Dr. Foret." He tilted his head then, as if he studied

her, although he quickly dropped his eyes. "Would you like one of yourself as well? Perhaps both of you."

"Of us? Of course not," she snapped. Then she realized the game they both played, each withholding information. It was obvious now that he sculpted for the dead. Perhaps only for the dead. Was the question his way to show he knew they were in mortal danger? A shiver went down her spine.

She changed the subject. "The other statues that you showed me a few days ago in your back room, may I see them again?"

Alarm showed briefly on his face. "Uh…the key to the lock. I am sorry. My assistant has it." He busied himself with something behind the counter.

"Sayyid," she said first, using the Arabic term of respect, but he didn't respond. Then she tried *Chemet*, in old Egyptian, addressing him as royalty, and the suddenness with which he turned around showed her he had understood. She searched her mind for other flattering terms, but all she could come up with was "vizier." "*Tsh 'aty*," she said, and his poorly concealed smirk made it clear he knew he was being flattered—in the ancient language. "We need to see the statues."

He lowered his glance again. "It is unwise, dangerous even."

"Dangerous to learn, or to reveal?"

He looked up through furrowed brows. "It is dangerous for the statues to be seen."

Valerie edged toward the rug that covered the narrow door. "You know we aren't thieves. We come on the advice of Nekhbet."

"Nekhbet. Ah, you might have said that in the beginning."

Valerie relaxed. It was truth time. "The man whose face you copied, the one who died, he was of the line of Rekemheb. And Najya…" She extended her hand toward her. "Najya is also in the family. She knows all our stories and has met the kas of Yussif and Derek, who wait for their likenesses."

His hand went to the pocket of his galabaya. "If goddess approves."

"Of course she approves. I am the writer of the chronicle. And a child of Rekemheb."

His eyes darted back and forth between them as if looking for a family resemblance. "All right, then." He marched the three paces to the carpet-covered door. "But if you want your two likenesses, you

must leave soon and let me work." He drew aside the carpet and opened the padlock.

They waited once again for lamplight, sensing the coldness of the room, in spite of the hot September afternoon. He returned and lifted the lantern at the center of the chamber , illuminating the hundreds of figures. All seemed to look down mournfully at them.

"Who are these?" Valerie asked. "Tell me the truth. What is this room?"

He looked past her, into the darkness. "They are the lost ones and this is their necropolis."

"They're all ka statues, aren't they? How is it that you have them? Is this all of them?"

"I will tell you our story. First the Greeks and Romans came with their own gods, but they let us keep our ways. But when the Christians came, the mummifi cation stopped. Those who still believed had likenesses made of themselves to receive their kas, but no priest could be found to speak the incantation, for many had been killed."

He took down a figure and showed it to her. The limbs were intact and carved hair was still in place, but the facial features were hacked away. "And where the people succeeded in bringing ka and likeness together, the Christians seized them and smashed their noses so that they could not draw breath in the underworld."

He brushed his fi ngers lightly over the ruined face. "Those who were left became guardians of their empty images. They gathered up the ka-dolls, even the ruined ones, to mark our history and passed the guardianship to their children." He swept his hand in a semicircle over the array of dolls and statues. "Now you have had your explanation and you must go."

"Not yet. Please." Valerie raised a hand. "T ell me more about them. Who they are? Are any in the lineage of Rekemheb?"

The image keeper sighed. "Yes, some of his lineage and some of those who knew of it." He pointed overhead to a line of fi gures carved in various dark woods and took one down. It bore a strange resemblance to both Derek and Rekemheb, though its copious hair sprang out in a sphere around its head. "This one, Samek, was a believer, and in Nubia his children believed as well, and his children' s children. Until they were taken into slavery and converted. All were lost, of course."

Najya studied the various shelves with obvious fascination. "I see

dolls and statues costumed up to the Middle Ages, but none after."

"There were few believers, and if they made themselves statues, these were useless, for no one knew the ceremony."

Valerie raised her eyebrows at the realization. "I knew the ceremony from my research. Does that mean that I was the first—?"

"Yes. In a thousand years," he finished. "Since the hundredth generation."

Valerie shuddered. "You mean since the Fall of Jerusalem."

He nodded.

She rested a hand on Najya's shoulder, seeking support. "I saw a vision of that day, of the slaughter. And of some that were allowed to leave."

His voice was gentle now. "If you are a child of Rekemheb, then they were your family."

"One of them was Idris ad Dawla," Najya interjected.

"It was." He opened an ebony box at the back of one of the shelves and lifted a figurine from it.

Najya took it from him and held it to the dim lantern light, turning it lovingly.

"This is the Emir of Jerusalem?" Najya asked, awestruck. "The ancestor of my family?"

Age had dulled the colors and cracks had formed along the wood grain, but the detail was so fine that the face and figure still had character Under a brown breastplate, he wore a green coat belted with a brightly colored sash. His pointed helmet was held in place by a bright blue-green turban with a tail that hung down his back and over the hilt of his sword.

"Of both your families, though, the lines descend from different wives."

"The women I saw leave the city," Valerie said. "Those were his wives, then. Are there statues of them?"

He averted his eyes. "Alas, no. But this one is also of your bloodline." He held up a mounted figure, a slender redheaded man atop a white camel. "Do you know the name Sharif al Kitab?"

Valerie stared into the air for a moment, summoning up memory. "Yeeesss. I think that was the name. I hid one night in his tomb, in the mortuary of Husaam al Noori. With his head under my arm. I had no idea—"

"Sharif al Kitab." Najya repeated the name. "I know it too. I'm certain it's the historian that my brother translated. He wrote a chronicle of the Fall of Jerusalem. I have a copy of it at home."

"Oh, I want to read it. So many connections, so much I still don't know."

"Then you will want to know this too."The image keeper reached past her again into the wooden chest and handed her another fi gure. It was a Frankish knight, fully armored. Over his painted chain mail he wore a pale tabard with a crimson cross running the length and width of it. Only his helmet was missing, so that his hair was visible, long and yellow.

Valerie held it up close to scrutinize it.

Najya laughed nervously. "He looks familiar. It's the eyes, I think. A little like Harry's. Or even, come to think about it, like yours. Is this another one of your ancestors, you suppose?"

Valerie looked toward the image keeper and spoke in a monotone. "It's the knight who killed the infant, isn' t it?" Without awaiting an answer, she laid the statue back in his hand. "My father 's eyes. They haunt me in nightmares."

"You don't have to let them, dear ," Najya comforted her . "He's dead. All of them are long dead. There's only the living to take care of now, Auset and Nefi, and the kas. That's what we should be thinking about now."

The image keeper seemed to agree, and he placed the knight figurine back in its chest. "Y es, and now that you know the story , we will go back. I must fi nish the work you have given me." He tried to step past her.

Valerie blocked his way . "No," she said quietly . "You've been lying to us."

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Auto da Fe

The image keeper was affronted. “I have shown you what you wanted to see. There is nothing more. Now, please, let us go out and finish our business.”

Valerie held her ground. “This can’t be all. It can’t be all so bleak that we few are the only believers who sustain an entire underworld of gods. There have got to be more kas some place.”

“There are no more kas,” he insisted. “Only the ones that you create. All the others are gone.”

“No kas? No kas at all?” she repeated. “You forget, I’m an Egyptologist, not some gullible tourist. You took me for a fool. If you’d told a little lie and said you didn’t know, I’d have believed you. But I know the names of all the pharaohs. And even if their mummies are crumbling or lost or no longer hold their ka, hundreds of them have likenesses.”

He backed up a step, and she pressed on. “Where for example is Hatchepsut? I’ve seen her statues. I’ve seen statues of the whole nineteenth dynasty, and of the Ptolemies. Where are Khephren and Menkaure, the pyramid builders, who stand unbroken in the Cairo Museum, and Ramses the Great, who sits gigantic at Abu Simbel? Their kas must all abide some place, and if they do, why not a thousand others?”

Agitated now, she came to the point. “Where are they? Two years into this prophecy and I’m still having to fight to find out things I should have known at the beginning.”

The lantern in his hand wavered. “If you take this knowledge upon yourself, you do it at great risk, to yourself and to many others.”

“Risk? I’ve just lost two family members to murder, and Najya and I came within a hair of being shot ourselves a few days ago. So don’t tell me about risk. We’ve earned the right to know the rest of the story.”

He laid his hand to the side of his turban, as if he was getting a headache. “May the gods forgive me. I know your lineage and your

sacrifices. I will take you to the ones for whom you have made them." He raised his hand to indicate she should move aside to let him get to the door.

Confused, she and Najya stepped back, expecting him to lead them out. Instead he laid another hasp across the inside of the door and hooked a second padlock on it, locking all of them in. Now , the only way to gain entrance from outside was to smash the door.

He raised his hand a second time and brushed them to both sides of the tiny room while he knelt down and set aside the lantern. He rolled back the tattered carpet, exposing an iron ring on a trap door . With a single heave he hauled it up with both hands, and the lantern at his feet revealed a passageway.

Valerie shook her head. "Y et another stone staircase descending into darkness," she sighed. "Why does nothing in this religion go up?" She followed him as he took the lantern and led the way down the steps.

"But then they'd have to call it the 'overworld,' wouldn't they?" Najya remarked behind her , pulling the trap door shut over their heads.

A stone tunnel, as in the tomb she had uncovered two years before, though a bit narrower , descended at a gentle incline for some twenty paces to another door with another padlock. He worked clumsily with the lock for several minutes, thwarted by rust or ineptitude. Finally he yanked the door open toward them and stood back to let them enter.

A vault was laid out like the closet they had just left, but extended significantly farther out in front of them. Here too, ka-dolls and statues, hundreds of them, stood in rows on shelves that reached above the height of a man. But the air was fi lled with an electricity that had been absent in the other room. And there was something even more unnerving. She saw it first in the closest figures, then realized it was in every one of them. Life shone in their eyes—the unmistakable glow of consciousness in each one.

"I've wandered so often through the souq. I thought I knew every inch of it," Valerie said as she glanced over the colorful display . "But all that time, this chamber was underneath my feet."

"This vault is older than the souq," the image keeper announced succinctly. "When the Anubis priests were gone, the ones who knew the magic of embalming, our ancestors, built this one last tomb—

for all generations. Centuries later the market came, assuring its concealment."

"Are there other vaults like this one? Other places where the ka-souls rest?" Valerie asked.

"No. This is all that is in the Duat, all that is left of our believers," he said. "These sustain the voices of the gods."

"May I?" she asked.

He nodded and she touched the nearest figure. It was warm, as she knew it would be. An Egyptian, Ptolemaic in dress, as were most of the figures around it. "You'll put Yussif and Derek here?"

He nodded. "With the others of your line."

"My line, the line of Rekemheb?" The words felt strange coming from her mouth. What had been an abstract concept had become tangible, something she could see. She glanced around again at the collection of dolls and statues. No, not a collection, for they lived. It was an assembly, rank upon rank of beings who had consciousness as she did. Did they despair, she wondered, or did they set their hopes on her?

"Can you show them to us?" Najya spoke Valerie's next thought. "The children of Rekemheb?"

The image maker looked resigned to controlling the damage that already had been done. He handed Najya the lantern and reached up to the highest shelf. With some effort, he lifted down an alabaster box, half the size of the wooden one that held the knight and the emir . He polished it first with his sleeve and squinted, seemingly annoyed at the layer of gray wax that covered its hasp. "I had forgotten it was sealed," he grumbled. "But I suppose it is correct for you to break it." He handed it to Valerie.

She scraped at the wax imbedded in the bronze hasp with a fingernail for several minutes. Finally it came loose and she opened the lid.

Najya held the lantern over it, illuminating its contents.

Inside the box lay two female figures of exquisite workmanship. They were more dolls than statues, for they had real hair and were clothed in carefully stitched costumes.

Delicately, Valerie lifted out the first of the two.

The image maker took the doll from her and handed it to Najya. "This one is the mother of your lineage," he said. Though made of

painted wood, the statue seemed soft, its edges rounded. The real hair that covered the head was thick and black like Najya's and fell to the middle of the doll's back. The figure was swathed in a dark abaya. Slung over one shoulder and laid diagonally across her chest was a brightly colored shawl or infant's sling. It was empty.

"She's lovely, almost sensual." Najya scrutinized the figure under the light.

"And that is the mother of your line," he said as Valerie lifted the second one, red-haired and boyish, from the chest.

She smiled and fingered the androgynous clothing. "I can believe it." She chuckled. "This would be my wardrobe choice too."

Najya held the dark doll next to the red-haired one. "Sister wives, together for centuries in this tiny casket. Do you suppose—?"

"Oh, I'm sure of it. Look at the short hair, the boy's clothing, even the facial expression on this one. And why weren't they put in the same box as their husband instead of only with each other?"

The image keeper cleared his throat and took the figures gently from their hands. "Let us put them back in their chosen place," he said and laid them back in their common bed.

As he slid the alabaster casket back onto its shelf above his head, Valerie looked around again at the multitude of other figures with their softly glowing eyes. "Can they see me?"

"Only if the ka is present," he said. "But they return here only to seek refuge, when the world is inhospitable." He reached overhead again, to a place right next to the chest he had just replaced. "But while we are here, there is one last likeness you will want to see," he said, handing yet another figure to Valerie.

She stared at it as if hypnotized. "So this is what she looked like," she murmured. "I can't remember." She held it closer to the light and ran her finger along the side of the painted face. She touched the tip of the nose, the lips, the hairline. "There isn't a lot of resemblance," she murmured. "Just the hair color and maybe the nose."

"Who is it?" Najya asked.

"My mother." She touched the head of the doll to her lips, feeling its warmth.

"You didn't know her?"

"She died when I was six. I remember her presence, someone strong and warm who held me. But I know her face only from photos." She

brooded for a moment. “I wonder why she never came to visit me.”

Najya put her arm around Valerie’s back. “She might still. You have years ahead of you to look for her.”

“That’s another story,” the image maker said, and Valerie watched as he wrapped the figure in a cloth and set it near the alabaster casket. She felt a sort of comfort knowing her mother was with the others.

Then she stepped as far back as she could against the door to take in the whole collection, motley and multiracial. “Look at them, Najya. Our roots. Our *Umma*. The precious few hundred who’ve been in hiding, some of them for twenty centuries, while the Aton owns the world.”

“If He owns it, He’s not taking very good care of it, is He? ‘His right hand smites His left,’ you said. It can’t be what He intended.” Najya returned the lantern to their guide.

“You’re right. The power struggles, the cycle of martyrdom and vengeance. It’s enough to mess up even God.”

The image maker looked up suddenly, alarmed. The tomblike room, which was dim beyond the sphere of the lantern light, seemed to come alive. Ka-eyes in groups here and there, to the left and to the right of them, began to glow a shade brighter than before, like coals that had been fanned. The effect was disorienting, as one section pulsed while the other stayed dull, then began to radiate in turn. Soon every shelf was lit, and the mass of eyes glowed in waves.

“Something is wrong. They have all come back.” His hand began to shake so that the sphere of light around them trembled.

“What is it?”

“We have got to leave here. The kas must be protected, above all else.” The image maker urged them briskly from the vault and sealed the door behind them. Without speaking, he brushed past and hurried ahead of them along the tunnel.

They followed, perturbed at their abrupt dismissal. “Protected from what?” Najya asked him, although he was soon at a distance from them. “Who’s going to want to harm a collection of dolls? And how is anyone going to find them?”

The image maker waited at the foot of the stone steps. “I do not know what it is, but the kas only return this way when the One God stirs everywhere at once. They are that way, like the birds startling at an earthquake.” He turned and struggled up the steps in his long galabaya,

then lifted the trap door over his head.

"What could it be? Do you mean a real earthquake? What could stir the whole world at the same time?" Alarmed now, Valerie scrambled out of the tunnel right behind him, pulling Najya after her.

The image maker dropped the wooden trap swiftly back into place and covered it once again with the carpet. He stood up and jabbed his key at the padlock until it finally slid in and the lock clicked open.

The three of them stepped out into the shop. It was quiet, just as it had been when they left it. Outside, the street was empty as it had been when they arrived.

"False alarm." Najya shoved her hands into her pockets, as if to show there was nothing they needed to do. "Looks like we got excited about nothing."

The image maker ventured outside and peered in both directions along the empty alley while they waited in the shop. "I bet it was a ploy to get us out of there," Najya grumbled. "Nothing' s going on. It looks just the same as when we arrived."

"You mean the kas all came back for nothing?"

"Maybe it was for something good. We just saved Auset and Nefi, after all. What if word spread around the underworld of what had happened, and they all came to acknowledge us."

"You mean like a little ka party, only we didn't recognize it?"

"Why not? I mean we've just been through a lot, but we did win this round. So maybe things really are improving. It could be that science, nature, rationality are beginning to have more power than faith."

"Faith losing its power?" Valerie chewed her lip, uncertain. If that was happening, no one had told Reverend Carter or Yehuda Ibrahim. She stepped outside the shop.

The image maker still stood, perplexed, in the middle of the alley. Suddenly two men sprinted around the corner. A third, who seemed to be an acquaintance, stopped in front of him, breathless.

"Come to Mahdi's shop and see. It is a terrible thing." He waved to them to follow and ran on ahead.

"Mahdi, who's that?" Valerie asked.

The Egyptian shrugged. "Just someone with a coffee shop."

More men rushed along the street now , calling to others to join them. Valerie and Najya followed them to the corner where a crowd had gathered. Valerie tried to peer through the legs of the crowd to

the ground, thinking that someone, Mahdi perhaps, had been hurt, but quickly saw everyone was staring upward. She moved back and forth behind the men until she found a space to see between heads. Najya came behind her and rested a hand on her shoulder.

Bolted high on the wall just inside the café doorway , a television played. Someone turned up the sound, but the rumbling from the street was too loud for her to make out the announcer 's words. It made no difference; the images spoke for themselves.

She understood now why the ka had fl ed. She also knew , as the rest of the world did not yet know , that the atrocity was carried out in the name of the Almighty and that in some other name of the Almighty, there would be retribution.

She laid her hand over Najya's, which clutched her shoulder, and leaned back against her for support. Grimly she watched the two towers burn like sooty fl ares sending off thick gray smoke against the bright September sky over New York City.

"The power of faith, Najya. Just wait. Soon we'll see more of it."

About the Author

Justine Saracen was a college professor for fifteen years before leaving academic life for classical music management and then writing. Her scholarly book, *Salvation in the Secular*, addressed themes that persisted into later fiction, the evolution of religion, the leitmotifs of fanaticism, and the power of language. In the 1990s she acquired an online following with "The Pappas Journals," "In the Reich," "Lao Ma's Kiss," and "Women in Prison."

More important were research trips to Egypt and Palestine, which gave rise to the Ibis Prophecy, a series that follows a lesbian archeologist through modern, medieval and ancient Egypt. The first novel of the series, *The 100th Generation*, was a finalist in the Queerlit 2005 contest. The sequel, *Vulture's Kiss*, reveals the drama's bloody antecedent in the First Crusades.

Her upcoming project is *The Mephisto Aria*, a lesbian Faust story set in WWII and the world of opera. Justine is a member of the Publishing Triangle in New York City, and currently studying Arabic and Islamic History. You can visit her at her website at http://justine-saracen.tripod.com.

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