SECOND SUN

THE DESTROYER CHRONICALS

BY SARA WHITE

  COVER DESIGN BY EZEKIEL ZENDEJAS

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 Book One

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 CHAPTER 1

 Na’feti took a deep breath as she stepped out and smiled. How she loved her city. It was the center of knowledge, power, and light in the world. Here, people from all over the world gathered to work towards the highest aspirations of mankind. Here, the legends say gods mingled with man and guided them upon the paths of enlightenment. Her city, blessed by the gods, had every wonder and delight, as well as the very finest of all things: the richest fabrics, the sweetest fruit, the rarest gems, the most exotic animals, the most fragrant spices, and exquisite oddities from every corner of the earth. Whatever your heart’s desire, Cairo had it.

 The sun’s rays had barely touched the top of her house, yet the streets were full of life. Already the smells of local businesses hit her nostrils. The combination of sweet meats, fresh bread, sawed wood, the pungent scent of boiling dyes and the earthy tones of tanning leather, all mixed with a plethora of daily scents. When the wind was just right, she could smell the moisture of the river, her favorite scent because she rarely saw it, just caught snatches of smells.

 Her family lived in the busiest district where artisans resided, crafted, and sold their wares. Her father and mother made fine wooden saddles for the wealthy. Her mother weaved exquisite fabrics and sturdy cloths, while her father made the intricate carvings and metal adornments along the wood. Her father worked meticulously on creating the softest yet most durable leather seats. When she wasn’t at the loom, her mother’s true talent was with plants and medicine. Their yard was full of herbs to the point of there being only narrow paths to walk between rows. That is except the right-hand corner where stood the drying hut and storage cellar.

 Na’feti had been helping her mother with the plants as long as she could remember. Her mother, Mayotha, had trained her to know the names and properties of all plants native to the local area. She had shown Na’feti how to make them into medicine for the local artisans and their families. Na’feti only later realized her mother was famous in the city when the High Priest from the Temple Beautiful came to her for help with a patient. She easily solved the chief medical official’s dilemma and thereafter the man visited them often. When Na’feti was twelve he smiled at her and handed her a sweet treat, an almond cake made with the finest of ingredients. She only allowed herself small nibbles at a time, savoring the flavor to the fullest when she was alone.

 The next time he came he brought her a whole bag of them, but she would never get to eat one. The Pharaoh’s son, Ra’Menes, was very sick. As her mother and the priest spoke long into the night, Na’feti tried to pay attention, to catch every detail, but soon sleep overcame her and she curled up before the fireplace. As she drifted off the voices of her parents and the priest filled her head and her dreams.

 She awoke in a strange room, but shock was not the first sensation she was aware of, no, it was the soft fabric upon her skin from a silken gown and heavenly cotton sheets. Even her mother’s finest fabric never felt this good. Sitting up, she observed the rest of the room, everything was of exquisite taste and richly ornate down to the hand painted tile floors. That’s when the shock hit her, and she gave a squeal as the door opened.

 “Sorry my lady, I’ve come to bring your breakfast. Didn’t mean to startle you.”

 It was a serving girl not much older than herself. The girl had called her lady, Na’feti was speechless a moment then finally asked, “Where am I?”

 She knew the answer before the girl spoke, yet she felt she needed to hear it out loud for this to be real. You’re in the palace, my lady.”

 Her heart seemed to stop for a moment. The Palace? Why? How? A loud knock on the door interrupted her many other questions. In walked a young man she didn’t recognize. He was dressed in the blue robes of the priesthood and wore a gold metal circlet upon his head. His blue eyes took her breath away so that she barely heard his first words.

 “I’m sorry, who are you? What is going on?”

 His voice, dripping with annoyance, replied, “The high Priest has requested your presence in the prince’s chamber. Here are some appropriate clothes. Please dress quickly and follow me. I shall wait outside.”

 He slammed the door not giving her a chance to react. She had been so enthralled with the temple lad that she didn’t notice the serving girl leave. She would have liked to have thanked her.

 The food smelled amazing from across the room and there was no way she was leaving without trying a few bites at least. She wolfed down half of it before she heard the knock again and a voice reminding her, he was still waiting, and she should hurry. Looking around, she saw a blue robe draped upon a chair. She struggled to put it on with one hand while still trying to eat as much as she could with the other hand. Another insistent knock at the door somehow managed to sound annoyed as well.

 She poked her head out the door right as his fist came down for another knock but this time it connected with her forehead instead of heavy oak.

 “Owww!”

 His face turned beet red. His cold calm demeanor dropped. Though she was in pain, she didn’t miss the look of concern in his eyes, a real emotion that made his blues so much more exotic and deeper.

 “Are you alright?”

 His hand on her shoulder sent a shiver down to her toes making it hard to say anything for a moment. She seemed paralyzed, almost unable to breath. She had never been around teenage boys except passing in the market or along the streets of her neighborhood. She had never been so close to one. She had to get it together fast.

 “I…I’m fine…r..really.” She did her best to smile.

 “Alright then. Look, I’m really sorry. The master will be furious with me. Please we must hurry. “

 “It’s okay. I won’t tell.” She assured him smiling more confidently now that his hand was gone and they were moving forward.

 “Thank you. I’m Osarmoses, Temple Scribe in training. It mostly means I’m the errand boy, but there are those afternoon lessons with Master Artimis which makes it all worthwhile.”

 He smiled at her over his shoulder which caused her to visibly stumble in her struggle to keep up. She could even have sworn there was a flash of concern in his eyes before he turned back away and there was a slight decrease to his rapid pace. Perhaps he saw that her short legs could never match his long stride. At 15 he was already built like one of the gods, physically toned, bronzed, and pushing six feet, what soon to be 13-year-old girl wouldn’t swoon?

 She had to force her eyes away from this walking statue and take in the sites of the palace around her. Beautiful paintings and fine fabrics adorned the walls even in this long corridor. This was the Grand Palace, a place like no other on earth. Even the floors were marble and gold and other stones she had never seen which formed mosaics throughout the many rooms she saw off to the sides. The people themselves were unlike those without in the city. They seemed a mix of people from all over the world in costumes and colors unlike those worn by commoners. Her eyes wide and mouth open, she was unaware her guide had stopped and even turned toward her till she slowly crashed into him.

 “Look I’m sure this is your first time in the palace, little girl, but you mustn’t gawk like some ignorant country bumpkin. Pick up the pace, the prince is very sick.”

 He was back to the cold distant temple assistant who had first knocked on her door. Country bumpkin!! She couldn’t even look him in the eyes or make much of a reply. She put her head down and had to nearly jog to catch up with him as he had turned and strode off before she could have replied anyway.

 Perhaps she had imagined the kindness she saw earlier, just her teenage brain wishful thinking. Well, she wasn’t a teen yet, three more moons by her calculation.

 He led her through a sunny courtyard where multiple fountains and baths were littered with barely clad people and birds singing happily. Many exotic plants filled the air with a pleasant sweetness she would remember forever. She completely forgot his earlier scoldings as she stopped and starred aghast at the beauty. Dew still clung to the leaves and petals which sparkled in the radiant new sunrise.

 “These are the healing gardens. Our God himself hand-selected every bird and plant. His radiance blessed the waters for all who enter. Sadly, the waters could not help the Devine Son.”

 With that last sentence his voice was filled with so much sadness she thought he turned away to hide the tears in his eyes. Then they were off again at the same breakneck speed; with her struggling to keep up through all the twists and turns in the maze of the palace. She barely had time to wonder how the servants found their way around before they were standing before two massive gold doors ornately carved with a dramatic battle scene.

 A pair of guards stood on either side. They wore only loincloths, gold chest plates, and had big silver spears in their hands. Neither of them looked at the approaching couple. Osar, in turn completely ignored the imposing pair, knocking four times before opening the door. Na’feti tore her eyes away from the giant men and followed him quickly as the door just missed her in closing.

 The room was everything you would expect a prince’s room to be like. Ornate furniture and detailed carvings adorned the room, along with soft cushions and fine rungs piles with toys she had never dreamed could exist. A near life size wooden pony occupied a corner of the room but rest was mostly obscured by the robes of all the priest, medical personnel, and servants.

 The High Priest looked up as they came in but didn’t immediately call to them as he seemed to be giving Na’feti a moment to take it all in. When finally, her eyes met his he beckoned her to the prince’s bedside. His smile was kind as he put out his hand for her, but his eyes showed the worry and fatigue of a man who had been up for days, probably had sat at the boy’s bedside all night. He knew if the prince lost his life, he too would lose his own. The God Pharoh would show no mercy in his grief.

 His hand was warm, and he pulled her close to his side as he would have his own daughter. He began to talk in the same low soothing tones she remembered from by the fire last night.

 “Sweet Na’feti, I’m sorry to have you taken like this so suddenly. You were so tired last night your mother said it best not to wake you. You see, dear one, it’s very important that you be here. I’ve administered the first step in the prince’s treatment, but it is you who must aid with the rest. Mother Mayotha said you were skilled in the next steps of the treatments. I fear I am unfamiliar with the techniques and need your assistance. This is of the upmost importance for the prince’s life is more precious than all ours.”

 He squeezed her hand and looked down upon her, not smiling anymore, but it didn’t matter for her eyes were glued to the prince. He was truly the son of a god! Every part of him seemed absolutely perfect and chiseled by the hand of the divine. His hair had grown out nearly an inch from his usual smooth shave suggesting he had been very ill for some time. She nodded and managed to say that she understood perfectly, even as she felt her heart breaking from the sight of his suffering expressed in the soft yet agonizing moans periodically escaping from the sleeping prince.

 “I’ve administered the sleeping concoction you and Mother Mayotha made but as you can see this sickness is torturing even his dreams. He is still in terrible pain. It’s up to you to provide the treatment he needs to heal.”

 His voice was so calming and kind she felt as though he was the father she always wanted. Her own was very distant. He had wanted a son to teach the trade, she was no use to him, and left her to her mother’s care. He was not a man that knew affection or really even love. Edai knew her mother as a business partner, a servant, and an easement for his urges, but love could not be said to be a part of his general design.

 Now looking into the warm eyes of the High Priest Artimis she felt wrapped in his love, admiration, and perhaps respect. She couldn’t be certain, but it reminded her of the way her mother looked at her. She finally felt herself breathing easy and able to speak. Suddenly all her training kicked in and she was all business putting the childish emotions aside. She bowed a proper greeting and addressed him formally with her eyes to the floor.

 “Great High Priest to the Sun God of Our Lives it is my honor to serve you and our Lord’s Blessed Son, Ra’Menes. I will not rest till the Sun of the Sun is shining more brightly than ever.”

 He gently lifted her head at the chin till she looked in his eyes.

 “It is well little one. I know you will. No need for formalities, they have all gone and we are old friends, child, I dare say colleagues at the moment.”

 He gave a little chuckle but again his eyes held worry and stress.

 “You will find all that you need on the tables before you. A water basin and fresh towels are to your far right and behind the screen there is a bath. I’ll have them bring you in a fresh cot if you like, but the room you awoke in is yours for the duration of your stay with us.”

 “I will not be needing the room sir. He needs this medicine every hour for 72 hours precisely. I need an hourglass in order to keep time.” She surprised herself with how confident and grown up she sounded.

 “It is as I expected. A good physician never leaves a dying patient’s side.” He looked far more tired now than she had even noticed before. “I’ll arrange for a bed anyway. I can help once I’ve rested myself.”

 “No worries, Sir. He is not dying. I can promise you that.” This time it was her turn to grab his hand reassuringly.

 “Yes dear, he is going to be fine thanks to you and your mom. I’ll send Osar with a hourglass, and will check on you when I can.” With that he turned and left so fast she wasn’t sure he had heard her thanks and affirmation.

 After he left, she surveyed her surroundings, then focused on the medical table set up near the prince’s bed. There, on a metal tray, lay the world’s most poisonous fish and next to that in a large bowl - the deadliest fruit. It was deep purple and full of wicked spikes that would kill you in 15 minutes with just one tiny prick. A copper glove and varying cutting and grabbing tools were spread out upon the rest of the table along with a bright lantern, a pile of banana leaves and several bowels of herbs, roots, and berries. Her mother had sent preparations for everything Na’feti would need.

 She was glad they had let her rest while the belladonna worked through the prince’s system. It was a powerful herb, which in a large dose was a killer poison in itself, but in smaller doses it could be a powerful medicine. That is why the High Priest had been instructed to give the boy a small amount at first, then increasingly larger amounts over time.

 He had just given him a dose before she entered the chamber. Now it would be up to her to administer the real medicine while the boy was in a heavy sleep and the effects of the Belladonna were at their peak. It would be the combination of the poisons and herbs administered in a timely manner which would save the boy’s life. Quickly, she rubbed the fish in frankincense and sage, a heavy layer of salt, then she expertly sliced into its belly, being careful not to open any organs in the process. She removed the poison sack, blader, and heart. Then scooped out the rest of the organs with ease, saving the brain for last and setting it aside. Now she emptied the contents of the bladder inside the fish, squeezing out every last drop, making sure all the meat was soaked before she placed the heart inside. Next the brains needed to be smashed to a pulp. Finally the hardest part: the poison Ga’turanga fruit. She put on the copper glove, grabbed the tongs and knife, and began to slice. She was almost finished cutting open the outer shell when Osar came in quiet as a mouse, and he made not a sound till the procedure was finished and she laid down her tools; only then did he knock on a nearby table and nearly startle her out of her seat.

 “Forgive me, I didn’t mean to scare you. Only to bring your time piece.” He had a mischievous smile that said he did indeed mean to startle her, but she had no time for games.

 “You didn’t scare me at all. I was surprised that’s all. Set it on the table and flip it when I tell you to. I haven’t a moment to waste.”

 That said she turned back away from him and began removing the red meat of the fruit with the tong and placing it in the bowl with the brain. She had to keep the glove on to protect her hand, which meant being a little slower than she liked. Na’feti was thankful the scribe kept silent; she could not deal with him now nor with the confusing new emotions he inspired.

 Now, to mash the fruit and brains and spread that upon the fish heart and inside the fish. Lastly, she punctured the poison sac and poured it on top, then sewed up the fish wrapping it in banana leaves.

 Osar stood in awe as she pounded the fish with a small wooden mallet. Once the ingredients were well mixed within, she had to open the fish again. With a small shell spoon, she scooped up a small amount of the foul-smelling concoction and fed it to the sleeping prince, somehow getting him to swallow with a bit of water to follow.

 This would go on all night, her giving him a dose every hour. They talked of many things and fast became friends, both sharing a love of healing and helping, both adoring the high priest. It was then that she learned the high priest was an initiate into the Twice Born and would himself one day take the trials to become an ascended Master. Na’feti shivered, not all who went into the chambers of initiation came back out, but if you survived you were like the gods in knowledge and love. There could be no higher earthly aspiration in their eyes, and both vowed that night that they too would follow the path to join with the Children of Light.

 She learned that he had no family and had been taken in by the royal family. He and the prince had grown up in the palace as brothers. This explained the love and concern she saw in his eyes when he looked at the prince. He was worried about his best friend. Osar told her how the high priest had agreed to take him under his wing. The boys were destined to rule the world together. She did her best to assure him their destiny was written in the stars. Ra’Menes would rule forever, she promised.

 By noon the next day she allowed servants to enter. She needed the toilet, food and a bath. For now, she could take a break from the hourly doses, while he was given another round of belladonna to soothe his thrashing about. Many times, throughout the night, they had held down his arms and legs as the poisons wracked his body. Several times the boy had vomited foul black tar looking substances, but Na’feti never gave up. Osar had gained so much knowledge, and therefore, much respect for this little girl, no, young lady. For no mere child could do what she did.

 “Your bath is ready Lady Na’feti.” She was nearly falling asleep at the medicine table. She turned and handed him the bottle.

 “He must get 4 drops in two hours, then 5 drops in 4 hours, then 8 drops in 6 hours. I must awaken 30 minutes before the final drops. I will need more ingredients. More of everything.” She was swaying a little, so he steadied her by placing an arm around her waist until the servant girls could help her to the corner behind a screen, where they proceeded to bathe, dress, and feed her wonderful soup, before settling her into a soft feather bed. She instantly fell asleep, and did not awaken for many hours.

 While she slept, Osar kept watch over the patient, making sure to be on time with every dose. But it was the High Priest who awoke her with a kind smile. He looked much more rested and at ease. “It is time Na’feti. We will soon start the final treatments. You need to eat a little, to keep up your strength for what lies ahead.”

 She thanked him and dug into the plate of fruits and meats before her. The drink was sweet and fruity, yet cool and refreshing. Only once her hunger was satiated did she look around for Osar.

 “He’s gone to get some rest. In fact, you just missed him. I wanted to be the one to wake you.” His smile was contagious.

 “I’m glad you did sir. He needed the rest, but he was so worried I was afraid he wouldn’t leave.”

 She laughed with a small soft sound. This was still a very serious situation. She had to get to work on another round of deadly toxins which, if she made a mistake, not only would the prince die but she, her family, the high priest and all his household would be put to death, even the animals. She took a deep breath and steadied her nerves for the task ahead.

 “Give him the dose.” She said with more confidence than she felt.

 Having the high Priest there had her both nervous and assured. She knew he would watch her every move, yet she also couldn’t do this part without his help. In the temple their medical advancements were truly phenomenal. They had learned to utilize quartz crystals with everything from frequency healing to laser surgery. It was her dream to be allowed into the temple and trained to be a true healer.

 After he administered the belladonna potion, she flipped the glass and got to work. She had 30 minutes to mix deadly poisons with the upmost care. As she worked, the priest observed, but he also asked many questions which would led to long discussions throughout the night.

 When he showed her the art of healing through frequencies with crystal technology, it was her turn to be full of questions. He was very patient with her, yet never skipped a beat in his administrations.

 He taught her the power of song and music. When he sang his voice was rich and deep, she could feel the vibrations flowing through her and soothing her stressed nerves. She did all he asked with a hunger for knowledge and approval. He in turn played the humble assistant when it was her time to give the medication. During this night they would form a true friendship, as teacher to pupil, yet with a mutual respect. By the time the prince opened his eyes in the morning they had developed a lasting friendship.

 It was a rainy morning, but it felt like the sun was shining when the young prince opened his eyes, sat up, and asked for water. She practically ran to bring him a cold glass. His eyes were the deepest dark pools laced with amber, like flecks of gold. ‘He really is a god Child of the Sun’, she thought and was a little too stunned to say a word. Luckily the priest was right behind her speaking where she had no words.

 “My Lord, it is good to see you awake again. How are you feeling?” He sat on the bed beside the boy and took his hand.

 “My head and body hurt Alphie. How long was I asleep.”

 Alphie? She had never asked the high priest his name; that would have been rude, and she was better trained than to do that.

 The older man handed the boy a cup of liquid, “Drink this my lord. It will help with dehydration and other issues. You’ve been out for awhile, but I think it’s safe to say you are past the worst of the sickness. Take small sips, your stomach may not handle it all at once.”

 She watched quietly from behind the priest not knowing what to do or say at the moment. She didn’t have to worry, he turned, grabbed her hand, and pulled her to his side. “This my Lord Prince is the talented daughter of Mother Mayotha. Without her medicine and help you would not be alive today. She will stay by your side another night as she gives you the final round of medications.”

 She did her best to smile reassuringly and speak, but nothing came out as he looked at her with those deep brown eyes. He thanked her, then grabbed her hand and froze like that for a moment, smiling but not speaking. Then she realized it was her turn to speak.

 “Ah, anything for you, my Lord Prince.”

 Then he let go of her hand, and she felt the room suddenly seem so much colder and darker. His eyes were starting to close again.

 The high priest stood up, “We should let him sleep dear one. Come and eat, our lunch has been prepared.”

 She turned to see Osarmoses sitting at the table which was spread with many delights. He had taken the outer tunic off and looked gorgeous sitting there in just a dark blue lion cloth held by a gold belt to match the one lost in his curls. She hadn’t heard him enter or lay out all these dishes and it was clear from the smirk on his face that he enjoyed the surprise look on hers. Her hunger quickly overcame her annoyance at his arrogance. Besides he was just too handsome when he smiled. He stood up and poured them all drinks as they sat down to join him.

 He seemed a different boy now that the prince had awakened, now that the worry had gone.

 “I have to admit I was skeptical when I first saw you, but you have gone above and beyond in saving our Lord.”

 His smile was sincere, the kindness shining from his eyes. Again, she was nearly speechless, but this was because her mouth was very full. She had never had fish like this. It seemed to be cooked in a sauce of some fruit she could not identify either. She mumbled a reply around large scrumptious mouthfuls. There came a point where her eyes became so heavy, she couldn’t eat another bite. The last thing she remembered was her face smooshed against Osar’s hard chest as he packed her to her room.

 She would spend two weeks there aiding in the prince’s recovery. She became fast friends with both young men and the three would spend hours talking about medicine and spirituality. She learned that though they call each other brother, Osarmoses was actually found by the Queen who had taken him into her home. Though he could never be Pharoah he did receive certain privileges and honors. The pair of youths would take her all over the king’s house and even into the sacred pyramids. In this way she became the little sister they never had. It was a time she treasured always even though her life would ever be entwined with these men of court.

 In her present life, five years later, she was up and out early in the morning for her training in the temple. The High Priest had ever kept a watchful eye and guiding hand in her life. He had insisted she learn in the temple of Light and Healing, and she had gone every day since. She had also been allowed to assist him in several extreme cases of high clientele in certain parts of the city.

 Once they had traveled outside the city. It was then in the long carriage ride that he taught her the teachings of Thoth, the Great Atlantean, the God of Wisdom.

 “My dear child you must understand that this life is training for our souls. It operates under certain principles. The Laws Above made by the Great Creator are the laws of life here Below. Everything has a Cause and Effect, therefore what actions you take and energy you put out into the world will have an effect, either positive or negative. It is you who decides which it will be but know this, what you put out will come back to you. And never give in to hopelessness for in all we do there is a pendulum swing, if things seem in deep darkness know it will soon swing back to light. In this life or the next it all comes back around again. Are you getting this child?”

 It was a teasing question as he could see by her eager eyes that she was taking it all in, every word being logged into a permanent vault.

 “Yes sir. I understand. All is connected, all is energy, all is in the mind.”

 “Yes. Do not forget the Law of One.” But then he could see he had lost her for a moment as her eyes turned to the temple they were approaching. A magnificent structure of marble, ivory, and gold. A pyramid within a lush garden of every succulent flower and delicious fruit. It was surrounded by a moat filled with giant colorful fish.

 “We have arrived. Keep your eyes and ears open and do try to enjoy yourself. Only then did she notice there were far too many chariots.

 “Wait, are we not here to heal a great Lord?” Her confusion tickled him and his deep laugh reverberated off the mighty walls.

 “I do apologize. I had to trick you; your mother would never approve of the sort of celebrations my friends put on here. I thought a teenage girl might enjoy a little fun.”

 He laughed again as her mouth felt open. This place was even finer than the palace. Everyone was dressed so lavishly she looked down at her simple garments, sturdy wool fabric in an earth tone and her worn sandals. He saw her look and pulled a cloth out from his bag.

 “The prince insisted I bring this for you. I believe you will find a place to change near where we get out of the carriage. Refresh tents have been placed for guests to change into costumes before entering the party. You’ll find there are slippers provided inside as well. Just leave your clothes and shoes back here in the chariot.”

 She was speechless as she took his offered hand then that of the porter waiting to assist her down. She managed to mouth the words thank you as two servant girls whisked her into a tent. They seemed to do this often as without a word they grabbed the fine fabric from her hands, and began undressing, cleaning, then redressing her. The fabric was a silken shear cloth as white and soft as she had ever felt.

 She worried her body might be exposed, but the girls fit it around her expertly to hide all her female areas. They even worked her hair up so elegantly and painted her face till she didn’t recognize her own self in the copper reflector on the wall. She looked like a woman of the court. Then they pulled out big white feathers and positioned them high upon her head.

 “Wow is that necessary?” she felt like it might be going overboard.

 “The master has requested everyone be in costume. We were told you would be the swan.”

 They didn’t stop a second for the explanation and now were done and giving her old clothes back in a wad. She stepped onto the carpets provided worried she would never find the high priest again. A tall bird man stepped next to her. It looked like Thoth, but he spoke with the deep rich voice of the High Priest,” You look very beautiful Na’feti.”

 She saw his kind eyes shining back at her and breathed a sigh of relief.

 “Thank you so much. I’ve never seen anything like all this!” She squealed a little.

 He led them to the entrance where soft slippers were placed on their feet before they stepped into the most beautiful marble wonder. Everywhere she looked there was a swirl of exotic animal furs, feathers, and bright fabrics.

 “I’m so glad you are happy my dear. This is a very special party. The Lord who owns this is the Pharoah’s cousin, he owns vast lands and a shipping regiment. Every year he throws this party to celebrate his birthday and that of a special guest. It’s always fun to see who the guest will be.” He seemed to enjoy himself more than she thought he would have, always appearing so serious and dedicated to his spiritual path. She supposed there was nothing wrong with enjoying yourself.

 Before she realized it Anubis was at her side. His dark dog’s mask was so beautiful, lifelike, and adorned with gold as he stood there holding out a drink to her.

 “My lady, you are stunning! Drink this. The nectar of the gods, pretty bird.”

 “Prince Ra’Menes! What are you doing here?”

 With his dark eyes and smooth voice, she would know him anywhere, in any disguise. He had snuck up on her too many times, a voice shocking her from a dark corridor or cabinet. He often dressed as a guard, farmer, priest, servant, anything he could to sneak out the palace and take her and Osar on some adventure about the city. Many a night they roamed the streets, till they wound up on the sphinx. Sitting there you could see all, and the lights were like another sky mirroring the one above. As above so below, all in balance light and dark.

 “I don’t know this prince you speak of, sweet bird. I am the God of your dreams.” His dark eyes flashed. “You will anger the Gods”, she scolded.

 “I am a god, sweetheart” he whispered with honey on his tongue in such a way that sent a shiver down her spine. Then he swept her up and danced for what seemed hours. They were two different people, it felt to her. For a while he was a powerful god and she just a helpless bird under his spell. With all eyes upon her, she could only see his which shone with adoration. She felt like a princess as he spun her around, his hands holding her waist firm, yet sensually.

 All too soon it ended, and her side felt cold without him there. Everyone found their places around a long, very long table. The prince sat so far away at the head, to be revealed as the surprise birthday guest.

 She was more interested in the delicious foods than him. So many exotic dishes she had to try them all. As she stuffed her face, it was a relief to be sitting between two old priests. Across from her was an elegantly dressed older lady. Why the poor dear was shoved down there in the unimportant seats she would soon find out. Seemed the fragile old thing was losing her sanity. She couldn’t seem to find her mouth half the time and mostly she sat there talking to her plate.

 Na’feti felt bad for her, but she couldn’t even reach the woman to wipe her mouth. She had to look away and focus on the delectable dishes before her. Roast lamb happened to be her favorite and no one else around her even touched it. She filled up her plate and was rather lost in it when she felt a hand on her shoulder. Ra’Menes was standing behind her, his Anubis head removed. He was more handsome than she had ever seen him and found herself suddenly nervous and embarrassed by the grease all over her hands and face.

 He handed her his handkerchief, “One final dance, Na’feti the Beautiful.” His smile was dashing and captivating. She quickly washed her food down with the whole glass of wine. She didn’t even bother handing his cloth back, it was covered in grease. Maybe she wouldn’t eat lamb next time, if there was a next time.

 “You are so beautiful. I must have you, all of you.” His voice had taken on a sensual tone that sent shivers to her toes and back. Normally she would have playfully punched or joked away his passes at her; it was a game they played, she never thought he actually meant it. Till tonight that is, for there was no mistaking the lust in his eyes or the tingles along her skin where he touched her.

 “Ra’Menes, my lord, are you not on the path of the twice born and must be celibate like your brother Osar. I don’t want to be a temptation.” Yet she did not pull away but danced on very close to him.

 “Oh, those are just guidelines sweetness. Zaidor says that Pharaohs are gods above the Twice Born. I need not undergo the ordeal.”

 “Zaidor? Who is he?” She was confused now.

“He is my advisor and the next High Priest.” He said this as he quickly twirled her away knowing that her mind would be spinning like the rest of her.

“But I thought Osarmoses was to be the next High Priest and your advisor?’ She was losing her steps now, not sure why he would even talk of another High Priest when their own was about to become a Twice Born Master. His initiation was set in two weeks. Then Osar would take his place. It had been their plan since she had known them.

 “The old bird isn’t what he used to be. Zaidor says he is going senile. Losing his mind and probably should step down. My father, too, has lost his edge. It is time for a new regime. The old ways are done. You are going to be part of something new and wonderful. You will be mine.”

 As he said this, he pulled her so close, and that last part was whispered against her neck. Her knees went weak, the wine hit her head, and the music carried her away in his arms. She forgot all about his change of plans and predictions for their future, till the carriage ride home.

 When she found herself sitting comfortably beside the kind old priest once more on the road to Cairo. In a little buzzed flutter, she spilled all the prince had said and her crying self fell upon the lap of the old man.

 He stroked her hair, “There, there, little bird, it is as I suspected. Now you mustn’t tell anyone. This must stay between us. Not even Osar must know his brother’s heart has changed. He is so close to finishing his seven years of training so he too may join the Twice Born. I am so proud of him. No let the brothers be, and it may happen that one can bring the other to the light.”

 She sat up wiping away her tears. “Zaidor is a priest of the Temple. Is he not a Light Worker as well, Good Master?”

 “My child, I fear the worst. It is true he has made it into the order and has recruited several others. The brothers celebrate him, saying he is bringing life back to the order because our numbers have dwindled. Remember in life quantity is not always quality. Our knowledge is not for everyone and our mysteries hold great power which must be safeguarded from those seeking to use that power for evil. We carry the light passed down through time from the one true God. Teaching that all men are heirs to Godhood. We learn that this is but one of many in the journey of the souls towards enlightenment.” He grabbed both her hands and held them together, looking deep into her eyes.

 “My child, stay on the path of light. There are signs that bad is to come. I don’t want to frighten you, but trust in Osar. He is a true follower of the Way.” There was so much fear in his tone she sobered a little and sat up very straight.

 “Master please, I don’t understand. Are you going somewhere? What danger? Is something going to happen to Ra’Menes?”

 “Ra’Menes will be fine. Zaidor, I suspect is a Ba’al priest infiltrator. It would not be the first time those workers of evil cults have tried to infiltrate our ranks. This one is most crafty. He has brought in so many of his brethren, I fear I can’t say anything to my brothers without his hearing. It will take some time for me to block Zaidor’s intentions. Pay attention and keep quiet.” The fear had gone and was once more replaced by kindness. She vowed to never forget his words as she fell asleep against the pillowed armrest. That would be the last time she would see the old man.

 She woke up in her room in the palace. Familiar as her own at home after all these years of staying random nights there. He wasn’t there when she woke up and he would be far too busy to speak with her in the coming weeks.

 Then without warning, he passed away. The new High Priest declared the old man’s heart failed and he died peacefully. Her sorrow knew no bounds.

 She sat between Ra’Menes and Osar during his funeral and cried as they each tried to comfort her. Osar in his quiet way, keeping his strong front; distant in his pain for his lost mentor and perhaps for the loss of his promised position.

 Zaidor handled the ceremonies along with his chosen priest. The Brothers of Light sat on the sidelines with everyone else. How easily the power dynamic had shifted. This very thought dried her eyes and gave her further clarity. She recalled the words of the former high priest in the carriage that night.

 Those words echoed with her still today and caused a slight chill to hit her spine even in the warm sunlight. She knew soon she would finally be able to discuss them with her best friend Osar, for tomorrow was the day he was to begin the Ritual of The Twice Born.

 Then he would face the greatest challenge of his life, he would go down into the chambers under the temple and endure the tests and trails that would take him to the edge of death. In the netherworld, his soul would be weighed in the scales of his good deeds and bad. If he was found worthy, then he would gain the choice to Ascend and fight the darkness on the other side or stay here and be a teacher and guild to his fellow man.

 Not all who went down into the chambers came back. She felt such a wild mix of emotions; excited for her friend who had worked so hard for this goal, fearful he might lose his life, and worried that Zaidor might try something.

 She took a deep breath and another, trying to steady her emotions. Osar would sense her fear; it would spoil his big day. She must push down all these negative thoughts and feelings. The birds were singing, the weather was absolutely perfect. There was an unusually bright star out in the day. It must be a good sign that all would be just fine.

 Perhaps Ra’Menes was right; the old man had been unwell, and she hadn’t known. She had heard no one else speak of a temple to Ba’al. The Hyksos workers had built an odd temple to their god. But all reports in the palace said they were harmless. Perhaps there was no cult to Ba’al anyway and Zaidor was an honorable man of light and healing.

 Yes, there was nothing to worry about. She smiled and hummed a song as she headed toward the temple. Today Ra’Menes was to be wed to the Princess of Southern Sudan. She had to be there early to help, so she rushed off in excitement. All thoughts of evil washed away in the fresh morning air.

 Chapter 2

 Zaidor smiled as the prince walked away. That little brat was eating right out of his hands. The kingdom was his now. Pharaoh was bedridden thanks to his carful administration of a most deadly poison over the course of a few years. As the leader of the priest to the god Ba’al, Zaidor had been trained in the dark arts. He was made to make, use, and even personally ingest every poison known to man. He was also well versed in spells and blood rites, and it was to this he rushed off now.

 The elder priest and the few followers left of the Twice Born Children of Light were no longer a problem anymore. Soon, he would gain access into the inner sanctum where they hid their most sacred text. There, he would learn how the Sons of Fire made their bright blades and how the Masters moved massive stones so easily. They had yet to let him, or his followers find the hidden records, but he would fix that shortly.

 He left the palace ground cloaked in a heavy coarse woolen cape. The route had been cleared ahead of him; no guards were at their stations to even guess who he might be. He had been very careful. This whole plan had been 40 years in the making, he was the final piece to the puzzle, Lord Ba’al’s true champion. He would succeed where all others had failed. He would make no mistakes and he would gain the power of the very gods.

 He came to a crumbling, abandoned earthen shack. In a small yard adjacent to the rotting home, a scrawny goat gnawed on grass next to an even thinner old man on a tiny stool. He sat there whittling a piece of wood, never looking up. One wondered if he could see at all. The skin of his eyebrows and lids sagged down over the eyes.

 Zaidor ignored the old man proceeding straight to the doorway draped in a rag filter than old man and goat. It was dark inside, but he didn’t need light, he had designed this building himself. He knew exactly where to walk to avoid traps. He had personally installed the lever which opened the door to the underground passage.

 The torches lit as the door closed above him. This spell was simple child’s play, but one of his favorites. He loved the whoosh as they simultaneously ignited.

 He waved his hand speaking the ancient demonic tongue, thereby sealing the doors behind him. There would be no interruptions tonight. His priests should already be in their places, with everything prepared for the ritual tonight. The stars were in perfect alignment, this must be done tonight.

 Tonight was particularly special for him because he would drink the purest of virgin blood. He turned one final time to see the large red door before him, it was heavily carved with runes. All painted over in blood turned dark brown. He sealed this one too behind him with a hand movement and ancient words. He would take no chance in displeasing the dark Lord.

 Inside, a fire burned in a large brazier in the center of the room. On the far wall was an altar of stone blacked with old blood. Already a pure white goat had been tied upon the slab. It had been slightly drugged to keep it calm, but not enough to tamper with the blood. At the head of the altar sat a beautifully ornate golden chalice, a golden blade lay next to it. A small groove ran the length of the table all around to the foot of the stone where a collection bowl was carved out. Another groove ran off from that to where the overflow could drain into a vase.

 An infant of 11 days was being held in a priest’s arms, sleeping peacefully unaware of its destiny. A small girl of 11 years sat calmly on the stone floor where she was bound to a post. She had been gagged so she couldn’t scream, and like the baby and the goat, had been lightly sedated. Her glazed eyes gave one the impression her soul had retreated already to save her from the pain ahead.

 He didn’t really care for sedation, he liked to hear them scream in real terror, to see the fear in their eyes, and the smell of their panicked sweat. It had begun to be his only true arousal. Perhaps too many years of being tortured himself as a child, youth, and man had brought him to this desire. Every method he used had first been done on him, and every poison he killed with, he had first endured unto the brink of death.

 Zaidor was a man who knew pain well, relished in it, and administered it with great precision. In fact, down the corridor a few twists and turns away, he had a plaything tied to the wall. He had pulled out every one of this handsome young man’s nails in his hands and feet. It had been most exquisite because it had dragged out for hours. The boy could only take so much pain before he passed out. Zaidor didn’t mind at all, in fact it gave him more time to savor his pleasure. So, he took his time ripping them out slowly; the young man’s screams in his head like a symphony and he the Maestro. Perhaps tomorrow he would drive small spikes through his balls and soak in the screams. But tonight, he had a grand orchestra to play.

 Alkenan, approached him straight away. He was the leader of a wild southern tribe. His people were nomads. He was a prince who had been betrayed by his brother, his army left to die upon an island, their ship sunk. He and his men had almost died while they struggled to build a raft big enough for all to leave safely. When they finally made the long journey back home, revenge burned as white-hot volcanoes ready to blow. They had been murderous before but now they went on a ruthless bloodbath upon their old kingdom. Alkenan burnt it to the ground after mutilating and massacring everyone they ever knew.

 He and his army called no land home and therefore roamed about taking as their dark hearts desired. Tonight, his bloodlust would truly be fulfilled as he was initiated into the Temple of Ba’al. Tonight, he would set the destiny of his people and seal the fate of Egypt.

 “Zaidor, I’m very excited to be here.” He didn’t smile or seem excited, but Zaidor supposed that was as much emotion as a seasoned warrior could ever show. Still best to put this cur in his place, least the dog steps out of line.

 “That’s Master to you Initiate. In The House of Lord Ba’al, neither your royal title nor military rank will gain you favor. Our Lord sees your heart and suffering. By pain and sacrifice we are purified. Through the blood you will find eternal life of wealth and health. May the Lord bless you.”

 He needed this man’s vicious army to overthrow all those loyal to the pharaoh or Sons of Fire. He may have made it to High Priest by the brat king’s orders, but those bastard old men in the temple were still refusing him admittance to the inner sanctum.

 It was all the former High Priest’s fault. That old man had never trusted him, though all the other Masters hailed Zaidor as the golden boy who would save the order. A few weeks before the old guy had died, the master had suddenly grown cold, and he found himself shut out of the most important meetings. It was too late, though, for he had already won over the prince and ensured himself as their leader anyway. Yet, even now they still refused him the most sacred text.

 Tomorrow that would change. Tomorrow, he would ordain the new Pharoah, his own puppet. Those old men would never refuse him again. The following day his mutt brother, Osar, would go through his initiation into the Twice Born and Zaidor had vowed to be there. He would go down into the inner chambers of the Sons of Fire and ensure that the false prince never saw the light of day again. After which, no one in court or temple could stop his plans.

 Tonight, he would endure this wild pirate prince. Like he did with the Egyptian prince, he would build up Alkenan then destroy him when he was done. Much as he had murdered the former pharaoh and then said the vary death chants to see he never made it to the underworld. Now his order had been planning a long time for the upcoming takeover. It had been decided the war and uprising would destroy Cairo’s holy regime. First weaken the Twice Born’s hold on the nobility and Egyptian people, then stir up the Hyksos workers.

 The Hyksos were a huge population of workers and artisans who had migrated to Egypt during one of the worst famines, and now would serve this purpose nicely. It would be easy to cause disorder and chaos amongst the population. Although they didn’t have a government, they did, however, have a council of elders and religious men who followed the main Egyptian religion. At the moment, it was mostly monotheistic due to the Twice Born domination. This meant that, as High Priest, they already were eating out of his hand. He could command them as he did all he Egyptians, yet he knew they were a proud people and wouldn’t follow an outsider as loyally as a man of their own.

 The Brothers of Ba’al were everywhere, ever listening, learning, whispering; they made many things happen without lifting a finger. Zaidor had learned that Osar had a blood brother, Aper’El’Aron, and it was this man he had selected to be a leader over the Hyksos. Over the years, he had given Aper’El responsibilities and privileges which gained him many friends and much respect. Everything had gone according to plan. Aper’El’Aron was loved and trusted by the Hyksos people, and he was Zaidor’s puppet.

 Alkenan was another story. The man was willful and reckless. He knew only the immediate satiation of his lust with no control or thought for the future. It had taken some smooth talking to keep the man from invading Cairo already. If he wanted blood, Zaidor would give him blood aplenty. If the prophecy was correct, blood would rain from the very sky.

 A black robed figure approached him with a silken cloth as Zaidor washed his hands in herbal infused water. The robed man dried Zaidor’s hands, then pulling a bottle from within his robes, he oiled the holy hands and disappeared into the darkness as quickly as he had appeared.

 “Wash your hands initiate and stand behind me.”

 Alkenan did as asked while a drum began to beat. Several hooded figures materialized in the center near a fire brazier, they chanted in an ancient tongue words which should have stayed forgotten, a dark chant to the underworld.

 A thick smoke coiled around the room, it’s scent of sulfur and death. Zaidor grabbed the jeweled knife, loving the way it gleamed in the red firelight. The goat before him bleated and squirmed uncomfortably as the man began to chant. His voice resonated in song, loud and deep, as the knife sliced the goat’s stomach open, and it screamed till he severed the heart. This he took to the golden calf upon the altar, squeezing blood all over it before placing it in the fire. The hooded figures removed the goat and placed the girl.

 The meat would feed the priest. How the Lord provided for his children! Was he not doing these fools a favor in liberating them from the chains of righteousness? Already every politician in town had come to his meeting of late-night pleasures and debauchery. Had they not all expended themselves with his temple harlots, and drank deeply from the Red Chalice? They had, and tomorrow the new pharaoh would join their ranks below.

 His smile froze the shaking girl beneath him, the pure malice, the seething evil she saw in those eyes would haunt her soul for lifetimes. She knew paralyzing fear as the raised knife caught the firelight a moment before he drove it into her stomach. That fear stopped her screams in her throat, much to his displeasure. He wanted to slow down, give her time to grasp the reality and really scream in terror, but the other priests were waiting, all ready for a taste; the ritual must proceed forward.

 Like the goat, it was her heart he took first and sacrificed it to his god, while the underlings collected blood in the chalice. He sprinkled the blood upon the altar, calf, and himself, still chanting his masterful spell. While burning the heart, he took a deep drink of the red chalice. He could feel her sweet innocence flowing through him as an intoxicating wine. They kept them so pure in the temples to the goddesses.

These beautiful daughters of Greece were untouched by man and spoiled on fine wines and fruits. He simply loved their flavor. But not as much as his next victim.

 He dipped his finger in the blood and painted a cross on the next priest, then gave him the drink. This would proceed till all the priests, then Alkenan, had been blessed and drank to the last drop. As Zaidor knew, the man’s eyes were full of pleasure not revolution. He had him now, owned him.

 The baby was already on the table. First, he had to proceed with other steps of the ritual: throw herbs in the fire, sprinkle oil upon the altar, ring a bell, and even anointed his hands and the baby. With the completion of this spell the blood of every child in the kingdom would flow. It had all been foretold. Even the Twice Born knew they could not stand before the beast of the Heavenly abyss, the Great Eater of Worlds. He would rise and laugh as they all burned and writhed in torment.

 Zaidor’s hand shook in excitement, and he had to breathe deeply a moment, the drum beat the only sound. When he grabbed the child’s head and raised the knife beginning the last chant, the baby screamed as if it sensed its impending death. This sweet morsal was not for lesser priests, it was sacred, and only reserved for he and Ba’al. He would drain every drop of blood, then cook the meat in the fire, alongside the hearts of the other two sacrifices.

 When he turned to sprinkle all the priests in the blood, he noticed Alkenan seemed most eager for more and drank deeply from the proffered cup. Yes, he would have to watch this one, he thought, for the man showed the same lust Zaidor knew in his own heart. It was a dangerous lust for power that would slaughter all in it’s path and many more. Death walked with this man, followed him like a hungry shadow, waiting to pounce on any pulse nearby. Indeed, he would watch this man closely, but for now, it was time to get him back out of the city unseen.

 With the ritual complete, he walked to the basin and washed his hands and face. Then changed robes back to his peasant disguise.

 “Nostram!” He yelled.

 A massive, hooded figure approached. You will accompany our friend to the southern exit.”

 The hood nodded. Turning to Alkenan he said, “I will go as far as I can, but I really must get back to the palace. It’s a big day tomorrow; there’s a royal wedding as you know.”

 “I understand completely, I’ve much to do myself.” Breathing in deeply he smiled’ “What of that meat?” he licked his lips where a bit of blood still clung to the edges.

 “That would be for our Lord. The best always goes to our God.” (And Me), he thought resisting the urge to smile and lick his own lips in anticipation.

 “Look Alkenan, you are now a brother for life. Our Lord will see that a new age dawns here soon. You and I shall rule this world. Egypt is only the beginning. Once Cairo falls, all the other cities will crumble in disorder. We shall take their ships and conquer even the Greeks who think themselves akin to the gods. We will make them all serve us as their gods!”

 “A Glorious new age is upon us! You my good man are now a part of something far greater than yourself, or your people. Have your men ready a month hence we shall take this world by storm.”

 “My men are ready now. They have been ready and every moment we delay we run the risk of the Egyptian army discovering our intentions.”

 Zaidor stopped and turned on the man starring down at him from his height of 6’4. He was a towering man and used that to intimidate others to his will.
“As I’ve said, there are many things to be taken care of within these walls or this whole operation will fail as quickly as it began. It is I who will see that your men make it inside palace and temple alike without Pharoah’s whole army upon you. If the Twice Born get wind of an attack, all the treasure will be lost to us. We must have those texts.”

 “What do I care for your stupid text. You promised all the riches of Pharoah. Keep your scrolls priest, the gold is mine.”

 With that he turned down the tunnel leading out the city, leaving Zaidor to glare at his back and plot the many ways he would kill the man. His anger boiling, he chose a tunnel leading much deeper down into the catacombs. Perhaps a little time with his pet would calm him down. There was still plenty of time to prepare for tomorrow’s ceremonies. He deserved a little time to himself, to enjoy himself.

 As he opened the door the boy looked up with fear in his eyes and his whole body tensed. Yes, he definitely deserved a little something all his own. The table in the corner was already set with his meal. Seems his servants knew him well. The ritual had been rushed but now he could take his time and enjoy.

 CHAPTER 3

 Osar stood at the servant’s entrance into the palace. He didn’t realize he had been holding his breath until he saw her running towards him. A huge sigh escaped him. He had been worried he had missed her and was standing there for nothing. However here she was now, red cheeked from running, dressed in plain servants’ clothes, yet somehow looking radiant as a goddess.

 “What are you doing? Shouldn’t you be getting dressed?” she managed to say while trying to catch her breath.

 “I’ve been waiting on you silly girl. I’ve got a surprise. Come with me.” He grabbed her hand and led her down the hall.

 “Where are we going Osar? I must help get things ready for the wedding.”

 “Don’t worry about that. There are plenty of actual servants to do His Majesty’s bidding.”

 After several twists and turns, they stood before her door, where he produced a key and dragged her inside.

 She gasped when she saw the most beautiful lapis blue dress on the bed. The table beside it was covered in a variety of jewelry for hair and body. There was another table upon which make-up and implements of beautification lay.

 “What is going on? What is all of this?”

 She was even more breathless now than when she had come upon him, and he wanted to kiss her more than ever. But his training was to resist all lust of the body. He quickly went to the jewelry table. He chose a Lapis necklace and brought it to her neck. She pulled her hair up out of his way.

 “Well, I am obligated to attend my brother’s wedding and I’d very much like it if you would accompany me. There, that will look lovely with your dress.”

 She looked down and touched the necklace. “It’s beautiful, I’ll take good care of it.”

 “It’s yours. The dress too. I do hope you like it. I remembered you loved that color and well, it matches my own tunic.” He met her eyes and felt himself overcome by her charms as she smiled, and then jumped into his arms.

 “I love it. I love it! Oh, this is more than I could ever have hoped for. Oh, I’m so very happy.” Then she kissed his cheek and stopped his heart.

 “I…I …uh…I’ve got to get ready for the greeting ceremony when the princess arrives. I’ll return for you shortly. Um…the house girls will help you get ready.” He said as he opened the door to leave, and three servant girls entered.

 With the door safely closed, he leaned against it and attempted to catch his breath and calm his body. She was truly amazing, but he couldn’t let his mind wander. Mind over matter. There were so many things more important he needed to think about. There was much he had to discuss with her tonight. He had to keep his feelings in check.

 He left her door and headed toward his own. He had much to finish today before he would begin the hardest trial of his life. In the meantime, he would pretend to enjoy the wedding festivities.

 Within a short time, he was ready and knocking on her door. The three servant girls exited and there stood the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. Her luxurious black hair flowed past her pert behind. Decorated only by a thin gold headband adorned with lapis flowers, her blue dress revealed her rich caramel skin, and accentuated it perfectly. Her hazel eyes were even more vibrant than usual in contrast to the thick black eye liner.

 His eyes were drawn to the lapis necklace at her neck and his breath caught in his throat to see the center stone dangling between her ample breasts.

 “What do you think.?” She smiled and he somehow remembered to breathe again.

 “You are simply exquisite. I’m happy you agreed to accompany me. First, we will ride the boat to meet the princess. Then with the full wedding party we sail back into the city.”

 He was surprised he sounded so calm and collected. This woman always had a different effect upon him. Now she was testing all his training.

 “You mean I get to ride in the wedding boats?! This is Amazing! Thank you, thank you.” She ran up and hugged him before he could stop her, and it was over before he could hug her back. She was already out the door and hurrying down the hall.

 “I’ve never been on a boat. Have you Osar?” She didn’t turn to see if he was following, she knew he was behind her.

 “Yes, Na’feti I’ve been on a boat many times. I’m sure you will enjoy this journey. The Nile holds many wonders.”

 He heard her let out a squeal of excitement. He hated to hold her back, but they couldn’t go charging off to the docks.

 “But first we must meet with my brother and Zaidor. We are to walk with them to the main boat. Also we will ride in our own personal one on the return trip as the main boat will then be occupied with the Princess’s entourage.”

 She had finally slowed down to hear all he said and let him take the lead since she had no idea where they were going. She grabbed his hand and squeezed a little.

 “I’m so excited. I’ve only been to the river that one time we all went fishing. Ra’Menes was hilarious pretending he knew what he was doing, and then fell down the bank into the mud!”

 She laughed in remembrance of the proper Prince covered in mud.

 “I thought I looked rather dashing covered in earth.”

 Ra’Menes had crept behind them and now he laughed heartily as Na’feti screamed a little and nearly jumped to the ceiling. He loved to scare her any chance he could.

 “Ra’Menes, you scoundrel!” She scolded him but smiled anyway and hugged him big. “I’m so happy for you! Crowned Pharoah and married today! This is the best!”

 He grabbed her hand, “I’d give it all up to run away with you. You are a vision in blue!” He kissed her hand then pulled her close.

 “Ra’Menes, I am so happy for you on this day.”

 Osar grabbed his brother in an embrace pulling him away from the lovely damsel. Ra’Menes would just use her as a mistress. Better to keep him focused on the task at hand.

 “My brother I thank you. This will be a most epic week for us and our family. You really going through with that ritual?” He sounded skeptical, what person of royalty could adhere to those strict rules and laws. Osar knew Ra’Menes could never have abstained from all the vices he held dear like fine food, wines, and ladies.

 “You know it’s all I’ve ever wanted. Now tell me are you really going to marry the woman your father chose for you before you were born?”

 He had always figured his brother would find a way to convince their father differently, but he hadn’t gotten the chance before Pharaoh died.

 “I have to leave out early in the morning to sail down to the last of the Twice Born temples.”

 “Wait. I thought you would use the chambers beneath the pyramids. Where are you going?”

 “Well, I could use those chambers but all the Twice Born priest are at the remote temple.” He hoped his brother wouldn’t push the issue.

 “Oh, Osar I wanted to be there for you buddy. I suppose I’m just happy you can be here for my big day.”

 He smiled big and locked arms with both as they walked to the large front hall. His smile and arms dropped as soon as he laid eyes on Zaidor. He stepped away from them and joined the High Priest as the wedding party made for the journey to the water’s edge.

 It was a short walk, but many servants lined the way, ready to assist if their prince might need anything, like various drinks or food. Some held huge cloth fans to keep him cool and shaded from the sun. After that walked a line of guards on either side to protect from the crowd. The whole city was celebrating their new pharaoh and his wedding. There was music coming from all directions. Everywhere they saw flashes of bright colors from ribbons, sashes, and banners. The people too flashed brightly in their festive best. They could smell the savory aroma of roasting meets and baking treats.

 Osar and Na’feti hung back a little and let the court proceed ahead. When they made it to the dock, he gently guided Na’feti aboard. She could barely walk she was gawking so much.

 The boats were beautiful with ornate carvings all along their wooden sides and rails. The center mast had been painted in gold and adorned with every beautiful flower which existed on the continent. In fact, throughout all the boats, the eye was met everywhere with gold glinting in the sun through a rainbow of flowers.

 He didn’t notice the festivities, but his focus was on the girl by his side. She marveled at the way the front went up into a high arch that curled into the ship, where a beautiful statue of the soon to be married couple had been placed for all to see. She remarked that the bride was lovely in such a perfect African goddess style. A hutch was built under the main sail which, when unfurled, would stretch to either side of the boat.

 The room was partially open with curtains that could be closed for privacy or mosquito protection. The posts had all been painted with gold and white flowers. There were soft pillows and couches as well as tables full of fruits and drinks. Servants with fans stood at each corner.

 The wedding party had gathered in the hutch, and many were reclining and sipping strong drinks. A servant placed a glass of fermented nectar in her hand; it smelled sweet and spicy. They turned away from the crowd and back to the deck activities. Everywhere sailors were moving as the boats began to leave the dock.

 Amidst the sparkling clear waters in the morning sun sat festively decorated woven reed crafts. They ranged from simple fishing boats to large merchant ships all brightly festooned, but none were as beautiful or adorned as the royal barge. Every eye upon the river watched them sail by. Here and all along their journey they would find boats full of celebrators.

 He watched her taking it all in, her eyes were green today and they shone with a light of wonder that dulled even the emerald of the waters. Before he could grab her arm, his brother swooped in by her side. He was dashing in his wedding tunic, white against his dark skin. Against his brother’s charming smile and debonair ways, Osar could not compete in the moment.

 His mind was on somber things, however he felt Ra’Menes’s joy and energy on this day. Today was his brother’s day to shine, he would try to enjoy himself so as to not spoil the festivities.

 He saw Ra’Menes wrap an arm around her and encourage her to finish her drink as he turned away to examine the goodies upon the tables. What exotic delights had been prepared! His brother did always have such eccentric tastes, but he had really gone all out to impress the new bride. He chose a pink fruit that looked juicy and smelled sweet. Turned out it was very delicious and for a moment he was lost in flavor till she tickled his side and made him jump a little.

 “Ah, Na’feti, don’t do that. A priest shouldn’t giggle.”

 He said as he pushed her hands from his sides and placed in them the fruits he had picked up.

 “What’s this?’ she mumbled over a dripping mouthful. Making him giggle again most unpriestly like.

 “That my dear angel is a Yatza fruit. Early people used it to cure issues with stomach ulcers, temper fever, and as…,”

 “As an aphrodisiac.” Cut In Ra’Menes with a wink and a sly smile.

 “Well, yes that too, to be precise. But only in southern parts of the continent.” Osar finished where his brother had interrupted.

“Oh, should I be worried? Trying to romance me with plant facts.” She gave the boys a flashing smile.

 “Not Osar, Old Boy, our dear Twice Born to be. Light of Egypt!” Ra’Menes raised his glass in toast, but Osar raised his too and declared loudly, “Not I, It is Pharoah who is the Light of Egypt. All hail Pharoah, Light of The World. Hail, The Morning Star.”

 Na’feti, having no glass in hand, raised her fruit next to their glasses, then took another gigantic bite which caused them all to laugh heartily. Ra’Menes was quick to hand her a proper drink of a dark pomegranate liqueur.

 Osar was worried about their little flower, she didn’t often drink fermented beverages. He wondered why his brother seemed determined to get her drunk. Well, it was good she was his date and he wasn’t drinking. He would have to maneuver her away from the wedding party.

 He watched as she laughed with a courtesan, a proud young lord with a bronze face that would have been handsome but for his very large nose. It was just a bit too big to be regal. Yet he wore it as if it were crown of honor. And it gave him no trouble with the ladies as was plain to see now as he leaned in on Na’feti, getting far too close for Osar’s liking. Now he felt desperation growing in his stomach. All these years he had feared she would be scooped up by handsome courtesan.

 She had always been such a devoted priestess, keeping her heart upon her plants, potions, and healing duties. He had admired her so much for her dedication to the cause of healing. He often tried to pretend she wasn’t the goddess of his dreams. He fought it off every time she was near and smiled at him sweetly.

 Now he grabbed another interesting plate of fruit and then grabbed her hand claiming her attention and pulling her to her feet.

 “My Osar! Is that some more sweet delights you hold for me?” she squealed completely forgetting the cocky lord attempting to gain her favors and allowed Osar to lead her to the deck.

 The rowers were in full stride and the boat was cruising down the river. All along the shore, people had come out in celebration. There were clusters of boats and crowded beaches where people danced and drank. As they floated by, the people shouted praise to the new pharaoh, then the music would swell, until the entourage floated out of sight.

 Once they were past most towns and festivities, they found a spot near the bow where there were no other guests.

He was mesmerized watching her eat the strange purple fruit with her eyes wide watching the animals of the river.

 “What are those things in the water? They are huge!!” She about squealed again in her excitement.

 “Those are the water horses. They are mighty and dangerous, but the people think they are sacred. Not like the crocodile you will see many of as we go along. They are large reptiles that will eat anything they come across. Many children and cattle have been lost in this part of the river. It gives life but it also takes it away.”

 His voice had gone very quiet and grim. He realized she was looking at him with sadness on the verge of tears.

 “Don’t worry dear, we keep them from the city’s interior. No one will get hurt in populated areas, and the fisherman are well aware of their dangers. I’m just being my usual morbid self. Let it not ruin the celebration for you.”

 “Oh, its ok, I know well the circle of life. I’m not a child anymore so you need not worry about protecting my feelings. I’ve just never seen such massive monsters in person. I guess I didn’t take time to study the temple walls. I have not really looked them at since I was a child.” She sighed as she stared off at the hippo herd on the west bank.

 “What’s the matter?”

 He could feel something was troubling her beyond random deaths on the river.

 “It’s just, I had always wanted to study medicine in Greece, you know see to world and find new medicines. I just couldn’t leave here.”

 “What? Why would you deny your dream? I’m following mine, though it may take me from all I know. I want you to follow your heart too.” He held her now very sticky fingers.

 “I didn’t want to leave you alone. The High Priest…well not Zaidor…uh...he said I should watch out for you. Because of Zaidor. I wasn’t supposed to say anything. I’m just so worried.” Her bright eyes were so troubled now it tore at his heart.

 “Oh, sweet one, I appreciate your concern. This is not the place to discuss these things, but I had sensed you knew more than you let on. In fact, it is for this reason I invited you along. Let’s get you cleaned up before we meet the princess. We should be there shortly then we will move to our private boat. There will not even be a need for an oarsman as the boats will be tied together.”

 He tried to sound as calm and reassuring as possible and apparently it worked because her brow unfurled. She looked down at her fruit-stained hands and laughed.

 “I guess I am a mess. Where can I wash on this boat, Oh and pee.”

 Now it was his turn to chuckle, “Yes that nectar goes right through a body. You will find a small room at the rear of the boat. Everything you need is inside. I’ll meet you back with everyone at the hutch.”

 With that they parted ways for a moment. Later she joined him on a sofa piled with large fluffy pillows. Ra’Menes was on one end, clearly he had a good buzz. He and everyone else were enthralled in the story a young Hyksos was animating. The blue sash tied upon the man’s fringed tunic suggested he was priest and the quality of his fabric told he was of high standing. So, this must be Zaidor’s pet, Aper’El’Aron he had heard about. Better to be careful around this one.

 The rest of their time was spent much this way lounging and listening to stories the Lords presented as each tried to outdo the other. The Hyksos priest seemed most charismatic and favored of the group.

 Then the sound of drums brought everyone out their chairs and onto the deck where it wasn’t long before the bridal party was in view. Her boats were all painted bright colors and decked in flowers much like their own, but the boat holding the bride was sheer magnificence. It was pure white Alabaster stone. It was only large enough for a few rowers on the deck because there was a roofed dais in the center where the bride and her lady attendants sat upon overstuffed cushions.

 As the boats came closer the curtains were parted and all could behold the most beautiful woman, they had laid eyes on. Her red and white dress had been accentuated in gold, pearls, and red gem beadworks. Where the gold and beads laced across her face and neck, they made her skin stand out in dark radiant contrast. Every man there forgot to breath as she stepped forward. None even noticed her father and mother upon the other boat till it was next to their own and the king was calling out a cheerful greeting as the drums banged intermediately, but harder, then ended with four heavy hits.

 Once all the introductions were finished, the king bound the couple’s hands and gave them his blessing. There was more music then and much embracing. After that everyone went to their own boats to begin the trek back to the capital. Finally, he had some time alone with Na’feti.

 He helped her into the his reed boat. There was a small cabin, but it was well equipped for the journey back. There were beverages and foods provided, a pile of cushions and blankets, as well as a curtained off latrine area. There were screens on every side which could be used to enclose the room and curtains for privacy or mosquito protection.

 There was so much he needed to say that for a while he couldn’t speak. He didn’t know where to start. In the end it was she who initiated the conversations.

 “You knew Zaidor was evil this whole time, and you didn’t say anything!” She punched him in the arm to show him how much he really frustrated her.

 “Oh, you knew too and didn’t say anything either. I mean he is not evil, at least I don’t think so. Just a bad guy.”

 He looked out over the water; they were moving fast now. So fast that the sound of the drums from the retreating armada had all faded away as had the boats themselves downriver.

 “Hey, I was under strict orders not to say anything till the time was right. I guess the time is right.” She lowered her voice and her head.

 Our Order holds many precious secrets which must be guarded closely from these workers of the dark. Master moved the center of the Order and our sacred artifacts to the mountain monastery. I must travel there tomorrow for my initiation. I wanted to ask if you would come with me there to stand by my side.”

 She grabbed his hand, “I would want nothing more. Master asked me to be there for you. I can’t believe it will not be in the great temple as always. Still, I promised him I would stand by your side always in case someone would try to sabotage you.”

 “Yes, that’s what we were afraid of. The ordeal is hard enough without another risk to life. I’m happy to hear that you will be there with me. That is one thing I will not have to worry about.” He closed his eyes for a moment and rubbed his forehead.

 “What else do you have to worry about?” Her tone was near panic.

 “The master told me there is a great evil coming, something worse than the end of our order or our city, something dark from the depths of space. He said our world would never be the same.”

 He looked at her now, hating the fear, pain, and worry he saw in her beautiful eyes. How he wished he could bring back her joy of the river earlier.

 “What do you mean, a comet or meteor? What could come from the stars? Will the Great Creator protect us.?”

 There were tears welling up in her eyes.

 “He didn’t go into detail, but told me once I complete the Initiation, I will know all. He said I should be the one to lead the people to safety. There is hope my dove, we will be okay.”

 He wanted her to be informed but also, he felt the need to reassure her not to panic. The tears in her eyes were pulling at his heart.

 “You’re not just saying that are you? You promise you will save our people?”

Her voice was uncertain, but he could tell she wanted to believe.

 “I promise you on my life I will do all in my power to save our people.”

 He could see a ray of hope there that lit her up like a candle.

 “I just worry for my brother’s household and the Egyptians. Zaidor has poisoned the hearts of the people already turning them from our ways. I fear they won’t listen to me.”

 In truth, he had no hope for many of them and especially the man he had grown up with as his brother. Ra’Menes’s path had veered so far from their youthful hope of being great spiritual masters. He missed their deep conversations long into the night sitting on the Sphinx, under a sky full of stars.

 “Hey, he is going to listen. He loves you; you are his brother in heart if not in blood. He never cared you were Hyksos born; you were always best friends. He may have strayed from the Twice Born path, but he is still your brother.” She had stopped crying and was now holding his hand.

 “I know you are right, my wise little woman. We must have faith that all will be as it should. When the time is right, I will talk with him, when I know more. He would never listen to me now. In fact, there are times when, I confess, even I’ve had a hard time believing in the master’s words. I’ll know more soon. If I survive.”

 When he said that she punched him in the arm again.

 “You will survive, you big goof. Don’t even talk like that. We are walking out of those chambers together; do you hear me?”

 “Yes, ok just don’t beat me up little doe.”

 He laughed and tickled her side. That lightened the mood a bit. He poured them fresh fruit drinks and sought to bring her back from all the dark conversation.

 “Look a huge herd of water horses.”

 She leaned onto the rails to watch the herd swimming along the shore. A few even swam out close to the boats, but the oarsman banged their paddles and drove them back a bit. The largest male stayed closest to the boats in order to warn them away from his family. They were very territorial and aggressive.

 They enjoyed a pleasant ride back to the docks. Then all disembarked to the sight of the whole city lining the streets in celebration. The people threw flowers and cheered them on right up to the temple doors. On the way, the party passed elegantly decorated elephants, that had been painted and strung with beautiful cloths. Musicians played alongside and fire dancers lead the way.

 It was a loud, grand celebration, till the party was safely inside the temple doors, There it was cool and quiet. Now was the time for the actual marriage coronation and marriage ceremony.

 First, he would take the Ankh staff of life and power, then he would take his bride. Afterwards, they would mount the elephants and travel to the palace for the real festivities to begin.

 CHAPTER 4

 It was a long evening of celebration for Na’feti until she could take no more and stumbled off to her room in the palace using a helpful guard’s arm for stability. It’s a good thing he was there because she would never have found her room. Shortly after the door closed, she heard a soft knock. A servant girl had been alerted by the guard and was there to help her out of the dress. Na’feti sent her off for hot water and food. She didn’t need to worry about clothes, the closet was always stocked in beautiful dresses of every color and style. She knew the prince, no Pharoah, kept this room saved for her.

 She had been so enthralled about the wedding activities that she had completely forgotten her talk with Osar. Now that she was alone, she thought about what he had said. He had been so serious, she had trembled. Something unknown and deadly is coming. She prayed Osar would return to save them from whatever it was. A deadly asteroid, or some sky beasts come to feast on their sins. Neither seemed that great of choice.

 The girl returned with large attendants carrying tubs of water to fill her bath. They brought oils, herbs, and even flowers to scent the water and cleanse her body. She always felt like royalty here. They even had a platter of grapes and pomegranates. She had eaten so much fruit today it was a wonder that she found herself grabbing a bunch of grapes as she stepped into the bath.

 She heard the door close as the maids left. They had lit a fire and an oil lamp which gave the room a warm glow and smokey smell. It worked perfectly with the scented water and hot steam aromatherapy. She eased down into the warm water, closing her eyes and letting go of everything for a moment. This had been the most perfect day.

 As she lay there all relaxed, she started thinking of the bright red star she had seen that morning. At the time, she thought it was a sign from heaven that all was going to be wonderful. Now she knew it was their doom. She thought of the beautiful river she had floated down that morning, teeming with animals and people living their lives unaware of the impending doom. Would they survive? Yes, they would because she and Osar would make sure to save them. She simply couldn’t bear the thought of their suffering.

 Then she let her mind wander from dark stars to the beauty of the water horses in the river. Those massive, magnificent beasts had a gentle grace in the water and a tenderness with their young. She had watched a mother and calf swim and laughed as the little one played around its mother trying to catch a fish and being often more frightened than brave. So, unlike the great ferocious male he would become.

 Suddenly a hand touched her shoulder and caused her to nearly jump out in fright. Then she heard Ra’Menes laughing before he came into view. He swiped a nearby chair and sat down right next to the tub, still chuckling as he brought his wine glass to his lips and offered her one.

 She took it before she scolded him for scaring her again as always. He was shirtless and his body looked like copper in the firelight. His eyes also shone, but it was with a different fire, one which burned much hotter.

 “What are you doing here? Shouldn’t you be with your new bride?”

 She tried to sink low and keep her breasts covered, which wasn’t really working until she grabbed a sheer slip hanging nearby. It wasn’t much but she felt a hundred times less exposed.

 “Oh, my Lily of the Valley. How sweet you look, how tasteful indeed! My little bride lies in a swaddle of silks dreaming of her god of a husband, I’m sure. While that god roams the merry halls of his kingdom looking for a tasty treat.” He flashed her a wicked smile, then his eyes smoldered as his hand found its way into the tub, to her exposed legs where it began to play.

 “Aren’t you full enough from all your festivities? She is very beautiful, you should be well satisfied, my lord.” She had a bit more to say but at that moment he covered her lips with his own as his fingers slid into her. She found her body betraying her as she kissed him back and moved beneath his touch.

 He had lit that fire years ago that night at the dance. Had she not been a guest of the High Priest, he would have taken her then. Now his fire burned like never before, she could feel it in his every touch, in the depth of his kiss. She was tired, buzzed and spellbound by the whole day, yet somewhere her heart she couldn’t do this. It wasn’t just that she too, hoped to be a Twice Born like the Great Queens of long ago, and to do so she would need to stay celibate. It was also that in that moment her heart called for another man, a man so very different from the one before her. It was then she realized it was Osar she loved and to sleep with his brother would be a betrayal.

 She pulled her lips back from his and grabbed his hand from below.

 “We can’t do this, it’s your wedding night.”

 She pleaded, but he just kissed her neck and over-powered her weak hand’s protestations.

 “I am the God now, my pet, and I’ve wanted you for such a very long time. I rather think I’ve been very patient. Ah, but the way you looked in that dress tonight, mmm and seeing you now…oh you are scrumptious.”

 She was finding it hard to reply as his hands and mouth were very skilled. Her lips seemed numb from the drink, which was too sweet; perhaps covering a potion, she wondered. Had he given her something to render her helpless or was it simply the effect of his touch?

 She had never been with any man, having always been with her family, in the temple with the High Priest, or with the brothers. Now every part of her seemed on fire and tingling. She tried again to deter him, but he was no longer listening to her. He was so intent her and upon a fantasy which had played in his mind over the years, he would not stop till it played in full.

 A loud knock brought him back to reality, the knock of his personal guard outside the door. The man had been instructed to allow no interruptions so it must be important. Pharoah called for him to enter, wherein the guard cracked the door enough to allow his head, which he poked in but looked only at the fire.

 “My Lord Pharoah, forgive the intrusion. The High Priest has sent a messenger demanding you come to him at once. I told him you were busy, but the insolent dog says he won’t leave till you follow.” He mostly growled that last part as his hatred and irritation came clearly through.

 “Dammit, that bastard. Who does he think he is to demand an audience with me? How dare he call to me as if I am his servant.” He spoke loudly but she could see a tinge of fear in his eyes. Why did he fear that man. “You tell that man to inform his master he can meet me in the Sun chamber if it is so important. I’ll be there shortly.”

 The guard closed the door, and she could hear him yelling a sting of obscenities at the man which must surely have sent him running.

 Though Pharoah had talked powerful, his fire had died, and he seemed ready to run to his true master. Obviously Zaidor was in control, and she wondered how he had struck fear into the heart of the most powerful man on earth.

 “I’m sorry, my dear, duty calls, I must take care of my kingdom.” He leaned in close and kissed her ear whispering, “I will have you, my sweet bird, all of you will be mine,” as his hands kept moving until she cried out in an explosion of pleasure. She couldn’t breathe much less speak as he kissed her breast, licked his fingers and walked away chuckling.

 “You are mine” he said in a smoldering and possessive way that made her open her eyes. *What have I done?* she thought, sinking lower in the tub.

 She loved Ra’Menes as they had always been close. She had, on occasion when she was younger, imagined she would be his bride. Life in the palace had enchanted her. Moreso, she had been wrapped in the charms of the charismatic young prince. He had always led their adventures, daring her to push her own limitation, climb heights that made her head spin, go into dark passages underground, or any other way he found his exhilaration fix. He was always kind to her, and she found him impossibly handsome and brave. He knew how to talk to women and how to get his way. He was the life of the party and light of any room. He had commanded her attention from that first night she laid eyes on him. They had bonded through those long hours of his treatment and pain. She never left his side in his recovery.

 Her head and heart now were a wild mix of emotions, excitement, exhilaration, embarrassment, love, guilt, just plain confusion. He had just married a beautiful princess from a wealthy kingdom. What man would want more? Why had he chosen now to make his move? Did this mean she would be his mistress?

 Her heart skipped a beat, that would mean she would lose her place in the temple and never become a Twice Born? Then again, a mistress was allowed to live in the palace luxury if she liked. The last Pharoah was said to have women in villas all over the country, possibly the world. What would her life be like to be his plaything? Waiting till he wanted her with nothing else to do with her time? Perhaps she could study herbs and medicines as her mother had done. The palace did have an extensive library.

 What of her dear Osar? These last few years they had gotten so close. Today she had wanted him so bad when they were on the boat alone. There was a moment when they had sat close, his arm around her shoulders. She had felt so very safe and loved. It was then he had looked at her with such tenderness she could have sworn he would kiss her. So much so that she had gotten suddenly quite warm. He immediately stood up and excused himself to go relieve himself. She had felt so foolish after that that she could not look him in the eye for a while, staying focused on the water life instead.

 Luckily there had been a lot to see and they were docking before enough time had passed for it to get more awkward. Then they were so caught up in the celebration that they didn’t get to talk much more, except a little at dinner and briefly in a dance. Now here she was in a bath thinking of the two men she loved. She had to figure it out somehow.

 Suddenly, the door opened yet again, but thankfully it was the servant girl entering to help her out of the bath and into a night gown. The girl even drew back the covers and tucked her in before she left, but Na’feti quickly got up and latched the door. No more surprise visits, she was far too tired tonight. She sank into the softest bed and slept very soundly.

 CHAPTER 5

 Across the complex, down a long dim tunnel, the new Pharoah walked with a brisk stride. He was furious with the High Priest for interrupting him when he was finally at the gates of his heart’s desire. The man had further irritated him by sending a messenger to be so demanding as if He, The Pharoah, Sun God incarnate, was subject to that man.

 True the man had been a mentor for years, but it didn’t give Zaidor the right to order him about in front of his subjects. Ra’Menes would definitely have a talk with the man tonight. He must know his place from now on. Pharoah called the shots above all priesthoods or gods.

 Finally, he came upon a wooden door with magic symbols burnt upon every available surface. He hated this door and what lay behind it. He would never admit it to anyone, but he was afraid of magic. It gave him a sick feeling he couldn’t explain.

 When he walked in, Zaidor was there in his Priestly robes smiling and waiting. Somehow that smile seemed even more irritating than his demands, it said he knew Ra’Menes would rush right over. Seems he had allowed this man too much power. Things were going to change, starting now.

 “How dare you summon me as if I’m a mere servant to your will. I am the Lord Pharoah. You will serve me.”

 He began with an anger he had never shown the older man. Zaidor cut him off before he could go any further.

 “My Lord, forgive my impertinence. I had a guest I wanted you to meet most urgently.”

 His arrogant smile didn’t match the humility of his words, but Ra’Menes immediately checked his anger and followed Zaidor’s eyes to the man approaching from the back shadows. It was the Hyksos priest from the wedding boat.

 “Yes, I’ve met the man. Aper’El’Aron I believe you said your name was.”

 He turned toward the priest. The man had on the priestly robes of the Twice Born. Interesting, he thought they worshipped spirits and natural gods. Yet here he was following the highest order of the priesthood. Judging by the richness of his fabrics, the man was doing well. Jewelry flashed upon his hands in a show of wealth.

 Again, Zaidor took over the conversation, “Yes, Aper’El’Aron is my newest right-hand man. He will be joining me now in all affairs of state and temple. He will be your new Grand Vizer.”

 “But what of my brother? He is going tomorrow to endure the trails of the Twice Born so he could serve as your second in the Temple and my Grand Vizer? What is going on here? I did not authorize this; I’ve already promised the position to Osarmoses.”

 Ra’Menes felt his anger boiling to the surface again. Something felt way off here.

 Zaidor smiled. “My Lord would you believe as it turns out, your brother has a brother? Yes, it is true, I’ve located your dear brother’s long lost family. This young man you see before you is none other than his real birth brother. Or at least that is how they relate linage in their culture. He is the son of Osarmoses’s birth mother’s sister. Which they relate as brothers. I know it’s quite shocking really.”

 “You mean to tell me my brother has family alive? This priest here? And you mean for him to take Osarmoses’s place by my side? What game is this?”

 “It is very true, as High Priest it is my job to shed the light of truth on all. This young man is to replace his “brother” because he is your hope for the future, your kingdom will be united. You are too young to remember the workers’ rebellion, but I assure you the Hyksos people are strong and proud. Aper’El’Aron is a pillar of his community. The elders respect him and will command the people to follow him as he follows you.”

 He turned then to Aper’El’Aron on cue as they had rehearsed. The young priest stepped up and bowed on one knee to the Pharoah.

 “I vow my heart, my life, and my people to serve thee, oh Great Pharoah. Your wish is my command, and I will do all I can to see my guidance is pure to thy divine ears, though I know the Great Lord of The Heavenly Skies need no wisdom but his own.”

 The words flowed out just a little too quickly, but Ra’Menes pretended not to notice the young man’s nervousness.

 He nodded his head then looked back to Zaidor.

 “I can see now the reasoning in your motives, but what are your intentions with Osarmoses? He has trained for this position his whole life.”

 “That has already been arranged. Forgive me lord, but I feel it best if he stays at the wilderness temple. There he will learn so much more than here in the capital. He will be there with all the elder Masters. It is good they have a young man’s help. They have been asking for more priests to help out. It will be best for his spiritual advancement.”

 Ra’Menes was shocked, the man had already worked it all out behind his back. Taking away his brother whom he absolutely trusted. He suddenly felt alone in his own city. Tomorrow even, Na’feti would leave him to aid Osar in his trials. He would have to make sure she returned shortly. She must not be allowed to stay long, he needed one of his best friends by his side.

 “You are the High Priest for a reason. I will consider your counsel just and wise. They are yours to command at will, but I’d like to be addressed before you make changes that affect me personally, as in, who sits upon my counsel. Osarmoses may stay there for a short while to further his training, but I need him back in the palace and working with me. He is still a part of my household and ultimately ALL SERVE ME. Is that clear?”

 Zaidor smiled calmly though his eyes burned, “Yes, my lord, it is very understood. Aper’El’Aron, you may return to your quarters. Tomorrow morning, I expect you in the temple at sunrise for the ceremonies and sending of your brother. Good night”

 “Thank you, sir. Good night. Thank you, my Lord Pharoah.” He turned and left swiftly and silently, only the stone door made a sound.

Zaidor looked hard and serious at the Pharoah. “Now my Lord, there is another reason I’ve asked him to be by my side and yours. The Hyksos outnumber us 3 to 1, your highness. They represent not just a threat if they rebel but much more, they are a formidable army. With a little training you can easily take over all of the world. Too long the Twice Born have held back this kingdom. They preach peace and love to all. You are not the weakling your father was or his before him, choosing the path of peace. I know you are a true God king, who can conquer the world so rightfully his.”

 Ra’Menes laughed a little uneasily then cleared his throat.

 “I am no weak, sniveling coward crying for peace. You know I approached my father many times about a military conquest. He listened to the old priest choosing to sit in this city and rot. I am not my father. It is true with the Hyksos trained, my army would be formidable. Your council sits well with me. Don’t tell Osarmoses about this so-called brother of his. Let him learn all he can from the old guys. I want him back once the army is trained. You have three months to show me you are correct.”

 He turned away before Zaidor could respond and stalked out the door. To his surprise the priest didn’t say a word to his retreating back.

 He let out a deep breath, realizing he had been holding onto it as he left. The man had been scheming behind his back. Now he was raising an army with his pet priest, saying it was for Pharoah, but something didn’t feel right in his gut.

 The man had taken over the Twice Born with ease, sliding through their ranks and rising to the top. Secretly the man hated the Twice Born and all they stood for. Only now did it occur to Ra’Menes what cunning and deception it took to accomplish that. What if he had sights on the throne? Would the people support him or the priest? What if he were raising an army to turn on Pharoah?

 It had been a long day, he wondered if that was having an effect on his perception. Zaidor had always been there for him, surely the man really had reached his goal and now wanted

Pharoah to reach his. He wondered if he was being naive or foolish. Time to think about it in the morning.

 He hardly noticed his servant undressing, cleaning, and redressing him for sleep, before he simply passed out upon his massive bed where his naked bride lay deep in sleep.

 CHAPTER 6

 The night seemed to stretch on forever for Osar as he tossed in his bed. He finally had to get up and go to the gardens outside his rooms. The palace gardens were the most beautiful in all the city, perhaps the world. Their mother and the late High Priest had brought in every known medicinal plant and most were flower and fruit bearing plants growing amongst the many baths, fountains, and man-made streams.

 When inside, one felt transported to the Garden of the Gods. The temperature was always warm and tropical, the air fragrantly sweet, and beautiful songbirds created a heavenly atmosphere. It was where he loved to meditate.

 At this time of night, the gardens were empty. The wedding party was still proceeding in other places in the palace, but here even most of the birds were still. He took off his shoes and strode down a dirt path through the jungle. Then he took an even smaller trail deeper into the forest until he came to a granite rock pavilion. Four smooth columns held up a circular roof, open in the center. Underneath, stairs lead into a heated pool of lapis and alabaster tiles with quartz crystal inset in key places. Many other power stones had been set long the bottom in rings.

 He lit a small brazier of oil set in a column and slipped out of his priestly robes and slid into the waters. The heat immediately washed his tension away. He grabbed a couple of handfuls of herbs and threw them in, then closed his eyes and began his meditations. First, he opened his chakras, then worked on channeling his energy. He prayed to the One God till he began to doze off and finally felt peaceful enough to rest.

 He knew he was as ready as he would ever be to face the challenges tomorrow. He had been told it would be the single hardest thing he had ever done in his life. If it was anything as hard as not kissing Na’feti today, then he would be fine. It had taken all his power not to take her in his arms, press her against him, and kiss her deeply.

 She was the only woman he had ever loved. He had loved her his whole life and knew he always would from that very first night. She was wise and kind beyond her years and still had a childlike innocence that made him want to hold and protect her.

 As he rose out of the waters and grabbed a towel, he wondered where she was now. He hoped she was resting up for the journey ahead to Jabal Musa, the mountain temple of the Twice Born. He, too, would need the rest as it would be days before he could again.

 He did manage to sleep deeply after that and was up just before the sun to pray and get ready to leave. A soft knock at the door surprised him, but it was Na’feti who surprised him more. She squealed and jumped in his arms when he opened the door. Somehow, she didn’t spill the container of juice in her hands.

 “Good morning Osar’. I brought you your liquid breakfast. It has seven kinds of juice, all fresh picked from the garden. I didn’t, but someone did after I asked.”

 She laughed and handed him the container. She smelled amazing and it lingered on his cheek.

 “Good morning, Little Flower of the Nile. Thank you for this, I had completely forgotten. Are you ready for another boat ride?” He downed half the juice in one gulp. It was an interesting mix upon his tongue, first a sweetness of mango and plum, then a tart pomegranate lingering after. She had probably put in a thousand other plants knowing he would need nourishment for the long fast ahead.

 “Yes, I’m so excited! I can’t believe we are going to be out of the city for four whole days! Or more, if you stay on the other side longer. I heard Master Ak’ked stayed in the final chamber for a solid week; they said the candle didn’t even burn down. I wonder if you will just be three days, or will you be longer? Will you need to recover first before we travel back? Is that how it works?” She was as excited as when she was a kid in the palace for the first time.

 “Whoa, I think you are more excited than I am! I can’t say I know even what is going to happen out there. I’ve only assisted in the outer chambers here in our own temple. I’ve never actually met an Ascended Master. Even our master had not undergone the full ritual. I’ve heard stories but the Great Book is no longer with us. Much of what we do have is enough to know it will be more pain than pleasure.”

 His face bore a deep hurt for a fleeting moment, then a fortitude of strength washed over his body as he steeled his nerves. Even she could feel the winds shift to the cold reality that this was no vacation but a serious matter.

 Then he remembered her excitement and brought a smile back to his face, “Hey no worries, I’ll be fine as long as you keep me fueled with this super juice. Mmm, what is in this stuff?”

 She grabbed the container back from him, “I’ll never tell, that’s my little secret. It just so happens I’ve asked for a half dozen more to be placed in cool storage for our journey. I sealed and banded all the tops with rope so they can be kept in the water, and tied behind the boat. Well, it should work in theory. I also placed them in a net which will keep them together in case one of the ropes breaks.”

 She bit her lip in the way she did when she was unsure of herself.

 “That sounds like a great idea. I’m sure it will be perfect. How very thoughtful and innovative.”

 He turned away as he said this and gathered his bags and things. Then strode out the door with her close on his heals.

 “I actually didn’t come up with the concept completely. I noticed that’s how the fishermen and travelers kept their produce, in nets along the boats, or behind. I thought this would be perfect for drinks as well. There are many herbs I wish I could keep cold because it preserves better than drying out. You lose so much potency in the drying process.”

 Her voice sounded like she was still biting her lip.

 “It’s still a smart idea. You adapted it to your own, that’s innovation.” He hoped that sounded encouraging, not patronizing.

 They had nearly left the palace when Pharoah caught up with them. He oddly only had one guard with him and no priestly entourage. He smiled when he saw them and walked up to embrace Osarmoses.

 “Brother, congratulations! It was a beautiful wedding. I know you had a fun night so what are you doing up so early and not in bed with your gorgeous wife?”

 Pharoah should be passed out, snoring, still drunk and naked. He usually was after most parties anyway. Yet here he was, not seemingly drunk at all.

 “My brother. Thank you. Congratulations as well. I should be asleep, but much is on my mind, and I needed to see you off.” He looked so very worried all of a sudden. Not a look anyone had ever seen upon his sculpted face.

 “My Pharoah, what has you so concerned and sleepless?”

 Now he was worried. His brother was always very happy and carefree. One night of marriage had already begun to change him.

 “It’s Zaidor, well it’s what he’s been up to that has me concerned for you. He plans to move another priest in your place while you are gone; a man who says is your true brother, a Hyksos. He wants you to stay at the temple, but I am Pharoah and I say you will come back to serve at my side as we always discussed. We are brothers still, even if this Aper’El’Aron is somehow related to you; which I doubt.” Pharoah grasped his brother’s arm and said, “I promise you.”

 Osarmoses hugged his brother tightly, “Thank you my dear brother. I know all will be as the Great Creator and Pharoah wills.” He really wasn’t worried now, he had such a sense of calm; that all was right as it should be. His destiny was not in this place.

 Na’feti was not calm about it at all. “Wait what are you guys saying? I can’t stay away that long! I need to be back here to gather herbs soon, and there are things at the shop and temple I’m supposed to do. You can’t leave me there for months!”

 She appeared to be nearly panicking, until Pharoah put his arms around her and pulled her into his chest.

 “Do not worry sweet Na’feti, I will not let you rot in some dusty old temple. I wish you wouldn’t leave it all, but if you must, I will send a boat for you in a week.”

 He stroked her hair and smiled in a way that made Osarmoses suddenly a little angry and possessive. He would not let his brother deflower her as he had nearly every woman he met.

 As if she read his mind, she pulled herself out of his arms and adjusted her hair nervously. Had he already taken her? No, Na’feti was a good priestess, she would not go back on her vow of celibacy until she left the order and married. Unfortunately, this made the priestesses in high demand with the royalty. Pharaohs often took several wives from the Temple Beautiful, being the elite temple of Egypt at the time.

 “You better get me back here. Old Osar here didn’t mention we would be moving there indefinitely.”

 “Hey, I didn’t know either. I just found out! If you want to stay, I understand.” He wouldn’t make her come, as much as he needed her to.

 “No, Osar, I promised I would be there for you through this. Plus, it is the opportunity of a lifetime. I wouldn’t miss this for the world.”

 She had started off speaking softly as she smiled sweetly but the last sentence was once again bursting with excitement. She was without a doubt a beautiful woman and he did not for one second trust his brother alone with her.

 “Thank you so much, I’d be lost without your kindness and watchful eye.”

 He wanted Ra’Menes to get that she was his perhaps bride to be, without saying too much, so he kept his keys on him and not her as he said this.

 Ra’Menes knew this game well as they had been through this many times before in their lives. He wrapped his arm around her again, “Ah, but it is I who owe this little lady my life. She is my lucky charm and sure to save me if ever I get poisoned or sick again. My sexy nurse.” He winked at Osarmoses and squeezed her closer.

 “You are incorrigible. Try not to get killed before I get back.” She slipped out of his arms and marched out the door.

 The men turned to each other, “Seriously, Osarmoses, keep her safe, and you too brother. I’ve got an ill feeling today.” He reached and grabbed Osar’s forearm again. They held each other like that for a moment.

 “Don’t worry about us, you just worry about that new bride of yours. She looks like a handful.”

 He was making light of things but inside he too felt the knots of fear tightening his guts. Then he swiftly followed Na’feti to the docks. His long stride easily caught up to her, but he stayed a few feet back. She never gave a sign she knew he was behind her, but he knew she did. Yet both were silent as they made their way through the people shopping about the trade market near the wharf. When they neared the bars and brothels, she slowed enough he stepped in beside her. She clinched his arm then and he chose this opportunity to steer her into a Tavern Inn.

 She was confused at that moment, “Where are we going? Why here? I’m not thirsty?”

 He quickly pulled her through the crowd and to the back of the room. With so many people, she wisely didn’t say another word as they kept going down a darkened hallway. A door opened on the right and a very old and grimy server emerged carrying a tray of Feseerkh, a fermented fish and Na’ku, a corn liquor. She gave him not a glance as she brushed past, and they hurried along as if they belonged there.

 At the end of the hall, he opened the door to the left which led to a covered porch made into a storage room. They quickly stepped through a homemade slatted door, and were standing on a dirt path leading behind the buildings.

 “I’m sorry for the confusion Na’feti I feared we may have been followed. I didn’t want anyone to know the temple we seek isn’t on the Nile River at all. We will actually be sailing upon the Great Lake. But first, we will ride a caravan through the forest. No one knows it’s location and the Masters are insisting upon ultimate secrecy. Even I don’t know exactly where it is.”

 He could see her brow furrow which meant she was very upset.

 “You didn’t have to lie to me, you camel’s tail. I can keep a secret!” That last part was spiked with a punch to his arm.

 “I’m sorry angel, I didn’t lie, just changed the truth a little to protect us all. I didn’t intend to cause you any worry. You know how concerned the Elders are now; we can’t take any risk.” He began a fast pace down the trail. “There really isn’t much time. I’ve chosen two very fast camels for us. We shall ride ahead of the main caravan and reach the sea by noon.” He hoped she wasn’t mad at him; he really couldn’t tell from her expression.

 She smiled, “I’ve never ridden a camel. This should be fun. What of the luggage, I thought we would be on a boat. Also, what about the juice?”

 Ok, so she had mixed feelings he could tell. At least it wasn’t anger.

 “Now don’t you worry about that dear, all arrangements have been made and those juices are safely stored away. Come my lady.”

 With that he led her to where several camels were tied to a hitching post. The rest of the caravan had begun to leave slowly. Four attendants were waiting to assist them into their saddles. She looked very pale for a moment, almost sick, but she smiled at him and motioned she was okay.

 No time to delay, he smacked the camel with a leather strap and the beast took off.

 “How do you steer this monster!” she exclaimed as she flopped around like a rag doll struggling to hold on.

 He burst out laughing as his own camel caught up with hers, then he reached over to hand her the reins she hadn’t seen.

 “Just pull him in the direction you want him to go. For now, just try to stay on the beast as best you can. He will follow the lead of this one. We are going to hang with the caravan till we are out of the city view.”

 She looked so cute holding on for dear life to that massive animal. She reminded him of that scared little girl he had first met; she had been so brave then too.

 “I’m really trying.” She ended that with a little chuckle, and it was music to his ears. She wasn’t upset with him is what he heard.

 “I would have gotten you a driver but then we would have stood out.

When beyond the city one doesn’t want to appear wealthy on the road.”

 “Oh, it’s fine, seriously I’ll get the hang of it.”

 She tucked her hair into a riding cap and smacked the camel with the strap, leaving him behind. It wasn’t long before they caught up with the head of the caravan, then quickly surpassed them to ride with the lead scouts in a steady jaunt.

 It was nearly noon when they hit the gulf of the Erythra Thalassa, named from the Greeks, meaning ‘red sea’. The waters were silver, reflecting a gray sky which teemed with storm clouds. A steady wind had the surface dancing with waves which formed white capes near the shore.

 The harbor here was much larger than along the river with docks as far as the eye could see in either direction. A large town had sprung up quickly in response to the huge network of trade and travel. Ships from Asia and the southern continent came here to transport their goods up to the Mediterranean Sea and vice versa.

 They passed dozens of caravans leaving the town, each accompanied by armed guards. Bandits had learned some of the world’s most valuable resources came along this road and they often risked their lives to steal anything they could.

 The situation became so desperate that Pharoah had his own guards begin patrolling the area, as well, to ensure the safety of his merchandise. There were guard houses placed along the wall around the town. He had no idea there would be this level of security and was quite impressed.

 They made their way through the streets down to the many docks. It took a bit to locate their boat, loaded and waiting.

 “This is the boat Ra’Menes gave me. If you don’t want to stay down there, you are welcome to take it back here anytime. The oarsmen will always come back for me.” He reached out a hand and helped her aboard.

 “I appreciate that. I may just take it, if the Pharoah’s boat doesn’t come for me sooner.” She said teasingly as she found her bags and made sure the juices had been secured.

 Then she sat down on a fluffy cushion waiting for him and the oarsmen to get the boat ready to depart.

 “You are free to come and go as you please. I will make sure of that. Think of this as your boat as well. I don’t want you to feel trapped or uncomfortable,” he knew he would die for her if he had to, now, and for the rest of his life. He hoped she would not leave without him though.

 As the sail unfurled and the boat picked up speed, he said a prayer and happily settled down on the cushion next to her.

 CHAPTER 7

 Ra’Menes watched his brother and the woman he loved walk away. He didn’t mention that Zaidor expected Osar at the Temple Beautiful for Aper’El’s induction into the high court of the Twice Born, or whatever dark arts Zaidor was really a part of. It was why Ra’Menes was so very careful around the man. He was almost certain Zaidor had killed his father and would do the same to him if he didn’t play this game. Even with all his might as Pharaoh he didn’t know how far reaching or numerous the Ba’al cult really was.

 Now here was a man Zaidor had taken from the craftsman’s tribes, raising him up to the very court. The man surely didn’t know Zaidor’s dark rituals and was being masterfully played. He vowed would not let the High Priest take control of his kingdom. Yet, he did like the idea of commanding a larger army and conquering the world. He would send these priests forth out of his city to some remote desolate area. Then bring back his brother to help him rule.

 First, he wanted her back. He couldn’t get the taste of her out of his head, her scent, her moans last night. He had wanted to stop her, to demand she stay but he couldn’t bring himself to say anything in front of Osarmoses. They had never spoken of their feelings for her and he suspected it was because his brother wanted her too, but couldn’t have her due to his vows.

 Regardless, he knew she was safe with Osar and the priests at the temple; they honored women and treasured the priestess. He assumed that was due to the high price they received for virgins. He didn’t believe in any religions or gods, but he knew money and power ruled the world. Zaidor wanted it all for himself it was clear, but Ra’Menes would seize it and give them a real god to worship.

 The doors to the temple parted and all within dropped to their knees. He strode forward with his head straight, but he was taking it all in. A great number of priests filled the hall with just a small cluster of lords and ladies of the court. Here, where his fears came to life, Zaidor’s priests had doubled in number, and he knew they didn’t follow the Twice Born ways. He had let this happen, let this man infiltrate the temple and his empire. Now it would be quite the task to keep control of these imposters.

 As Pharoah sat upon a central dais, Zaidor stepped below him and faced the crowd.

 “Now that our Lord Pharoah has arrived, we may begin proceedings. I call upon the Accepted apprentice to the Twice Born, Osarmoses.” He looked around the room, knowing he wasn’t there. “Osarmoses? Well, it appears he is not present to receive his honors before his Initiation. Then, my friends, it is with a heavy heart that I must honor another this morning. I had planned to elevate Osarmoses as the royal spiritual advisor, Grand Vizer, and my second in the Great Temple serving the One Creator of All. Sadly, we must have someone nearly as worthy to fill his place.”

 Pharoah couldn’t believe the man would play it this way, “He has gone to his initiation early in order to beat the coming storm.”

 He knew it really wouldn’t change Zaidor’s plan, but he felt he had to say something.

 “Be that as it may, he has left us at a loss so that we now have an empty chair and must fill the position. It is for our lord Pharoah’s sake that I now present Aper’El’Aron as your new Grand Vizer to the High Throne of Egypt, my Lord Pharoah.”

 With those words the whole audience broke out in a “Ah’ Men’ Rah” which they chanted three times.

 “Because he has failed his duties to serve Pharoah first then his God, Osarmoses is hereby banished to the wilderness temple indefinitely.”

 Zaidor had lied when he said it would be a learning exile not a punishment, a banishment. Ra’Menes wanted to protest but knew he could not challenge the man in from of his followers. It would be hell on him and the only two people he trusted had just left.

 Zaidor wasn’t finished, “Brother Aper’El’Aron brings with him his people’s devotion to our order and to Pharoah. Their allegiance and devotion to our lord will ensure that we secure the southern continent and the world under the power of our new Pharoah. I name him Grand Vizier.”

 The crowd broke out in an uproar at his speech. There was no going back now. He would keep his promise and bring his brother back.

 First, he had to get the girl. He felt he needed to keep that too a secret from Zaidor. She was his alone and no one would hurt her, especially not the cult, who loved sacrificing virgins. Maybe it was best if she was away from this place for a while. He had things to work out before she came back. Like how to get her a permanent position inside his palace, staying there and always at hand.

 He sighed and tried to look attentive as Zaidor finished the ceremonial proceedings, which right now meant placing the priestly gold band around Aper’El’Aron head and handing him the sash of his position. He was bored already and wishing he was far away on a boat with Na’feti.

 CHAPTER 8

 Na’feti couldn’t believe she was in this beautiful sailboat on this huge body of water. It was bigger than she had ever imagined. The day was perfect; cool with dark storm clouds on the horizon which carried the promise of rain.

 They had enjoyed the journey for a few hours, lounging and talking, but now he stood and instructed the oarsmen they would be stopping at the next town. As it turned out, it was just down the shore where a series of docks and boats signified the town. There were many people around: a few on the wharf, loading large blocks of salt; men were repairing boats; young girls cut reeds and wove baskets as young men gathered driftwood for fires; everywhere there were activities of life on the salty sea.

 “I’m sorry for the delay on lunch, but this town has the best restaurant. Our dad took us here once on a trip to meet the Chinese Emperor at a beautiful island Palace. It was a wonderful trip, but my favorite was this little salt processing town. Dad had left all the servants behind and just took us boys to eat. He rarely had time for us like that, no advisors or guards.”

 He had such a look of joy on his face that she didn’t want to interrupt to say they had arrived, but the jolt as they bumped into the dock shook him out of his reverie.

 “I sure hope the food is as delicious as your memory, because I’m starving for some good tilapia.” She reached out her hand to him as she said this, and he helped her out of the boat.

 “My favorite is the Nat’Kish. The town has grown some, but most things still look much as I remember. It’s just a short walk over the hill to the Inn.” He was so eager to get there he had to keep slowing his stride so as to not drag her along or leave her behind.

 “Oh no, not the ugly mud sucking fish!” She wrinkled up her nose as she said this which made him laugh and he nodded the affirmative. “I’ll pass, no thank you.”

 “Little sunflower, I promise you’ve never had any prepared the way this family does. These people know fish and flavor is their specialty. Did you know many of the world spices come through here? It’s much faster than traveling by land from India. It is also safer for cargo than caravans through the open wilderness. As you saw, this lake is very salty making for large accumulations in pillars and along the shores. This little town is quite famous for its salt and their salted fish. Its rather a salty, smoky way to preserve the fish brought in here.”

 “I never knew you traveled so much. I guess I was so occupied in the temple and with Master Artimis I didn’t notice much. I always thought the times when I didn’t see you, it was because we were both so busy.”

 Always lost in her herbs and potions, she hadn’t even noticed when he was gone. She had assumed he had been so caught up in becoming a priest. They had few chances to be alone back then.

 As she thought this, they reached the Inn, and he pushed the heavy wooden door open where it was both cooler and darker inside than she expected. The place was packed, but they managed to grab a small table in the back. It took a minute to get the attention of a waitress, then he ordered several plates of fish and sides.

 “Osar! You are not supposed to eat before your ceremony! What are you doing?”

 She was truly shocked that he would break his fast so close to the Initiation.

 “It’s ok, Little Flower, I am not going to break my fast. These are for the oarsmen and you.”

 He smiled and drank a glass of water down quickly. She knew he was starving, and the smells were making his stomach growl loudly.

 “Oh, I didn’t even think of it till now. I’m so very sorry. Now I just don’t know if I can eat in front of you.” She suddenly felt sad that he couldn’t enjoy his favorite food, especially after the story he told her.

 “It’s fine really. You must eat my darling. Do not worry about me. I do this for my spiritual advancement. You know it is a sacrifice I willingly make. Nothing would give me more pleasure than for you to enjoy yourself.”

 She wasn’t fully convinced, but didn’t get a chance to protest as a man in a dark gray hooded robe sat down at their table.

 He turned to Osarmoses and spoke in a quiet raspy voice, “You are a priest of the palace. I can tell by your robes; we don’t get many of your kind here.” He did not wait for a reply but continued, “You must tell the Pharoh of a grave danger. I have seen an army camp in the forest three days ride. An army of the most ruthless sort of scoundrels. They say the leader killed his own family and burnt his kingdom. He will do the same in your city. They will rape your women and rip the fetuses from their bellies. They will cut out the entrails of the Pharaoh’s army and drink the blood of your children. Death rides for the godless gods.”

 Then he laughed manically and fled the building as all eyes followed him out and ears listened to his continued cackles until they faded away.

 They looked at each other across the table but were interrupted again by the waitress bringing a tall, segmented basket to the table. Osarmoses paid the lady for the basket and a jug of wine for the men. Then he ushered them out into the fresh air.

 “Okay that was weird. Did he say an army was coming for our city?”

 “He did dear, and I must get a message to my brother as soon as possible. I need to find a messenger, or a hawk service. I hate leaving my brother alone right now.”

 “I saw a carrier on the way here. I think it was a falcon symbol.”

 “‘Even better than a messenger. I can get a message sent directly to the Pharoah and hope Zaidor does not intercept it first. I trust no one but my brother and mother in the palace so I could send it to her. There would be less chance of spies observing her messages and actions.”

 After he sent off the message by the swiftest bird he could find, they made their way back to the boat. Na’feti spread out a blanket for her and the rowers to have a picnic while Osarmoses guided the boat along the water. The wind had picked up and caught the sail moving them swiftly.

 After the meal, they settled on to the cushion and he laid his head in her lap as she sang a sweet song about the Queens of Heaven. Her voice rose and fell with the waves until he was lost in sleep. She must have drifted off as well, because she awoke some hours later to the sound of the men calling out to shore. When she opened her eyes, it was just dusk, and they were nearing the temple.

 “Osar! Osar, wake up! It’s beautiful. You simply must see this! Is this Jabal Musa?”

 She stood up, throwing him off her lap in the process. She wasn’t even looking back as he hit the deck. He stood behind her to see what she was so excited about.

 It really was a sight to see. Upon a flat top peak, the last rays of sun still touched the top of a pure white pyramid with a crystal tip which sent out a prism of color upon the valley below. Outward from the temple all the way down to the base of the mountain were lines of pyramid like structures, which were made from hides stretched upon poles, painted with many designs and lit up from fires within. More fires and lanterns lit up the path and village along the slope.

 “This is the temple of the Twice Born. These are the devoted priests and the tribe of Hyksos which serve and follow our ways most devoutly.” He told her.

 “It is more beautiful than I could have dreamed,” she breathed.

 They stood in awe, not speaking as the boat neared the docks and tied off. Once onshore they began to hear the drums. The sound seemed to beat with his own heart and rhythm of their feet. Then the voices could be heard; prayer songs rising to the sky with the smoke of dozens of fires.

 The path was rocky but easy to walk through, the incline could be steep at times. It wasn’t long before they had reached the top. There they saw a large lodge blazing orange against the night sky. A tree was standing up in the center with the limbs coming out the top. They were decorated with ribbons and feathers making a beautiful display above the tent.

 Many of the little pyramids were around the summit and people were busy with the activities of life, except a group of men by a fire outside the lodge. They pounded a drum and sang along with words she didn’t understand but felt within her heart. Several of them wore headdresses of feathers, ribbons, leather, and beads. They looked magnificent by the fire light. The men of Thoth, followers of the True Way.

 A priest was approaching from the temple. He wore a simple loincloth of dark blue and a band of gold held down his short black curls. He was young and fit as if he did much manual labor or warrior training.

 As he approached, he smiled then crossed his chest with his right arm, bowing his head and said, “Greetings Initiate, I am Wa-ya Gvnage Usgolv. You may call me Graywolf. We have been anticipating your arrival. I’ve been instructed to take you to a sweat where our Master will join you shortly. Afterwards I will show the lady to her lodgings while here. There is a women’s area near the main lodge and not far from where you will be staying.”

 Osar crossed his chest in similar greeting.

 “Thank you so very much. I am Osarmoses and this is the priestess Na’feti. Now what is this sweat of which you speak?”

 They had followed him to a small round structure which appeared to be mostly underground and had a heavy hide covering. A fire burned to the right where men were placing stones upon the red hot coals.

 Graywolf stopped and pointed toward it, “That is what we call a sweat lodge. Remove your robes, then go in and sit down.”

 Several other men clad in tiny loincloths had come over and were entering as another grabbed a large hot stone and brought it inside, then came out to bring in three more to be placed within.

 They sat down near the middle where an old man reclined with a small water drum in his lap. Men and women entered behind them. Then the cloth shut, and they sat in darkness. In the center a small circular pit had been dug and from there four large stones glowed in the darkness. The dirt floor was covered with woven grass mats, and she could feel wooden planks at her back and a beam behind her head.

 The Master entered, he had on one of the large, feathered headdresses and sheer white robes which appeared to glide above the ground. He sat down at the head of the circle across from the door where two men near it quickly tucked in the heavy cloths until no light shown.

 The Master began to pray as he threw sacred herbs upon the hot stones. The scent was sweet like sage and cedar, but she couldn’t quite catch all the others. Her mother would have known.

 Then the Master threw water on the fire, and it began to steam. A drum began to beat, and the Master sang a song to the heavens. He sang four songs then added more water intermediately until sweat was pouring out of his skin. Then the door opened, and a man went out. The sweet breath of cool sea air swooped in like grace from God. She savored it. Far too quickly the man returned with more stones.

 Then once more, the door was tucked in tight, the rocks emitted a cloud of steam, and the drum beat carried them onward. She found herself praying, cleansing her heart as her body did the same. At moments when she felt she couldn’t breathe, the air was so thick and hot with moisture, that was when she prayed the hardest and found a way to detach from the body. She felt her soul was an eternal being unable to die, and she knew she would be fine.

 Suddenly it was over, and the door was drawn back. The men near the door filed out quickly but she sat there a moment still taking in the experience. The Master and a few of the old men stayed back as well. Two of them laid down, while the Master reclined back, his drum, a small skin stretched over a loop and painted with symbols, tied with leather and adorned with eagle feathers.

 In the dim light the man was still impressive, his presence an energy you could feel, a positive spark that lit one inside. She did not mean to stare but couldn’t pull her eyes away. She was greatly relieved when the man spoke first. His voice was rich and deep which made her realize it was his voice which had sung so beautifully.

 “Welcome Initiate Osarmoses. We have long awaited your arrival. Brother Artimis spoke very highly of you. Everything has been prepared for you.”

 “Thank you Master. I am honored to meet you. Thank you for allowing me to serve and undergo the Ordeal.” He sounded nervous to her.

 “Now young Moses, you will follow the boy waiting outside, Graywolf. He will lead you to the baths. Tonight, you should rest, tomorrow you will participate in the Sun Dance ceremony. You will have to dance all day so I would get to bed right away.”

 Dance all day! She had not even heard of this part of the ritual. She had no idea what a Sun dance was or how he was supposed to do it. Guess they would instruct him in the morning.

 “Thank you, sir. I shall get some rest.” He said to the Master.

 She hoped they could sleep. Outside the sweat lodge a young man awaited them. The boy wore leather loincloth fringed at the bottom. His long black hair was braided on either side of his head. A small braid in the back boasted an eagle feather which flew in the breeze from the sea.

 The Master was right; he did have many hard days ahead and he would need to rest tonight.

 They would find their room turned out to be an outdoor lodge, one of the small pyramids covered in hides. Some were painted with the Eye and hand of God. There were many with red and gold designs skillfully painted around.

 Graywolf left them at the door. Inside a oil lantern burned on a table, revealing their cloth bags and clay jars in a box to his left. The floor had been covered in large grass mats across from them, most of it was blankets and pillows. They were both so tired they collapsed on the bed, falling asleep instantly.

 CHAPTER 9

 Zaidor looked out over the Nile, the sun had set moments ago. It had been a beautiful sky, resplendent with gold and rose hues, yet he had barely noticed. He was so consumed with anger that he was practically seeing red. His spies brought him a message that was sent from the exiled priest whom he thought he was rid of for a while. Now they informed him that the message sent to the Mother Queen was a secret warning for the prince.

 It was only by chance that his maid, who was one of his eyes and ears around the palace, had found the tiny piece of parchment outside the Queen’s window. It must have blown there, undetected by the lady, after she had read it. The maid only saw it after nearly falling out as she reached for the curtain flying in the wind. With her head almost hitting the ground, the parchment had caught her eye.

 At first, Zaidor had been in such a fury that his plan had been found out that he raged against the nearest furniture, upturning several tables of drinks and treats. Several servant girls rushed in to clean up the mess. He watched them for a moment, then turned away to face the dying sunlight as he seethed in anger. Soon, he formulated a plan and wasted no time calling for his most trusted aide.

 Within a few minutes Ag’abagdon was at his side and ready for his command. He handed him the parchment.

 “Leta found this outside the Queens bedroom window.”

 “Yes, my Lord. What will we do?” he handed the paper back to Zaidor who threw it into the fireplace where it turned to ashes in a small flash.

 “Our Pharoah is on a tour of the troops and the new recruits. I want you to find him and not leave his side. You are to keep any messengers from reaching him. All messages are to go through you first. I need you to keep her son occupied. I’ll handle the Queen mother, myself.”

 His smile was cold in a most disturbing way, his insatiable bloodlust ever present in his dark eyes.

 “One more thing, I’ll need you to send a messenger we trust, to Alkenan. Tell him his location has been discovered, I will need him to move but stay hidden. They are not to attack. I’ll send supplies to Beni Hasan. There is a cave close to there where he can stay.”

 The man muttered compliance and left quickly, knowing he must find the Pharoah without delay. He felt a tinge of sorrow for the old queen. She did not deserve what would come next.

 Zaidor could have cared less what the man thought as long as he kept his mouth shut and did as he was told. So far after 30 plus years together, Ag’abagdon had not once betrayed his trust. They had come from the gutter, criminals aspiring to more. They had killed a drunk reclusive lord one night, assumed his home and identity. Then it had been rather easy to move though high society taking whatever they wanted.

 Infiltrating and taking over the Ba’al temple had been a breeze, but he had to use more than scare tactics to rise in the Twice Born ranks. Ag’abagdon had always done all he asked without question. He didn’t really know why the man followed him so blindly nor did he really care. He had become so accustomed to the man’s loyalty he never questioned why and often took him for granted like air one breathes.

 He would gladly handle this himself. He had been visiting the old queen as her spiritual guide through her grief. He had been moving in on her slowly, winning her trust and taking advantage of her vulnerability.

 It had been almost as easy as killing her husband, poisoning him drop by drop over time. She was an incredibly sexy and beautiful woman. He would enjoy ravishing her before he took her life. How he wished he could bring her into his chambers below, lay her upon a table and make her scream.

 Unfortunately, tonight it would be all about stealth and silence, silencing her voice and he assumed her lady in attendance. He knew ways of getting around the palace where no one would see him. He chose one such path now behind a curtain near his bed. It would take him to the gardens, which were but a short walk to the Queen’s chambers. She wanted to be near her gardens always, and lately she only left her rooms to sit among the flora and fauna.

 He found her sitting on a couch near a dolphin fountain. She had her eyes closed listening to a bird singing in the tree above her. She wore a thin chiffon dress draped from her shoulders to feet. She really was a radiant woman. It was a shame he would have to end that beautiful life, but oh such a pleasure!

 “My queen, how beautiful you are this evening, the most beautiful flower in the gardens.”

 He approached as if gliding and slid down next to her on the bench.

 “Zaidor it is a pleasure to see you. I’ve needed to talk with my son but can’t seem to find him today. Might you know where he is?”

 Worry furrowed her brow, but it only made her seem more attractive to him at that moment. Yet it wasn’t so much her beauty as it was the thought of her blood running that had his heart pounding and his member throbbing. He had to drive away the image of her neck in his hands, the fear in her eyes.

 “He has been occupied my dear, he has decided to expand the army with the Hyksos people. He is far across the Nile today at the training camp he recently set up there.”

 He stroked her delicate hand in his, traveling up her arm ever so slightly as he spoke, but hearing that, she pulled her hand back and stood up in distress.

 “An army?! From the workers? Then he must know…” She trailed off a moment starring into the fountain’s pool where Chinese goldfish swam close in front hoping for a snack.

 “I got a message today. There is an army awaiting in the southern forest.” Then she turned to him. “O Zaidor, are we in danger? I don’t want to lose my son after just losing my husband. My heart can’t take any more loss.” She collapsed into his lap where he held her close as she cried, stroking her hair.

 “Yes, yes dear, he knows. Do not worry. He is preparing for the army now. No harm will come to him. I’ll personally see he is away on a diplomatic trip. The Canaanites have requested an audience with the new Pharoah. They want to know our trade deals stand strong. I’ll be by his side the whole time, my lady. That little troop in the jungle will soon be obliterated. You need not think another thought upon it.”

 He was upset with himself as to how he had solved the issue without the need to kill the woman and her handmaid. She was far too emptyheaded to question him or inquire further. Lost in her grief, she would probably continue to sit with her birds and flowers rather than intercede in politics. He wondered if he should go ahead and snap her neck there. She was so delicate it would be too easy, and perhaps too obvious.

 Just thinking of her death had him quite hard again, and it was then that she noticed, and shifted on his lap to accommodate him.

 Her tears had ceased as she leaned closely to his ear, “You promise to keep him safe?”

 His affirmation was lost in a moan as she took him deep within at that moment simultaneously biting his neck. As he pulled her hips into him, he thought he might just let her live a little longer, then he surrendered to the call of the flesh and the goddess before him.

 CHAPTER 10

 Na’feti opened her eyes to see a bit of sky through a smoke hole in the hides where the poles gathered at the top. The rising sun turned the whole teepee golden. She looked over to see Osarmoses staring up at the ceiling too. The drums had begun to pound, and they could hear singing in another language.

 He looked over at her and smiled, “Good morning beautiful.”

 “Good morning. How was your night?” But before he could reply to her, the cloth was thrown aside and Graywolf stepped within.

 “My apologies, Moses, for the disturbance, but I’m running rather late. Master will have me scrubbing pots for a week if I don’t get you ready in time for the ceremony. Come let’s go.”

 Osarmoses got up to follow but turned to her first, “We will talk about all this tonight, I promise.”

 Graywolf intervened, “There will be plenty of time for you to talk tonight when she is treating your wounds. Better follow along little priestess.”

 He laughed as he left, and they both eased out behind him. Graywolf walked swiftly to a lodge made of many branches.

 “This is the cooking arbor where the women prepare the meal for this evening. Normally I’d leave you here, But Master said to bring you to the circle. The women will show you the dance. I’ll find you when you are needed.” He didn’t pause for her reply but walked on at nearly a trot.

 They wove around the many painted pyramids till he stopped at one with bright yellow corn and water horses painted upon it. An elderly woman in a lion fur dress grabbed her hand and took her inside. The woman stripped her and put a fringed hide dress upon her. Na’feti was surprised at how well it fit and comfortable the material. She was so accustomed to woven fabrics she had forgotten that some still preferred animal skins. She could see how it was a much more durable and practical thing to wear.

 The women braided her hair and painted her face with ochre clay. They wrapped a soft red shawl around her shoulders, and this also, had a long fringe trim. Then they ushered her outside to the largest lodge where the women were circled around. They fell in place easily as they danced forward a few steps then backward again. The ladies near her linked arms with her and kept her on rhythm to the drum and prayer song coming from a group of men at the head of the lodge. The girl to her right smiled and quietly introduced herself.

 “I’m Alishaka. I hear you are from the city, right in the palace.” She couldn’t hold back her excitement as much as she was trying.

 “I’m Na’feti. Yes, I serve at the Temple Beautiful which often brings me in the palace as well.” She was getting a little breathless with all the dancing.

 “Is he really a prince?” The girl whispered to her. She wondered how the girl knew, but decided word must have gotten around.

 “Yes, he is the brother to the Pharoah. I grew up with them. My mother was a healer in the palace.” She hoped that didn’t sound pretentious, but the girl didn’t seem to be concerned.

 “Oh, wow a real prince here.” She giggled like a little girl and Na’feti couldn’t help but smile.

 Their conversation was cut short as a medicine woman said prayers and smoked off everyone with a binding of sage as she went around. A tree had been cut, decorated and placed in the center, then the lodges built around it. From her point she could see a great eagle carving upon its upper branches.

 There were many people in brightly beaded clothing, and everyone seemed adorned with feathers, especially the chief and priest. Each had huge feathered headdresses. This was a very sacred ceremony to the people; so many prayers were sung and offered to Creator. Most of the population had come and were sitting around in great groups. Even the children seemed extra quiet in reverence of the ceremony.

 Finally, she saw Osar, though they addressed him as Moses. He was bare chested except for paint upon his skin. He had a cloth wrapped around his waist and white fringed leggings on his feet. There was a wreath of sage upon his head and another in his hand along with a short staff in the other.

 He didn’t look like himself at all. She was admiring the eagle feathers they had adorned him with, when a man approached him with two ropes tied to the tree. She nearly screamed as they pierced his skin with sharpened spikes fastened with leather thongs. The blood ran down his chest as they placed one on each side. Then he began to dance, and he would continue till sundown as the skin tore more and more.

 It was a gruesome day for her, watching her dear friend go through such torture. She understood it was his sacrifice to Ra, but she didn’t fully understand why it had to be an all-day painful event. Osarmoses didn’t seem to mind, and he danced beautifully till the spikes ripped through. What flesh ripped out was burned in offering at a great bonfire.

 Now she understood why her services were needed, those wounds would need treating to prevent infection. She hurried back to their abode and began laying out her supplies. She went near the kitchen arbor and found fresh water were she filled several jars, then hurried back, nearly getting lost.

 When she opened the flap, he was lying on the bed a bloody sweaty mess. She quickly rushed to his side.

 “Osar! O my dear, you’re covered in blood.”

 He grabbed her hand in his and looked deep into her eyes. It was as if all her stress, worry, and thoughts disappeared in the cool water of his stare.

 “I’m okay, Little Lotus, it is only a surface wound and some sore muscles.”

 The curtain opened and Alishaka brought in a large bowl of water and a pile of cloth.

 “Na’feti! Hi. I thought you might need some water.” She set the bowel down beside them, then knelt and dipped a cloth in the water, which she then handed to Na’feti.

 “Alishaka, it’s so good to see you. Thank you so much. How did you know?”

 She took the wet cloth and started cleaning his chest, not noticing that he still held her other hand. Meanwhile, the other girl was busy wiping dried blood from his arms and legs.

 “Word gets around here”, he said as he noticed her ministering to him.

 She gave a shy smile, glanced at him, blushed and went back to wiping and talking to Na’feti.

 “I hope you don’t mind that I boiled this water earlier with Ale Hoof leaf root and Serpent’s Tongue bulbs to cleanse and help heal the wounds. I added a little root of the Dragon’s Claw for inflammation.”

 Na’feti was amazed by this Hyksos girl who really seemed to know plants and medicine ways.

 “Wow, I don’t mind at all. That’s exactly the plants I would have used. Are you a priestess in the temple here?”

 “No, my grandmother is our tribe’s medicine woman. The Great Mother taught my ancestors which plants were good for which ailments. It has been passed down through the ages. I am next in line as my mother made the journey to the underworld, many years ago.”

 As she spoke, she tenderly washed his belly, in a slight reverence it seemed. Na’feti could see her own infatuation with the man reflecting in the girl’s face.

 “You are a life saver. We thank you and your people. I hadn’t thought to bring dragon’s claw. I’m afraid I wasn’t prepared for him actually meeting physical harm. I didn’t know about the dance. These wounds are deep. Do they normally need sewing up?”

 Where his skin had been pierced was still bleeding and she grabbed for a fresh cloth to press on it, but Alishaka stopped her. She grabbed two poultices off the table.

 Na’feti hadn’t even noticed them there, she had been so focused on him. She felt bad it had been her job to take care of him and she had completely failed. Her heart suddenly swelled with gratitude at the sweet girl applying a poultice to his torn flesh.

 “This should stop the bleeding and help in the pain. He should be able to take them off when he bathes in the morning. Graywolf will be here at sunrise.”

 The girl wouldn’t talk to Osar or hold his gaze but only spoke with her. Na’feti wondered if it was a cultural thing, or she was just shy.

 “I really appreciate all you have done. Can I get a bath tonight and a meal?”

 Na’feti lifted his head up and made him drink the tea as she spoke. It should make him sleep for a while without feeling pain.

 “Yes, of course. I will show you to the bathhouse and the kitchen lodge when we are done with the Initiate.”

 The girl had returned to cleaning his stomach and he had already closed his eyes. Within a few minutes he was sound asleep and snoring. The girl had made it extraordinarily strong. Na’feti hoped it was not too strong, but she actually trusted her, something in her heart felt the girl had good intentions and was quite knowledgeable.

 They finished up, then Na’feti tuned one last time to look at her dear friend before leaving. He seemed so pale, she said a quick prayer as she followed the girl toward the kitchen lodge, her stomach rumbling loudly but muffled over the endless sound of drums pounding in the dark. She found her steps going on in time as well as her heart. She had already grown fond of the rhythm and the waves. She felt at home in this distant place with these strange and beautiful people.

 CHAPTER 11

 Ra’Menes stretched on the couch that had just been brought into his tent. He watched the servants bring in a writing desk and table. They were setting up his war room for meeting with the generals. He had moved out here at Zaidor’s urging that he be with the men as they prepare for campaign in order to prepare him for the actual conquest. He had gotten a little spoiled in the palace life; he needed a to show himself and the men he was every bit the God he was supposed to be.

 A servant fanned him and another brough him drink, at least he wouldn’t have to suffer like some common soldier. It was a hot night and he almost felt sorry for the men still training outside. General Malek was a hard man and only too happy to have a large population to train. He drove them day and night, relentlessly, a man happily in his element again after too many years of peace. The General had hardly slept since they had set up the new training grounds.

 Ra’Menes had not been able to sleep either, not in his bed, lying beside his beautiful new wife. Even after making love for hours, he just laid there in the dark; his mind on Na’feti. He kept replaying the night he had finally tasted her, and he wanted more. He wanted all of her and he couldn’t get her out of his head.

 So, when Zaidor suggested he get familiar with the troops and campaign life, he had jumped at the chance to get away from the palace, to get away from her. His wife was everything you would expect in a high-born princess; spoiled, whinny, and self-absorbed.

 This arranged marriage was just that, a union to join two nations, not one to join two hearts. There was no passion in their bedroom, just the physical action of sex, no love, no intrigue. He hated it. There was no excitement or even real pleasure. He knew he was good in bed, and she certainly vocalized her enjoyment during the act, yet it was still empty sex.

 With his brother gone, leaving him no one to talk with, he refused to be friendly with his new advisor. He really didn’t believe the man was Osar’s brother anyway. It was probably another trick of the new High Priest. He had once looked up to the man, but after learning of the bloody cult he was really serving, Ra’Menes couldn’t look at him the same. He knew the level of deception the man was achieving in fooling everyone that served the Most High God.

 Ra’Menes cared not for gods anymore, for it was his time to shine and leave his immortal mark upon the world. He would serve no god or men who served gods and especially not one who served a bloodthirsty god such as Ba’al. His stomach turned at the thought of what Zaidor had done to achieve his power. There was no doubt in his mind the man would kill anyone in his way. Which meant he too one day would be an obstacle for the priest unless he found a way to get rid of the man first.

 He was almost startled when Zaidor parted the curtain, “My lord, might I have a word?”

 He was already in the door and not waiting for Ra’Menes’s half mumbled acceptance. He swiftly glided to a chair nearby and sat himself down, grabbing a glass of wine in the process. It didn’t matter that he wanted to be alone with his thoughts, Zaidor was not a man you said no to, but that would have to change.

 “I didn’t expect to find you so far within the training grounds. What a ride on these old bones. This is a nice vintage to sooth an old man.”

 He gulped down his glass of wine as if it was a cool water. Ra’Menes lifted the container and filled the man’s glass again.

 “Please have another. So, to what do I owe this pleasure?” Pleasure was not the word he had in mind.

 “Thank you. Yes, I came out here so that we may speak of the upcoming campaign. First the Chaldeans have asked for a peace meeting. I thought now would be a great time to take that journey.”

 His eyes shown in the lights like flames upon dark waters. It sent a chill down his spine.

 “I will no longer be maintaining the peace with them. When I enter the Chaldeans land it will be with the might of my army at my back. The time of peace is over. I will show them the true power of Pharoah.”

 Zaidor grimaced and didn’t speak for a moment. When he did, his voice was controlled and strained as if he were holding back an emotion. Good, let him get angry, it was time he realized he was not the one calling the shots.

 “As you wish, my lord. It will be according to Pharoah’s will.”

 That seemed far too easy, he had expected the man to protest and present an argument. Now he was worried what else the man wanted.

 “Exactly. These Hyksos are quite warrior people. It will not take long to train them for battle.” He was actually quite confident in this army already. Their archers were more than impressive.

 Zaidor smiled and nodded his agreement as he poured himself another glass.

 “You are most correct as always, my lord. Now if I could discuss another matter with you.”

 He cleared his throat and Ra’Menes dreaded what would come next, something in his tone bespoke of bad news.

 “I have another ceremony coming up the next full moon. There is a star alignment, well I won’t bore you with all the details, but you must understand it is a very important event. I won’t ask you to attend as you’ve got much bigger things going on. I just want to ask a small favor really. I require a virgin maiden for the last rite. I fear it’s getting harder to find true virgins anymore. Don’t even look to Isis’s temple, they have become just high-quality whores. No, the temples are all polluted. I need someone truly pure, someone from our own temple.”

 He paused for a moment to drink.

 “You haven’t taken any of them, have you? Defiled our little flowers?” He raised an eyebrow looking at Ra’Menes as if he was trying to see into his soul.

 Ah, there it was, the heart of his inquiries. He wasn’t asking permission to take a woman he was only assuring their innocence. The whole thing sickened him.

 “I have plenty of ladies of nobility to satisfy my needs, I have no need of the boring temple wenches. The are simply no fun, so pious and devoted to their god. My ancestors were worshipped as gods.”

 “You will be, my Lord. The time of the Twice Born is over. Your army will be the largest in the world and all will worship you.”

 Zaidor finished off the container of wine and stood up.

 “Yes, priest, this is what I’ve worked for. This army will be ready soon. Do as you will. I’ve too much to prepare to worry about your bloody rituals”

 He was happy the priest had made his visit short. He really didn’t want to hear any more of the man’s dark obsessions.

 “Thank you, my lord. Please remember you’ve taken our oath in brotherhood and drank from the serpent’s goblet. These rituals are important to your future as well.”

 Zaidor said over his shoulder as he exited, the curtain sliding back into place silently.

 Ra’Menes watched him leave and felt his stomach untighten. He knew there was much more the man hadn’t said. He wasn’t sure it mattered, the man had delivered the army he promised and there was no reason to doubt he would help him conquer the world. Who cares if a couple women and children died in the process. Many lives would be taken as he captured the globe, this was war, blood was war, there was no turning back now.

 CHAPTER 12

 Na’feti awaked to Osarmoses softly calling her name. She smiled and opened her eyes to see his own smile greeting her.

 “Good morning” she said sleepily and stretched big.

 “Good morning, Sweet Flower. I hated waking you, but we really must get to the temple soon. Graywolf brought you breakfast. I’m not exactly sure what it is but it smells delicious and fruity. Maybe I’m just hungry.” His cheeks were looking a little hollow.

 She sat up quickly, “Oh Osar! You poor dear. How are you feeling today? Let me check your wounds.” She felt simply awful. She should have been up this morning by his side.

 “I’m fine. Alishaka changed my dressing at the baths earlier. They are healing, I mean the wounds stopped bleeding. No worries. I’m just glad you are here with me.” He looked into her eyes with a reassuring face.

 She noticed then how clean he was, and how little drops of water fell down his hair onto his bare chest. She felt herself turning red and feeling a little warm. She pushed it away to examine him.

 “I’m happy to be here too. I didn’t know this ordeal would be so hard on you physically. I’m sorry I wasn’t more prepared to help to you.”

 He grabbed her hands and held them close to his heart. She caught her breath for a moment, forgetting everything but his strange blue eyes.

 “You have been the best. It means everything just having you here with me as I face this, as a stranger in a strange land, though I’ve been told these are my people.”

 He was still holding her hands and she couldn’t bear to pull away. Graywolf made it easy by opening the door flap which made them both quickly pull their hands back.

 “It is time Initiate.”

 Then he turned to wait for them outside. She hoped he didn’t think something more was going on. There was no time to think about it as they had to go.

 She quickly put on her priestess robes and soothed her hair down under a silver circlet set with lapis. As she put on her shoes, she noticed he hadn’t worried with anything, not even shoes. He wore only a simple cotton cover about the waist. She grabbed a strange fruit and followed him out the door.

 She trailed behind the guys as they wound through the lodges of the people then they set foot upon the path up to the temple. She paused in awe looking up to the top. It was so high up that she couldn’t even see the temple on the top from this perspective. A dirt path snaked up the mountain with many stone steps to aid the journey, but it was still a steep climb. They had been in a flat area midway where the tribe camped. It would take them nearly two hours to climb to the top. It left her winded, but the view was amazing.

 There, the guys stopped so abruptly that she ran into Graywolf.

 “I’m sorry” she said shyly, but he did not reply. She had to lean around him to see what stopped them. They were standing before the outer courtyard gardens. The Great Master was before them.

 “Initiate Osarmoses we are honored to have you here and pleased to bring another brother into the ranks of the Twice Born. Follow me please into The Temple to the Shrine of The Hidden Places.” Then he turned away for them to follow.

 Na’feti was in shock for a moment she couldn’t move. It was Osarmoses who pulled her hand and led her along quickly. It took her a moment to find her voice, then she whispered to him, “He looks like Thoth! Those feathers!”

 He let go of her hand and made the shushing motion.

 Her mind was awhirl with the sight of the master. Since they had been there, she had seen men with these feathered headdresses. She assumed it made them important men. The Master too, had feathers upon his head but it was as if they were growing like hair covering the entire head. His nails appeared as alabaster stone talons. Even now she could see what she had thought were his robes, were really fine soft feathers.

 This had to be another costume made to match the stories of old where these human animal hybrids roamed, these angels. Yet as she walked behind his feathered head, she couldn’t deny what she was seeing; they were naturally growing as hair from his head. Her heart was racing, she had to calm down. This was real and since she was being allowed to participate in a most sacred ceremony, she didn’t want to mess it up by insulting the Master.

 She turned her mind to her surroundings and began to identify plants she knew from the plethora of fauna adorning the grounds. Here the smell of the salt sea was overpowered by the many flowers in bloom. Gradually the gardens gave way to the inner courtyard where lodges were set up in intervals. Priests could be seen attending the grounds, walking to and from somewhere else.

 “These are the homes of our priests who stay with us. I apologize, we didn’t have a spare room here and had to put you up in a teepee. The brothers have been gathering since the passing of our dear Artimis. I trust you were also warned by him Osarmoses?”

 Osar assured the Master that he had been forewarned, and then they were before the alabaster pyramid shining majestically in the rising morning sun. The door opened to the east where a priest always stood in ready for guest. Above him the sun was carved into the stone with seven hands and ten rays representing the life-giving Almighty God and his ways of power: love, foresight, courage, justice, wisdom, insight, resolution, knowledge, and mercy. She couldn’t take her eyes off it until they stepped into the sanctuary behind the Master.

 Once inside, she recognized more of the ancient symbology of the Twice Born. Above, there was carved the Triangle of Sublime Essence representing the Supreme Spirit, the Soul Spirit, and the Forming Spirit. She couldn’t believe she had remembered that from so long ago when Master Artimis had taught her.

 There was another door across from them which was marked under the Great Eye. The Master led them through this door and into a dim chamber. Then, he went to the far wall, moved his hands around, and suddenly the stone moved revealing a hidden door. She noticed a crystal in each of his palms. She thought that must have been how he opened the door. The magic science of the gods her mother had told her about: crystal usage and things to do with the Temples. She thought her mother had been telling her made up stories to go to sleep on, but it seems she had been sharing her wisdom as always.

 They went down a passage which was even dimmer than the room until they emerged in a small stone chamber. A golden oil brazier burned low near a priest who stood beside a golden table, but she couldn’t see what was on the table. This priest had on only a blue loincloth and a golden halo.

 The Master stepped near the brazier and took a handful of something from the priest which he then threw on the fire. She smelled cedar, sage, frankincense strongly as the smoke began to rise.

 He brought it close to Osar and said, “We are in the Marriage Chamber where we will perform the Marriage of the Soul.

 “Osarmoses, we welcome you into the Sons of Fire, bloodline of the Children of Light, servants to The Most High God. We have sacrificed our lives to live for the greater good. Beyond this door you will face Death himself and your soul will be weighed in the balance of good and evil. When you emerge, you will be born again and join the ranks of the Twice Born. May your heart be found worthy, Candidate.”

 He began to chant, circling Osarmoses with a shell from which smoke arose. The Master was cleansing him from head to toe with the sacred smoke, then he paused so Osar could inhale a big breath of it into his lungs.

 She tried not to breathe deeply as she received a bowel containing the sacred oil. She had been trained in this part. She would say a prayer then anoint his head with the oil when the time was right, which she was told would be later.

 So, she stood back as Graywolf received a bowel of red ochre which he used to paint the symbols of the temple upon his skin, upon his face, chest and back. She tried to flatten upon the wall and stay out of their way as they prepared him for the trials.

 She didn’t understand what they sang but the words flowed around the chamber mingling melodiously with the smoke swirling before her eyes. She closed her eyes and found herself lost in the melody.

 When the ritual was over Graywolf left them. Then Master led them through a triangular-shaped stone door that seemed to glide open soundlessly. She still held the bowel tightly, hoping not to stumble in the dark hallway, which descended even further down into The Chamber of Darkness.

 They stopped in the antechamber before entering. There was a small lamp on the table from which she could see carvings of Life and Spirit. Now he motioned her forward and she quickly sprinkled the oil on his head after saying a sacred prayer.

 The Master’s voice was clear and rich as it reverberated upon the stones.

 “You are now the Anointed One. You will enter the first Chamber of Darkness. Here you will be tested by one of our Orders to determine if you have let go of all earthly ambitions and truly desire The Great Illumination. The dangers before you will be great as your courage and fortification are tested. Stand strong, my brother, for in the Chamber of Red Light it will be Victory or Death. If you make it through that the Second Chamber of Darkness, you will then enter the cold sarcophagus of death. Your time will be finished when the purple lantern burns down. When you make it from the Chamber of Purple Light, you will then enter the deep Caverns of Initiation. When you stand before the Portal of Restuah, remember to pray humbly. You will be enwrapped and left in the Womb of Rebirth for seven days. Then I have no doubt you will emerge a Twice Born brother.”

 Osar bowed his head, “I understand Master. I will be victorious.”

 The priest began to pray for his safety and success in his trials. The door behind them opened. Osar hugged her before he entered, then turned and walked into the darkness. Now all she could do was pray and follow this feathered man back into the summer sunlight which seemed cold, with her heart still deep underground facing the greatest trials of his life.

 Chapter 13

 Zaidor was once again sneaking out in the middle of the night dressed as a poor peasant this time. After he had left the palace grounds, he walked a little easier, though he remained hunched over and added a slight limp for effect. He learned few people looked at a poor, lame, elderly man. In fact, they purposely adverted their eyes away from him in this disguise.

 There were few people out this time of night, so even though the moon was bright overhead, he didn’t feel the need to slink in the shadows, but instead, he chose the fastest way right through the middle of the street. Once a wino fight fell at his feet, but he stepped lightly around them and continued on to the dock where a boat was waiting for him. No one was around as he climbed in the small one-man craft and headed down the river silently.

 An hour later, he docked at a little fishing town. Most of the town was dark and quiet, but as he wound his way through the dusty streets, he came in sight of lights. Down towards the end of a road, lights burned in several establishments along either side. He avoided the well-lit inn and ducked into the dim tavern next door.

 He chose a small table far from the bar where no one could overhear his conversation. Then he ordered a drink from a portly waitress that reeked of sweat and booze. He tried to ignore the stains upon her ample bosom as she shoved them too close to his face when she sat his drink down, but he still gagged a little.

 Thankfully, the place was too loud for her to hear. A musician played an Oud, a sort of string instrument, as an old lady in a tattered brown dress, sang the words to an ancient fishing song. Zaidor knew the words well and the melody brought him back to that little shack along the river where his mother would sing as she fried fish. Fishing was life to his family, and to him everything stank of fish back then. He hated the smell of the river, the mud, the fish, all of it made him nauseous.

 One night, when he was very young, his mother had been singing this very song, when a band of warriors from an eastern tribe had raided their village. He remembered how her skin had been a lovely shade of black, smooth and shining in the lamplight. She was still the most beautiful woman he had ever seen. The singing had been what had kept them from hearing the sounds of men coming in on them and their neighbors. They had rushed in fast and killed her instantly with a blow to the head.

 It had happened so quickly he only caught a flash of the men, then her lifeless eyes were staring up from the pool of blood spreading beneath her face. It was a moment that never left his mind and possibly what had broken his psyche. Her blood was before his eyes every time he twisted the knife and filled his cup.

 They had taken him that night, grabbed him by his hair and dragged him outside. Then a man began to fight several invaders, so Zaidor had taken his chance and punched the one holding him in the groin. Then he ran in to the brush around the village, and on to the river. He had hidden in the mud and reeds, in the stinking mud he hated. He lay there all night, too terrified to move.

 The horrible woman finally stopped singing. Before he lost it right there and ripped her throat out. He was thankful for the harsh corn liquor before him. It warmed his belly but not that cold void deeper within.

 It wasn’t long before a man in a black hooded robe sat down before him. He motioned the waitress to bring another for his guest.

 “Tuk’tak, I appreciate you meeting me here. I won’t waste your time. I need a message delivered to your chief.”

 Zaidor paused and eyed the man across from him, in the dim light there was little to see but a large, hooked nose and a glint of the eyes. Tuk’tak didn’t say a word, just took a drink then nodded for him to continue. The man never said much anyway, it made him a good messenger and an even better assassin.

 “Tell him I can’t do the meeting down river as I had formerly arranged. I am going to need more time. I want him to send out scouts and find where the Twice Born moved their temple. I need the Pharoah’s brother taken out. I’ve banished him, but I feel Pharoah will just let him back in the city. I want him gone for good, but save the priestess that travels with him. That pretty little thing is mine, and she is not to be violated! She must remain pure. None of you are to touch her. Do you understand me?”

 The assassin just nodded and finished his drink down in a mighty gulp. It infuriated Zaidor but he couldn’t kill this man either, not in public, not now. However, he was feeling the call, and needed to get back to his secret chamber, to his plaything.

 “There is one more thing. I need a few more months for the attack. Tell him to keep the army better hidden until then. No more slip ups. Make sure he understands that.”

 He tossed some coins on the table, enough to buy the man another round and some of the disgusting food they served. That should keep him occupied, he thought, as he walked away, and the waitress brought more drinks to the table.

 Then he made his way back to the boats. He didn’t really trust the man or his boss, but they would do to serve his purposes. This mission was a way to keep the waiting army occupied as well as their commander.

 Alkenan was restless before the wedding, he had wanted to strike then but Zaidor had placated the barbarian. Asking him to move farther away, he knew, would irritate the man. He hoped a mission might just help satiate his need to kill. He, too, knew the call of blood and power. Tonight, more than most.

 He still had so much to do when he got back to the city and left these sad fishing villages behind. Everything he did was to avoid ever going back to this poor peasant life. His father had died on the water and his mother in their pitiful shack. He had run and would never look back, there was nothing for him here.

 His mind was set upon the future. He felt confident they would find the girl he wanted by the time the planets aligned. It was a rare cosmic event, and he wouldn’t miss it. He would have her upon his altar soon. He smiled wickedly under his hood, thinking how silencing her would be his sublime pleasure. His god would be most pleased.

 He looked up at the bright moon and then to the left where a bright red star glowed bigger than any other in the night sky. It was the sign of the Dark Lord coming, the scrolls said. The Twice Born fools had run for the hills to hide in fear. They prayed for a Messiah; they would get a Master indeed. He laughed out loud at that one. The sound echoed upon the banks across the still surface and even the toads held their breath.

 CHAPTER 14

 Osarmoses opened his eyes in the darkness. He could feel cold stone all around him and he remembered all that he had been through. He had journeyed through the spirit world, and it was all crashing in on him. Every part of his body hurt, and he felt there was no strength in his limbs. But his mind felt alive with fire!

 He tried to pull himself up, but he was far too weak and fell back with a groan, which alerted the awaiting priest to his awakening. Three priests came to help him out and pack him to a room they had waiting for him. It felt good to lie down on a soft bed after being in a stone sarcophagus for days. He didn’t want to move but there was food and drink, well, bread and water, on a table beside the bed. He didn’t have to try to move because Na’feti was beside him, raising his head and pressing the glass to his lips. He thought she never looked more beautiful.

 “Hi, my sweet little flower.” He managed to crackle out a few words.

 “Shh, don’t try to talk. You have been through a lot. Just take small sips, your system can’t handle much after days with nothing. Then you need to rest, please.”

 She set down the glass and grabbed a cloth out of a bowl of water, squeezed it and placed it to his head. It felt wonderful to his pounding head, then he closed his eyes and slept long and deep.

 Then he noticed his hand as he reached out and he froze. He was completely changed, his skin, his nails, everything. His nails were thick and white, so it seemed he was clothed in a sheer fabric that draped down his arms. Then it hit him, not fabric, no wings of the finest softest feathers he had ever beheld. He knew before he touched his head that he no longer had hair, but long feathers grew there.

 What had him speechless for a moment was his eyesight. At first there had been a haze upon his vision but now that it had cleared, he saw colors he had never imagined. If he focused on any object it appeared as a compound of thousands of swirling lights, the beauty of the molecular level astounded him.

 Even though Na’feti was a being of light and energy, he could see the waves and frequency of her emotions as colorful bands radiating from her. Her worry and fear were a deep dark red and purple, but her happiness shown golden and her core was a dazzling white light.

 There was the sound of glorious music seemingly coming from everywhere, he knew instinctively that it was the Song of Creation. It was beautiful and everything around him sang in harmony with it.

 He felt as though a pillar of light and fire burned through up to the heavens above. He understood things he had not known before, as if all knowledge were right at his fingertips.

 She was quietly watching him, still holding the cup. There was a look of wonder in her eyes as he examined himself, then her. He closed his eyes with a shake of his head and finally grabbed the cup she presented. His throat was so dry he drank it all swiftly. Then he felt confident to speak with her.

 “Thank you. Looks like I’ve become a Master.” He tried to laugh but it was a weak chuckle.

 “You are beautiful! I mean you are still you, but so much bigger and well, Majestic!” She was vibrating with excitement which to him was a neon blue flower in her spirit, but her cheeks were blushed with crimson.

 “I don’t feel very majestic. My whole body aches.”

 “Well just look at you, you’re completely transformed! I don’t understand how that is possible! What happened? Is that clothing or feathers? I really can’t seem to tell!” She leaned forward to touch his arm.

 Now he laughed heartily.

 “Slow down. Yes, I’ve been transformed. I’m not exactly sure when it happened. I do remember an intense pain while I was in the crystal chamber. I can’t tell you for certain if it happened then. My journey was not in this time and space. I was shown the future, and it was as if my soul was transported there, it felt so real.”

 “I’m so happy you made it out alive. I tried not to worry, but you were gone so long. I just didn’t want to believe you would become like the Master here. I guess I thought he went through a whole other ritual. Why wasn’t Master Artimis like this?” Her voice had gone to a secretive whisper.

 “There are different levels of master’s within the order. Technically I’m a Twice Born Ascended Master now. Artimis never made it down here, because he spent his later years moving our true brothers here, as well as all our sacred artifacts and scrolls. Still, even I thought the whole transformation was a myth till we got here.”

 She was still stroking his arm, running her fingers up and down along the soft feathers so fine as eagle downy.

 “That means the old stories are true. All the Gods and Guardians, like Thoth were actually real. Wait, did you say you saw the future?”

 “Not all the stories, but yes, the stories of the old gods are just men who found the power within them, and claimed their right to godhood. We can all become as great as those old gods and beyond.”

 He had learned so much this last week in the chamber underground. He needed to share it with everyone, but momentarily, he was happy his best friend was there to discuss it and pull his thoughts together.

 “Yes, I saw the future, it is about what Master, er, Brother Artimis warned us and so much more.”

 She grabbed his hand and smiled sweetly.

 “Please tell me everything! You’ve been gone for over a week, and asleep another three days. First, drink more and eat this bread.” She said as she handed him a cup and a roll.

 He happily drank and ate as she instructed, enjoying eating once again. He had gone beyond hunger pains during the days leading to the trials. Now he savored every bite as she waited for him to tell her more, which wasn’t a long wait because his shrunken stomach couldn’t bear much.

 “Thank you for everything, Little Flower. I am alright now. I must tell you when I walked on the other side, at first, I found myself in a sort of endless plain. There was a wall of smoke or thick clouds that went on either way as far as I could see. Every time I touched it, I knew a terrible pain and fear, then I was thrown back some ten meters. I tried running either way, but it just kept going.”

 “Something in me said I needed to let go of my fear, let go of everything, so I took a deep breath, turned around, and walked into the mist. I didn’t know where I was going and the fog seemed to thicken for a time, then when it had nearly dissipated, I finally turned back around. Before me stretched a long black path made of volcanic glass, it appeared to glow in the darkness. I think it was like a bridge because there was black water on either side from which the dead came up, clawing for me, striving with one another, and falling back under its mirror like surface. I had to fight them off as they raked my legs. I thought this too had no end until I came to a Portal and a guardian there. I was asked three riddles before I could enter.”

 “I would have to climb through nine levels of darkness, twisted souls, and trials at portals, until I reached the final door to the light. There awaited a Glorious One. He is shown as a sun in the darkness. He greeted me as a brother and embraced me. I felt love like I had never known from any being. He said he too had been to earth and would again make that journey. He said in the future, he would come to guide all our brothers and sisters. I couldn’t speak, I was so overwhelmed by his presence. I believe he is the messiah of prophecy.”

 “He took me through the door into the Land of the Eternal Living. It was a beautiful valley; of many types of plants and animals I could see. I saw few people, always too far to see their faces. As far as I could tell they were picking fruit or lounging in soft grasses with the animals. All was peace and harmony, as we strolled along, he told me many things. Then he took me through a triangle door, but he said he couldn’t go with me any further.”

 “The next thing I knew I was in a battle with a great beast that turned out to be my own self, my ego. I journeyed through a wasteland it seemed till I saw a grand coliseum, the stones illuminated from within. I walked into the very center, wherein was a small clear pool. It’s surface was smooth at first then I saw a flash as if it were a bottomless pit.”

 “A mighty voice spoke, calling me by name and I trembled. It said I was to be weighed in the scale of souls, all that I am laid before me upon the waters. If my soul was found righteous, then I would walk across safely, if not, the endless pit of despair awaited. I watched many images displayed rapidly upon the waters, I recognized some of this life but there were many other images. It seemed in every life I changed form, except for my eyes, which remained true to me.”

 “Then the voice commanded I step forward and a golden table with a crystal goblet appeared on the other side. I set my eyes upon it and took that faithful step over the abyss. I held my breath till I crossed and with a great exhale fell to my knees on the other side. The voice told me to drink. I stood up and complied. The liquid burned as fire, filling my belly, my veins, my very thoughts were lit up, all was blinding light, radiant flames.”

 He stopped speaking for a moment and took another long cool drink, just thinking of the experience had made his throat burn again.

 “Wow, Osar, I’ve never heard anything like this. I’m so happy you survived. What if you had fallen in that pit?”

 “I would have died here on this plain as well. It was always a risk I knew I would have to take.”

 He grabbed a pomegranate off the table and watched the beautiful swirls of energy it held within. It would take some getting used to this new body and its abilities.

 “Yes, but I never really understood how your life could be in danger during the trials. I would have been terrified and probably fallen in the abyss.”

 She laughed an uneasy laugh, and her sadness streaked her aura with brown and green.

 “You would have been fine, you are truly pure of heart, Little Flower. I would not have worried about you at all. Even the Father of the Gods would be awed by your beauty.” He said with a wink and a smile, and paused a moment for another drink then began in earnest, “The Creator showed me many things afterwards. Oh Na’feti, there is a terrible thing coming. It is the Eater of Worlds, the Destroyer, the Purifier of Souls. It came long ago, and our earth was devastated then. It is soon to come again and few will survive its wrath. I was shown a safe place for us, our people and our children long in the future when it comes again in their time.”

 “Oh no, it is worse than we feared. No wonder master Artemis was so afraid. But leave our people, our homes, and all we have known to go into a strange land? Will any follow you?”

 She was now almost completely radiating fear. He had to calm her down and assure her all would be fine.

 “They will come, the Egyptian and the Hyksos. Our True God will lead us safely through the Chaos to come. Do not worry. We will all make it to the Promised Land. You and I will go back to the city and get the people ready for the journey. First, we must prepare here.”

 He reached out and pulled her into his arms, enfolding her in is soft wings and strong arms.

 “I will try to be brave. I believe you and will do all I can to assist you. I promise I’m with you.” She relaxed in his arms for a moment then pulled away to look in his eyes.

 “I promise you.” She whispered.

 He couldn’t resist the urge to kiss her at that moment, as he had always wanted to but never been able. It was as he had imagined, possibly sweeter, then she softly melted back into his arms, and he held her close. The energy of her love was a radiant light he could not take his eyes off her until a soft rap at the door forced them apart. He called out for the person to enter.

 A young priest brought in a tray of delicacies, fruits, breads, and meats for the table. The Master entered after him and took a chair, then the priest poured him a goblet of golden liquid, presumably from some fruit. The priest rarely drank fermented drinks, only a little wine with meals as most civilized people did. He didn’t say a word but appraised Osar with his eyes as he drank.

 “Master, so good to see you.” Osarmoses walked over to where the master sat. He was still surprised at how weak his limbs were and still very sore. He supposed a transformation into a giant bird man would have some side effect. Or he was still reeling from that amazing kiss they had shared. She was very flushed, but now her aura and energy projection was a rainbow of her mixed emotions.

 “How very good to see you too, brother Cheveyo. Please no more formalities. My name is Cante Tinza, it means “Brave Heart” in my tribe. We are pleased to have you join us and pray with us. You have already met some of our people in your initiation. You will meet many more as you stay here. There are devotees from all twelve tribes of The People of the Creator here. We are the descendants of the Children of Light, Hyksos they call us. We welcome you brother back into the fold.”

 He sat back and drank from his goblet again.

 “Thank you so very much for everything. I am so appreciative of all everyone has done for us here. I look forward to really getting to see the place and the people now that the rituals are complete.”

 If Na’feti shined in the energy of her spirit, the Master was as bright as several suns to him. He had to close his eyes for a moment as it was too intense. His knees were still weak, so he sat down in a chair rather quickly.

 Cante Tinza completely understood what the man was going through.

 “It will take time for you to learn to adjust your eyes. You are accustomed to your eyes auto focusing without a thought, but that is through years of living as well. Now you are as a newborn, unable to control your own body. You will be weak for days as well. You will need to eat and drink to recharge your new body. That also means plenty of rest. When you are ready, I will teach you how to harness your new abilities so you can become a true Master.”

 He opened his eyes wide in amazement, which only made the light more intense. But instead of closing his eyes again, he looked at the Master, forcing his eyes to not focus so in-depth. He was curious that he might have abilities he didn’t yet know.

 “I look forward to your wise instruction, brother. This is so much more than I could ever have imagined or hoped for. I must tell you as well of what I was shown on my ‘Journey’.”

 He wondered how much the brothers already knew.

 Cante Tinza nodded his head. “Yes, yes, there will be plenty of time for discussion in the days ahead; we have been waiting for you a long-time brother. You have shed the old and your new name is Cheveyo, Spirit Warrior. Soon all the priests will want to meet you and speak with you. For now, I’m sure the healer will agree, you need to rest as much as possible. Please consider this room and the adjoining water room your own as you stay here.” He finished his drink and arose to leave, hugging Cheveyo as he did.

 “Much appreciation mast, ah, er, brother. I will listen to your advice.” He wobbled back to the bed, noticing Na’feti had moved to a table in the corner. She immediately came over with a cool damp cloth which she put over his burning eyes.

 “Here Cheveyo just lay back and relax.”

She was so sweet, if he wasn’t so weak, he would have kissed her again. Instead, he said, “Little Flower, you must take my boat and go be with your family. Time is precious, you must get them packed to move. I’ll come as soon as my training is complete.”

 He needed her but he knew she had to go back.

 “I can’t leave you like this. You are not recovered yet. You can barely walk, you need me.”

 She sounded on the verge of tears, so he sat up and held the hand that had been holding the cool cloth to his head.

 “Na’feti, look at me, I’m more than fine. I just need rest and food, he said. But I need you to get our families ready. They need you. I don’t know how much time we have left. Please let my brother and mother know, everyone you can, till I get there. I promise I won’t be long, a couple of weeks. I hope.”

 He didn’t know exactly how long his training would be, but he didn’t want her to worry.

 “If you really think so, I am missing home so badly. I do have a huge family you know. So many cousins I don’t know how I will convince them all to follow you out of Egypt, but I know Great Spirit will guide and protect us as you said.”

 She handed him the cloth, then stood up and kissed his cheek before she turned to leave.

 “Thank you for everything, my sweet flower Na’feti Al’Shizzar. I’ll see you soon.”

 Now it was he who wanted to cry, watching her leave tore at his heart, but he knew it was the right thing to do.

 “I’ll see you at dinner. I’m not leaving right now, you big goof. There is a ceremony for you after dinner. I’ll head out in the morning, ok.”

 “Oh, good to know, I’ll see you there then.”

 He watched her leave in her beautiful radiance, and it was as if the sun had left his room. He still felt lightheaded from her kiss, but he wanted to get a bath. As if reading his mind there was a light tap at the door and a young priest entered offering to take him to the bath house. He happily accepted the shoulder to lean on, amazed at how much taller he had grown. He couldn’t tell if his skin was glowing, or if it was just the way his eyes saw himself. His new body felt so strange to him, like he was a baby learning to walk again.

 Thankfully, the people here were accustomed to the Twice Born and didn’t stare at him in shock and awe. Many smiled and congratulated him. The air around the place was festive and he could hear the drums pounding from below and smell the fires cooking. There was so much laughter and singing all about.

 He caught a glimpse of Na’feti, she was dancing with a group of children and looking so very happy. It hurt to be separated from her, but he did not want to keep her from her home. Still, he supposed in another life they could have lived happily here.

 For now, they would be contented with the path before them, knowing that no matter the danger, the Creator would see them through. He was not afraid of the Destroyer because he had seen the other side of it, an earth reborn much like himself, becoming new again. Man had lost his way and like a beast to blood the It had come to devour their sins. Men like Zaidor called it forth, mankind’s negative energy spewing out into the cosmos, making a siren song it could not resist. It was time earth sang a new song, one of hope and love.

 After his bath he went down the mountain, his feet marching to the beat of a large drum. As he made it closer, he could see that many of the people were gathered in a large, flat area where a circle of arbors shaded seated elders and sleeping babies. He noticed there was a group of men sitting around a huge drum which was covered with stretched hide. The men all pounded the drum in unison and sang along. Their families sat close behind them.

 His attention was taken by the men dancing around the grassy circle. They were dressed as magnificently colored birds. Each had feathered headdresses, bird’s wings on their arms, and tail feathers behind. They spun around moving to the drum beat, up and down, like giant birds in flight. He was mesmerized seeing the dancers as shining lights like no one else there could. They emitted a golden glow that seemed to flow from the ground, through them, and then twirled above as they danced in a massive spiral.

 He had forgotten his journey for food and sat down right there on the ground unable to look away. The song seemed to end but then another began, and the dancers never missed a beat. They made him eager to unfurl his own wings and sail. He wasn’t certain he could fly but there was a feeling deep in his soul that said he could. He trusted that feeling better than his own head.

 An elderly lady and a young girl came up next to him. The girl spread out a blanket, so he reached out to help the lady sit down while the girl fetched a basket. Then she began pulling out dishes of food that smelled amazing. She smiled and passed him a bowel of something yellow, aromatic, and delicious. They all ate silently and watched the dancers go around and around. She kept passing him dishes which he happily accepted.

 Na’feti and a woman a little older than her approached after a while with more blankets, pillows, and food. Soon more people gathered and everyone shared the food. He had never been around such warm-hearted people, and he could tell Na’feti loved it too.

 As day wore into night, she snuggled next to him with a warm blanket wrapped around them. The old lady fell asleep against him. He felt more at home than ever before. It would be a sad day tomorrow when she left, but tonight he was in heaven as they sat there watching the dancers.

 CHAPTER 15

 Ra’Menes paced in the front of his tent which was more sparsely decorated than the yurt style bedroom in the back where his sleeping wife lay. He wanted the men to see him as a strong leader so the only items in there besides rustic wooden tables and chairs were a lion run and a rack of weaponry. It was his personal collection of fine weapons from around the world with which he had trained. Since he had studied each, he loved to show off his extensive knowledge of their origins and purpose.

 Even now he toyed with a Mambele, throwing it at the large central beam. It stuck in deep every time with his expert wrist. He had a particular skill with throwing weapons which was represented in his collection. He didn’t worry about the sound waking his new bride, she was deeply sleeping after their vigorous lovemaking. He hadn’t meant to be so hard on the dear girl, but his worry and stress had its effect upon his performance. He thought it would help to let it out, but he had just felt worse.

 Now he couldn’t sleep thinking of another woman. Na’feti should have been back to the city by now. He had received a message days ago that she was to return but still there was no word. Something wasn’t right, he just knew it. She could have stayed the night along the way, but even so, she should have returned within two days. By his calculations, it had been 7 days since she had left the temple. He had sent scouts to check her home and everywhere he could think of where she might be, but they had failed to find her.

 A fear nagged at his gut that something wasn’t right. He threw on his armor and grabbed his favorite sword. He had become accustomed already to dressing as a warrior in his time here. He told the guards to protect the Queen and let her know he would return shortly whenever she awoke. Then he mounted a camel and took off for the catacombs.

 In his mind he played out Zaidor’s last visit. The man had acted so strange and secretive. Why had he come asking for a temple maiden? His heart sank, what if he had meant Na’feti? He wondered if the man would really stoop so low as to take his friend for his dark purposes. His fear rose as he rode on into the night, finally reaching one of the outer entrances he and Na’feti had used as teens.

 He didn’t worry about tying off the camel, but jumped down running toward the cave entrance mostly concealed in the wooded hillside. He didn’t hesitate once inside the maze of tunnels for he knew exactly where to go, Zaidor’s ceremonial room.

 He slowed before he neared the door, catching his breath so he wouldn’t appear winded and weak. The priest guards at the door looked confused as they had not been informed of his coming, but they knew him and knew better than to refuse him entrance. Zaidor may rule the temples, but Pharoah ruled all.

 He kept his breathing steady and even as he entered the dimly lit room. A number of priests and Zaidor had their backs to him chanting before the altar. He could only see a woman’s feet writhing at the end of the table. He eased in as quietly as possible trying to get a glimpse without disturbing the priests. He caught a flash of olive skin and long black hair as the High Priest raised a knife over the body. He yelled, “Stop!” before he could stop himself. He had meant to be stealthy but that was not possible here.

 Zaidor and all the priests turned, and he saw then his precious friend there tied and gagged with tears raining from her eyes. He didn’t think twice but drew his sword and rushed between her and the priest.

 “Touch her again and I’ll kill you all!’ He meant it with all his heart, he wouldn’t hesitate to end every one of them and they knew it by the look in his eyes.

 Zaidor was seething but trying to contain himself.

 “My lord, I beg you please I must finish the ritual, the stars are aligned, it is time. This is very important. The virgin must die.”

 “Touch her and you die! You cannot have her. To hell with your bloody ritual and all you bloody priests.”

 He was so mad. He knew he shouldn’t provoke the man, but he couldn’t stop his mouth. He at least could stop his hand from killing him.

 “My lord, you are obviously distressed and perhaps have had a bit much to drink. I will excuse your impertinence in front of our Order. You agreed I could have a maiden from the temple. You clearly said you didn’t care. Is this to be your kingdom, built upon lies?”

 “I never agreed to this. I don’t care what you do but you will not hurt my friends and family.”

 He reached behind him and pulled her up with one arm, holding her against his chest and his sword still in the other.

 “Move aside priests.”

 They stepped out of his way, but Zaidor was not happy. “You have no idea what you have done. This was an important ritual; I needed her blood.”

 “Use your own!” he said over his shoulder as he took her out of there and swiftly down the hall. At first it was a fast walk that became a sprint. Thankfully, his camel was still there waiting. He untied her and took off her gag outside the cave.

 She hugged him tightly.

 “You saved me. Oh, that horrible man was going to kill me. But you saved me Ra’Menes!”

 “There is no time right now, I need to get you to safety. I know a place.”

Then he helped her upon the camel and climbed up himself using a nearby stump. She could barely hold herself up out of her weakness. He sat behind, holding her with one arm and the reigns with the other.

 He drove the camel hard to one of the worker villages. There was a healer lady who lived there. He wasn’t sure exactly what Hyksos tribe they were, but he knew they were kind people. He and Nafeti had come here years ago to get a special herb for her mother. He had come along to protect her and to get out of the palace. He had been impressed with the knowledgeable and kind old lady. He hoped she was still alive and still as kind to Egyptians.

 Dawn was lighting the sky as he wound through a maze of lodgings made from rough logs. Some were covered in clay with a moss filler. They were large, rounded structures with tall conical roofs thatched with grasses, tied together. He could tell when he reached the medicine woman’s hut because of the many plants growing around in clay jars and even hanging by strings from the roof. There was an odd assortment of animal bones and clay figures scattered amongst the plants. Two large quartz crystals nearly a meter high were set on either side of the door which was woven of river reeds in a sunburst pattern. The Eye had been painted above upon the beam.

 He carefully maneuvered the camel close to her door and called out for help. When there was no sign of life, after a few minutes he called out a few more times until the door opened and a cloud of smoke billowed out. A little old lady emerged wearing only a loincloth and so many necklaces that her breasts were obliterated in the charms, crystals, pouches and herbs which dangled off every strand. Her gray hair was tied in two braids and covered in beaver’s fur along the bottom half. Her face and chocolate skin were painted in designs and sacred symbols.

 She looked up at him slowly as if her neck didn’t often turn to such an angle. “What is the problem, boy? Why are you here at this most sacred hour? Ra comes soon, riding against the night.” She said slowly, drawn out in the accent of her people. She was more accustomed to her native language and spoke Egyptian with care. He really liked the way they talked and had taken several of their girls as lovers over the years.

 “My dear lady, I need help. This girl has been tortured, starved, and I don’t know what else. Please, she is a healer as well. I came here years ago from the palace.”

 He prayed in his heart she wouldn’t turn them away. She motioned with her hands for him to follow, nodding her head as she went back inside. He couldn’t just jump down from the camel with her in his arms, so he slumped her forward upon the saddle, then he quickly got down. To his luck she actually began to slide down his way where he could get ahold of her. He had never realized how hard it was to mount and dismount a camel without a league of servants and steps.

 Now he held her close to his chest as he entered the smoke-filled hut. He was hit by a strong cloud of cedar mixed with other more subtle herbs. The old lady was throwing handfuls upon the fire in a central hearth. She motioned him to his left and he remembered they always entered in the east, circled the hearth one way, never to the right. When he reached her she told him to lay the girl on the pallet behind her which she had apparently set up as he attempted to dismount. She moved surprisingly fast for one her age as she gathered herbs and mixed them with boiling water. Then she gave him a wet rag and told him to clean the blood off.

 There was dried blood on her face, some from a busted, swollen lip, some from a cut on her cheek and some he presumed had been sprinkled on her as the priests like to do. The room had been black with the dried blood sprinkled on altars, statues, priests, and sacrifices. He wiped blood off her wrist where ropes had rubbed the skin away as she fought to free herself. His heart ached as he saw all the cuts and bruises upon her beautiful body. The more he cleaned the more he became enraged.

 “Here little prince, drink this, it will calm you,” Nim’sha said as she handed him a horn cup full of steaming liquid. She stirred honey to the drink in her hand, another black polished horn made into a cup. “I know you like it sweet too. Nim’sha remembers.”

 “Thank you, Nim’sha. It is delicious. You are most kind to help us.”

 She looked at him hard and said, “Now tell me why aren’t you in the temple with all your healers and priests? Why do you come again to my door?”

 She was a smart woman; he knew he could not deceive her. So, he told her the truth which was even more unbelievable than any lie could be.

 “It is from the High Priest I rescued her. She appears to have been tortured and I don’t think she has eaten or drank anything either in possibly a week. I can’t bring her back to the palace yet. Not till I deal with him. Please Nim’sha keep her safe and secret here. I need to take care of a few things. I will be back as soon as I can.”

 This little old lady was his only hope at the moment.

 “Don’t worry boy, I will treat her as my own daughter. You run along and get the bad guys; she will be safe.”

 He smiled for just a second as he kissed her hand in a gesture uncommon for him. Na’feti would have laughed at his trying to be civil with a peasant class person.

 “Thank you,” he said and turned back to Na’feti, kneeling beside her.

 “You love her.”

 She said it as a simple statement. He didn’t look up at the old lady just kept gazing at the motionless beauty before him as he spoke, “She saved my life once when I was very ill. They thought I would die, but she knew the proper treatment. Stayed by my side for days. I wish I could do the same.”

 She put a hand upon his shoulder to comfort him.

 “It’s alright, what she needs now is rest. You cannot help her except by leaving. Go on and let me tend to the child. She is special, this one. I couldn’t even save you back then, but this child did what few healers could have. I will not let her take the journey to the netherworld.”

 He knew he had to leave. Artimis trusted Nim’sha and so did he; Na’feti would be safe here from Zaidor. He thanked her again, handed her the cup, then left without looking back for fear he couldn’t leave at all.

 Out in the daylight the sun was blinding and it took him a moment to adjust. The camel was still there and not happy about being tied up as it was pulling to get loose. He had to calm it down to get it free, and it immediately took off behind the hut. He found it down the hill drinking from a creek. He was hit by what a long night it had been and how hard he had ridden the poor animal.

 Luckily, the creature was kneeled down drinking, so he was able to climb up without much trouble. The camel finally had its fill and started off at a trot toward the training camp. He needed to get to his tent before he went to the palace. There was blood and dust all over his clothes and skin.

 When he arrived, his servants were waiting outside for him. First, he ordered a bath and breakfast prepared. Then he went in and faced the angry bride within which had kept the servants out. She was yelling in her native tongue as he approached the curtain. Reluctantly, he entered the room.

 “There you are. I want out of here. How dare you leave me here with these disgusting men. This place is dirty and smells. This filth is making me sick!”

 “My queen, please forgive my absence. I didn’t intend to leave you so long.” He reached out for her, but she pulled away in disgust.

 “You stink like camel dung! Is that blood? You are filthy. I want to go back to the palace.”

 “Yes, my apologies it was urgent business. Let me get your chariot.”

He quickly left, but she was right on his heels complaining about everything from the taste of the water to the sound of swordplay.

 General Malek entered instead of a porter, and he announced her chariot was awaiting. The whole camp must have heard her yelling. He was pleased his general was always so efficient, especially as he kissed her checks and hustled his angry wife off. They gave her little opportunity to speak another word as they quickly loaded her and sent the chariot on its way.

 He would get a bath and meal before he followed her back. General Malek followed him back inside. He had been eagerly awaiting his leader’s return.

 “My lord the men have been having some issues. These tribesmen want to lead their own regiments and captains not have Egyptian leaders. There was a fight at dawn’s training.”

 “General, I’ve been thinking on this. The Hyksos are a proud people, it is for this reason I’ve recruited them into my army. That pride will ensure their loyalty to the oaths they swear to me. But that Hyksos pride won’t let them take orders from strange men. So let them command their own. Divide the battalions by tribes. Set one man over each battalion to report to you and your other lieutenants. Instruct them on how to subdivide each company. Choosing their own captains. In this way we should have a little cohesion within our army.”

 He wasn’t really concerned with the man’s reply, turning his back on him as he entered the bath. He was happy to shuck off all his filthy clothes and wash in clean cool waters. The day was so hot already.

 “My lord, it will be done. We should be a few more months in training. The men have proven to be skilled warriors, but it will take some time to get them organized and fighting as one on a grander scale.”

 The man apparently wasn’t going to leave him for a moment’s peace. Neither would the flies, they had been worse this year than ever he could remember.

 “We don’t have months. The time to act is now. Do what you can to speed this up. Train more hours, push them harder.”

 He gave up relaxing, got out and dressed in a simple cotton tunic he could wear under his leather armor. It was black and burnished with fire. He wanted to show them their new god was a God of War. It was the perfect outfit to confront the High Priest. He would show the man who was in power.

 “Yes, my lord, as you wish my lord.”

 He left Malek to deal with the troops after they sent a message to his brother with his best bird. Then he went on to the palace without delay. They had given him a fresh camel, the fastest as he had requested.

 He wasted no time that he might encounter anyone but went through the secret old ways not even Zaidor knew of, the passages meant only for pharaohs. Shortly he was before Zaidor’s chamber door and the guards were letting him in.

 The chamber was dark despite it being a sunny day. A single oil lamp sat on a gold table, and behind it in a tunic of deep red. He had washed all the blood from himself and sat there as calm as a man without a care.

 “We need to talk. I cannot forgive you for nearly killing my friend. You will pay for your crimes! I will tolerate your blood cult no longer!”

 He had worked himself up for a big speech, but the man stood up and took the words from his mouth.

 “Young man, it is your actions tonight that won’t be tolerated. You swore your allegiance to me when you joined the Order. I am the one who brought you into power. I eliminated your father, quite easily I might add, and I won’t hesitate to get rid of you if you choose to question my authority again. Besides, I didn’t know that was your friend. I sent the guys to acquire a maiden of the temple, it was so dark they just grabbed at random. You are the one who assured me they were all available and pure. Had you said something, I would have spared the girl. Simple mistake, I assure you it won’t happen again. Just like I know you won’t disrespect me again in front of our dear brothers.”

 He smiled and stared at Ra’Menes who could almost see the venom dripping from his lips.

 “Zaidor, I will believe you didn’t know which girl she was, for she had been badly beaten so I could barely distinguish her. Someone must pay for what has been done to her. You told me the victims were not tortured. You know I didn’t agree with this. But you stand before me admitting to my father’s murder. Do you think I was okay with that? You have gone too far! You are not the man I thought you were.”

 “You agreed to it all. You told me to do what needed to be done to bring you power. I do these rituals for you. It is Ba’al that moves the hand of fate. He it is who killed your father. I merely did the proper ritual and sacrifices. That innocent blood you treasure is what gave you an army to conquer the world. I did. Ba’al did. And we can take it all back.”

 He growled that last part in such a viscous way that Ra’Menes stepped back. The door opened as a table full of oils and devices came in pushed by three nearly nude ladies. They eyed the Pharoah hungrily as they set up to message the old man. He walked to a long table against the wall, and said over his shoulder, “Now if you will excuse me, it is time for my massage. I’ve had a most stressful night. One of my own had to pay for your interruptions.”

 Ra’Menes turned away before the man disrobed. He didn’t know what else to say. He had been outplayed and had entangled himself in a spider’s web more deadly than any viper.

 He was furious at how the man had treated him and the conversation played over and over in his mind as he made his way to his room. Zaidor had threatened him and his family. He needed to see the one person he could trust in this palace, his mother.

 CHAPTER 16

 Cheveyo was in the gardens moving stones using frequencies of sound. When he had been a scribe, he had come across an ancient text that said the Great Pyramids had been created using frequencies. It had sounded like a myth until he had undergone the change. Now that he could see the frequencies and energies of everything, he knew it was quite easy to achieve. He had also learned to remove the negative energy of sickness. It was simply a matter of moving positive energy in place.

 In just a little over two weeks his whole world had changed in every possible way. He had learned how to use his body and its abilities. He connected with the people here, learning the beauty of their ways. They knew things even the brotherhood had forgotten. If not for the approaching doom, he would have been in absolute heaven.

 The Master Cante Tinza approached, and Cheveyo dropped the stones he had been levitating in a circle. The man was still hard to look too closely at because of his high energy which blinded him if he wasn’t careful.

 “Brother Cheveyo you have received a message from the palace. I thought it best to come myself. I have a feeling we won’t like it.”

 He held out a small, rolled parchment. Cheveyo couldn’t believe the words he read.

 “Na’feti was abducted, beaten, and nearly sacrificed by Zaidor. My brother rescued her and took her to a tribal medicine woman, but he says she is in bad shape. I shouldn’t have sent her back alone. I must go to her.”

 He was shocked this had happened to her, he had let this happen, he should have been with her, protecting her.

 “My brother, go and help her. It is true it was not my plan to send you back so soon, but the Creator had other plans. You are stronger than any I’ve ever met, including myself. I know you will be just fine. Trust your connection to the source of all knowledge. There is nothing I can teach you that you don’t already know, have always known.”

 “Thank you for all you have done for me. I pray my drawings and descriptions will be enough for the boats to be constructed. I fear there isn’t much time to make as many as we discussed, but I promise to send reinforcements of any carpenters I can find.” He didn’t want to leave here with so much to do but his heart pulled him to rush to her side.

 Cante Tinza placed a reassuring hand upon her shoulder.

 “Do not worry, we will have everything prepared. I’ll send a few warriors with you as well. I have a feeling you will need people you can trust and our people know and trust you as well.”

 He embraced the man who was his teacher, and now brother. He knew he would see him soon yet was reluctant to part. As he left for his room, Graywolf materialized out the shadows.

 “I’m coming, Master. I... I mean can I please follow you and help save our people?”

 This was the first time he had seen the young man look nervous. He hadn’t even known he was there, but he expected nothing less of the brave warrior.

 “Yes, of course, it would be an honor to have you by my side. Gather all you care for, there may be no time when we come back.”

 A moment of fear and realization played across his face. Then he steeled his nerves, met Cheveyo’s gaze and said, “Yes sir! I will meet you at the food hut.”

 Then he took off running. Cante Tinza was gone as well and Cheveyo too ran back into the temple, they had a long trek down the mountain and back to the shore.

 As he opened his door to leave, Cante Tinza was standing there waiting with a scroll in his hand.

 “Brother Cheveyo, there is just one more thing. When Thoth left Egypt, he hid a collection of records beneath the Sphinx. Artimis was unable to remove them alone, so he instructed the task to you. You mustn’t let anyone know you have these. I’ve had three sarcophagi made for the sacred records here and two for the bones of the first parents. You will have to pack the Word tablet; it was written by the actual finger of God. Zaidor must not know what is in those sarcophagi.”

 He handed him the scroll and hugged him with a final word.

 “Remember you are no longer Osarmoses, Child of Osiris, you are reborn, Cheveyo, Spirit Warrior, and you will lead us home. Much love brothers. We will see you soon.”

 Cheveyo was saddened at their parting but knew he would see the man again. There was no time to waste. He quickly made his way to where the ladies were preparing the evening meal. Graywolf and three other warriors were there dressed in full regalia complete with bows and arrows and large feathered war bonnets. At least he would not stand out so much when they returned to the city.

 Graywolf stepped forward.

 “Master Cheveyo, we have food for our journey. We sent a scribe ahead to ensure the canoes are ready, but we must hurry if we are to reach the shore before dark.”

 They wasted no time in starting the trip down. When they made it to the shore, the scribe was waiting with three canoes and lit lanterns. No one said a word as they boarded, even the scribe who was in one waiting for Cheveyo. The boy paddled as hard as the grown men around him.

 Though they later acquired swift camels, it would still be nearly dawn before they entered the farmer village where the medicine woman lived.

 They stopped on the outskirts and Cheveyo dismounted. It had been decided they would split up here and each visit their tribe and families. The scribe would stay with him. The boy was an orphan Egyptian adopted by the church. He and Graywolf said goodbyes and parted ways.

 Cheveyo was thankful it was still dark as they quietly walked through the neighborhood. Though he could see clearly in the dark it was the fact that others could not see him at the moment which comforted him. The scribe walked softly behind him as well.

 In these predawn hours there was a stillness in the air, not a bird called, dog barked, or breeze stirred. The regularly humid climate had turned dry and hot, when it should be the wettest. The rainy season had failed to come, and the land was cracking underfoot.

 Before he could announce himself, an old lady emerged dressed in a white buckskin dress with long fringe hanging from the arms and sides. She had many necklaces and huge double braids. A big smile lit up her face at the sight of him.

 “Oh, I’ve waited a long time to meet you. Come in, both of you.”

 She turned back around, and they followed her inside.

 The first thing to catch his eye was Na’feti lying on a pallet near the central cooking hearth. Her energy was so low with his new sight she appeared as embers under a layer of ash. His heart nearly broke at the sight of her bruised skin, her lip and eye still swollen and purple. Before he knelt beside her, he remembered his manners.

 “Good morning, I am Master Cheveyo, a dear friend of the girl. I thank you for opening your home to her and us. Is there anything I can do to assist you?”

 She eyed him suspiciously, “I thought you all knew how to heal anyone. I’ve heard the Twice Born can raise the dead even?”

 He laughed a little at that.

 “Well, I’m pretty new at all this. I was just beginning my training when I heard she had been abducted and beaten. There was no time to learn healing.”

 He gazed at the poor damaged girl on the floor. He wondered how he could help her.

 “Lucky for you, young Master, I happen to know how it’s done. I just don’t have the energy like I use to. Looks like your training continues here.”

 She winked and busied herself putting on a pot of tea. The scribe stood there watching everything awkwardly until she motioned him to sit and drink.

 It had been a long night, and nothing could have prepared him for what he found in this hut, the surprising grandmother and the nearly dead girl. He trusted in the Creator and said a quick prayer. It would be a treat to learn from this sweet and wise elder of his own people, his real people.

 CHAPTER 17

 Ra’Menes walked swiftly and silently towards the docks at the royal marina. He had given most of the guard the night off, but still he was surprised to see only one fat elderly gent asleep on a bench.

 His mother and her ladies followed along quietly behind him. Three young servant boys loaded with the women’s belongings trailed behind them. Six strong oarsmen waited upon the dock to assist the ladies aboard.

 He and his mother paused while the rest boarded. He could tell by her face she wasn’t done trying to change his mind.

 “Please be careful my boy. I still don’t understand why you are so afraid of the man hurting me that you have to send me to your sisters in Memphis. He has been good to us.”

 “Mom there are things happening you wouldn’t understand. He is not who he appears to be. Grief has clouded your judgement. Trust me, all will be well, but right now I will feel better with you safe away from here.”

 “Son. I got a message a while back from your brother. I didn’t tell you then because Zaidor said you already knew. I guess I did think it a little odd how he could have known.”

 He had to cut her off or she would ramble.

 “What did it say?”

 He wondered why it wasn’t sent to him directly. She pulled him close in an embrace and spoke in a near whisper.

 “He said there was an army camped deep in the wilderness south of the city.” She pulled back and smiled, “Isn’t that why you’re making a larger army?”

 “No, I didn’t know this at all. That Snake!!! You should have told me.”

 He tried to keep his voice low even in his rage but in the quiet night sounds carried to those on board who looked their way.

 “Go on get aboard, just another reason you should leave. I do have a better army than we have had for a while. I will take care of these invader swine.”

 She put out her hand for the oarsman to help her up the ramp as she said goodbye one final time.

 “I know you will be fine, My Pharoah.”

 And with that they shoved off and the Queen made her way to the cabin and her bed. He knew she would sleep the whole way; she always slept on long boat voyages.

 As he watched her leave, he wished his new bride had been on the boat. She had informed him earlier at dinner that she was pregnant for sure, then she left the room with her entourage saying the heat was too much to bear and they were headed to the gardens. She had refused to leave the palace claiming the insects were insufferable on the river and that she would not leave her new husband and kingdom.

 He admired her strength and knew Zaidor wouldn’t see it necessary to hurt her as the alliance was at his insistence as well as his late father’s. The High Priest understood there was no love there merely benefits of politics.

 Unfortunately, the man now knew how much he cared about Na’feti. He had to keep her safe out of the city. His plan was to find a way to be free of the whole bloody cult and the Twice Born, he would restore the old temples to glory and worship the many gods, including himself.

 At this moment, he had to get back to check on Na’feti and speak with his brother, then he needed to get back to the palace.

 The new Grand Visar, Aper’El’Aron, had accosted him yesterday with the kingdom business. This year the locust had spawned, and they were wreaking havoc upon the crops. The grasshopper population seemed to be unusually high as well. Even now he could hear the cicada filling up the night with their songs as the grasshoppers jumped underfoot or whizzed by his head.

 He didn’t know how he was supposed to deal with insects. At least his father had always kept the storehouses full. Still, this was just another reason they needed to go to war; they could take what the people needed from others who were not being hit hard with pestilence. The army leaving would further save the kingdom because those men could obtain food from the conquered, thereby the people would survive. He planned to sail ahead of the army with a fleet which would send supplies back on cargo ships.

 Tomorrow, he scheduled a trip to the builders to see how those ships were coming along. He would expand the navy like no pharaoh before him. Even old Aper’El had been impressed with his plan. So, if the drought lasted for years like in the legends, he would be a beacon of light, like Ra. His people would survive.

 His camel was having issues as he tried to hurry to the old lady’s hut. It would run for a bit, then began walking again. He was just outside the village when it kneeled and refused to get up. No amount coaxing or whipping would move the beast. He had no choice but to dismount and walk but, in that action, he noticed moving shadows. He had been followed. Well, he hoped they were ready to play.

 He pulled his saber from its sheath and grabbed a dagger with the other hand. There was an obelisk nearby and he chose to put his back to that and stood ready.

 “Come you cowards if you dare!” he yelled at the shadows, challenging them forward.

 The first assailant approached out of the darkness to his right with a short broad sword. He parried and easily got a blow in on the man’s leg. The man called out and another of his team rushed in from the left. Ra’Menes had his hands full trying to block both, which meant he couldn’t keep an eye out for the third man. The second guy landed a blow on his forearm which nearly cost him his life as the first guy swung with fury at his head.

 It was then he noticed the third man was coming in as well, but suddenly some big, cloaked guy intercepted him. The two began to fight as another cloaked figure began wresting with the man he had cut. That left him to battle one man instead of three which he dispatched easily landing a killing blow across the man’s neck.

 The third assailant ran from the large figure, but Pharaoh ran towards him, burying his dagger in the guy’s guts. Then he punched him in the face knocking the man down. When he looked around, he saw the last assailant lay dead.

 The large figure spoke then, “Brother, are you alright?”

 Osar had come back. He was so relieved.

 “Yes, I’m fine just a scratch. I could have taken them all out. Still, I’m glad you came back home.”

 Osar embraced his brother in the dark and Ra’Menes noticed his brother seemed a lot bigger. He shook it off and started toward the healer’s hut.

 “It’s good to be back, though I can’t say I appreciate the circumstances. What happened to her?”

 “The same thing that happened to me tonight, Zaidor tried to kill her. I rescued her from under his knife. I still don’t know what they did to her before I arrived. Now he has attempted to take my life.”

 He couldn’t believe this had happened. The man had threatened but he didn’t think he would be so bold as to actually do the deed.

 “I should not have sent her alone. I had no idea the man would attempt to kill her for his sick rituals. Now he has gone after you as well. The man’s evil knows no bounds.”

 “I will give him boundaries real soon. I won’t let him hurt anyone else we love. I sent mother away to our sisters in Memphis just before I came here.”

 “I know you will brother. I’m happy she is safe. So is Na’feti now.”

 They had reached the hut and all quickly went inside. He could see that Nim’sha was administering a few drops of medicine to Na’feti. She still looked awful with her face bruised but it was not as swollen as it had been. He wanted to kill the man with his bare hands.

 “Hello Nim’sha. Thank you for taking care of her.”

 She turned at the sound of his voice, “Oh hello young prince. She is recovering slowly, but not to worry, we will get her all better.”

 She went to a shelf on her wall filled with jars and baskets of random things. He wondered who the ‘we’ was but then he turned to his brother and his brain forgot everything.

 He took a few steps back in amazement, almost fear. The being before his eyes was truly extraordinary, and unbelievable in white sheer clothing and a magnificent head of feathers. He had seen this vision upon temple walls in the oldest places in the world. He knew the Eagles verses the Serpent story by heart. As a child it was his favorite; the serpents could change into men and they took over the world by deceit and feasted on human blood, but the eagle men flew down from the skies and attacked all the serpents driving them away so mankind would thrive again. Thoth was a scholar warrior from Atlantis, a guardian, a teacher, an eagle, a man, a god. There were so many stories, but he never thought they could be true.

 “Menes, it’s me, Osarmoses. Brother, don’t be afraid.”

 The eyes and voice were his brother for sure. But the rest…he just couldn’t wrap his mind around it all. He realized he had been holding his breath, and exhaled, suddenly feeling lightheaded so he sat down. He just couldn’t believe his brother was now this being.

 “What happened to you? What are you?”

 He would not allow himself to acknowledge his brother may have become some sort of god.

 “I’m not entirely sure what made me this way. I just know this is what happens when you become a Twice Born Master. I didn’t believe it myself at first.” Cheveyo was still standing inside the door but then the scribe tapped him to move and he sat down next to Pharaoh.

 “This is absolutely insane! I really thought those were just stories. I…look, thank you guys for helping me back there.” He had to get his head focused.

 “You’re welcome. It’s ok, just relax. Did you get the message I sent the day we left?”

 “Mother just told me as I sent her away. That there is some army waiting in the wilderness. Zaidor got to her first; he has eyes and ears everywhere.”

 He was still processing that news, it seemed to interfere with his plans.

 “Yes, a man found me at an inn grabbing a bite to eat. He said rumor is it’s the barbarian prince who killed his brother the king and destroyed the kingdom out of spite. He is called the Red Prince for they claim he drinks the blood of the innocent.”

 “I will deal with this menace soon. It is a good thing I am expanding our army. Zaidor did that, he moved in a Hyksos Grand Viser to replace you the very day you left. His name is Aper’El’Aron, he is supposed to be a true blood relative of yours, but I hardly believe that. I’m sorry, I had to agree because he brought with him every able-bodied male of his people for our army. Zaidor tried to banish you forever, but I won’t let him make you leave your home. With such large reinforcements I will be able to leave a part of the army here as a protection and the rest will come with me to take these invaders, then the world.”

 Now that he was speaking with his brother, he knew he was right and there was nothing to fear from any outside army when his own was now so strong.

 Cheveyo smiled and nodded, “That is a wise plan brother. I understand you had little choice in the matter of court. I don’t think I should go back there anyway, not like this. I should stay with the Hyksos. I’m not sure how this man could be related to me when my family was slaughtered, and the village burned. It is another wicked trick of Zaidor I assume.”

 “He is pure evil. I would recommend you don’t go back to the palace right now. To be fair I’m spending less time there as well. I’ve been camped out with the men on the training grounds. Now after the incident with Na’feti, I’d rather she didn’t go back either. Where will you stay?”

 He wanted to keep her by his side but knew that wouldn’t be possible with the battles ahead. He would have to let his brother take care of her, but that birdbrain better keep his talons off her.

 “It seems our host has invited us to stay with her and learn her healing ways. I wasn’t able to finish my training with the master, but this beautiful soul knows many things.”

 He turned to the old lady who just nodded agreement and passed them all cups. The scribe had gone to fetch more wood for the fire in an effort to let the brothers catch up.

 “That is very kind of her. I also think you should be here with Na’feti, protecting her. When she is better, she can go to our sister’s place with mother.” Then he addressed the old lady. “Nim’sha, is she getting better? Have you an idea how much longer?”

 “She is healing. Only she can determine how fast. Maybe this big guy can help, if he will listen to me and use his power. At least another moon before she can travel, maybe two. There is so much damage, I’ve been keeping her asleep. But tonight, I’m letting her say hello to you both. Be calm and don’t upset her. Give her love and strength.”

 His heart leapt in his chest; she would be awake.

 “Nim’sha, when do you think she will wake?”

 “Always asking when! Humph!” With that she went to a table at the back of the hut and busied herself with more herbs.

 The scribe had returned and was sitting quietly by the fire, poking it with a stick. The child seemed lost but at least he was smart enough to stay out of their conversation. For a moment no one said anything as the brothers watched the sleeping girl and the locust sang loudly outside.

 The healer brought Na’feti a cup of something that smelled so foul it made his eyes burn. He thought it smelled bad enough to wake the dead, which seemed appropriate given the circumstance. She began to sing as she let small drops fall from her fingers onto the girl’s lips.

The scribe beat a small water drum Ra’Menes hadn’t even noticed was there before. The boy began to sing along in a language only they understood.

 After four rounds the young woman on the floor began to stir. He was amazed they could bring her back so easily. He eased himself closer to the pallet to see the action and be there when she awoke. The locust seemed to sing louder not to be outdone. He felt his heart pounding along with the drum and he willed her to open her eyes.

 Another round of songs and he thought he might go crazy and just shake her. Then her eyes fluttered opened and he kneeled beside her.

 The old lady handed him a cup and he asked her, “Are you thirsty? May I?” With that he offered her the cup as the old lady helped ease her head up.

 Her hand came up to touch his arm. “You saved me.”

 She was so weak; she could barely make a sound but for a whisper.

 “Oh, my dear don’t try to speak. I will never let anything happen to you again. I’m sorry I didn’t get there sooner.”

 To his surprise there were tears threatening his eyes. He held her hand close to his heart.

 “You saved me Menes. Thank you.” She repeated as her eyes closed for a moment and a pained look crossed her face. “Oh. It hurts so bad.”

 It killed him to see her in so much pain. He wanted to tell her he loved her, he never wanted to leave her side again, but he knew he couldn’t say that in front of everyone.

 Cheveyo was kneeling down beside him now that the healer had moved. His face showed no emotions, almost alabaster smooth. Pharoah wondered if the man now felt emotions like regular humans, though to be fair, he hadn’t shown much emotion before, always so serious.

 “I’m here, Little Flower. I’m so sorry I let you go alone.”

 So, they both were dealing with issues of guilt it seemed, but the real enemy was still out there and Ra’Menes would make him pay. She looked really bad now that he was close and sounded even worse.

 “You came.” She breathed out the words slowly.

 Her eyes rolled back in her head for a moment, closed then opened again with a painful moan.

 “Help me” were the last words she sighed before she was asleep again. He wondered if she would remember this encounter.

 Nim’sha shooed them both away. “Now let the girl rest. Go outside and draw some water.”

 They quickly followed her instructions and went outside to find some water. Ra’Menes led him to the stream below them. There was barely any water in the pool and just a trickle coming down. The sun had risen now, and it was getting bright so they could see clearly.

 He was still amazed that this odd creature was the boy he had grown up with, the man that he had hugged goodbye just a little while ago. He was so much taller and broader, changed in every way possible but voice and eyes.

 “So, what happened out there? Did it hurt?”

 “It was the most painful experience of my life until I walked through the door to that hut. I can’t believe I let this happen to her.”

 The look on his face made the pharaoh think that his brother may have deeper feelings for their childhood friend. Feelings perhaps like his own and that caused a bit of jealousy to flame within his guts. Osarmoses can’t become a god and get the girl; he wasn’t even a true Egyptian.

 He squashed down these feelings of inadequacy. Afterall, he was The Morning Star, Child of Ra, Light of Egypt, there was no need to feel second to some mutated priest. This was exactly why religion needed to be vanquished and such strange acts abolished, just like Zaidor’s bloody cult.

 “It is not your fault but mine, I should have made her stay where she belonged. My wife has informed me we are with child. I will need Na’feti by her side helping her and my child stay healthy. When she is better, we will all move to the palace. I realize I need to clean house and get rid of these cultists over-running my kingdom.”

 “You are going to be a dad!? I’m so happy for you, brother. This is a good day. Thanks be to the Creator.” He looked to the sun and mumbled a prayer which Menes could not hear.

 “Yeah, I guess with all that has been going on, I hadn’t really let it sink in. I mean I needed an heir to the throne, so I’m hopeful it’s a boy. With these invaders though, I don’t know how I’m going to be able to protect them. So, Memphis is the best hope for their future, our future.”

 “I really need to tell you about what happened down there, when I was being tried. I had these visions of the future.”

 “Osar, I really want to hear this, but I don’t have time to stay today. You know we are under a severe drought and these damn insects are eating all the crops. I could really use your help with organizing the relief when the time comes. Right now, I need you here to take care of her. I’ll be back next week or so and we can work this all out.”

 His voice sounded as tired as he felt. The only thing keeping him going was the joy that Na’feti had opened her eyes and remembered he had saved her. He had wanted to hold her and kiss her and never let her go, but instead he would leave now, leave her to another man.

 His brother said he understood and wished the best as he took both water jugs in one arm and hugged him with the other, then he went to the hut, but looked back one more time as he ducked inside. It was a look of so much pain and concern, Ra’Menes almost wanted to follow to ask him what was wrong to cause such intense feeling.

 He didn’t have time for almost, almost wouldn’t save his people. No, it was up to him alone, and perhaps his brother, if the man wasn’t too far gone with whatever this transformation was or had done to him inside and out. He decided he would take the man’s camel as well because he knew Osar wouldn’t need it for a while, being bade to stay till the girl could travel back to the palace.

 He had everything under control and all would be well in his new kingdom. Na’feti would be his, he would take her as his second wife and have children with her as well. The people would flourish under his rule. He had many plans for the future.

 CHAPTER 18

 Na’feti opened her eyes and stretched leisurely within the sheets on her bed in the palace. The bed was so soft it was like sleeping on a cloud after the long journey she had been on with so many different beds. The cots and pallets stuffed with various things had all been hard, lumpy or both. This last month in the camps near the swamps of the River Tribe had been a nightmare of bug swarms and hard earth floors.

 They had eaten just about everything that crawled, slithered, swam, or flew. Many of the foods made her want to run but Cheveyo had been there to encourage her to suffer it down. They were skilled in pottery and basket making and had gifted her a nice travel basket lined with cloth and sewn with straps for arms to fit through.

 Then they had visited the Earth Tribe, the People of Stone. They were not friendly people, but they had good hearts which shown like diamonds in coal, once you got to know them. They were a large tribe of masons and jewelry makers. They were a people of hard living, and they respected facts and logic.

 The chief’s wife had gifted her a lovely turquoise necklace with matching earrings. Yet they were not a people of comfort and slept on hard beds and chairs cut from rock. She was more than happy to return to the city, to the safety of the palace and her comfortable bed there.

 She and Cheveyo had spent many hours together traveling all over the countryside around the city, yet few of those hours had been alone. They were always surrounded by people wanting to ask the prophet questions. The squire stayed at his side as well so that she rarely got a moment to talk with him. She had sat quietly and watched, listening to all he had to say. He was magnificent, but he had not kissed her since that day at the temple. She felt foolish to love a man so great, a man who everyone loved.

 She rolled over, enjoying the feel of the sheets upon her skin. Even her bed at home couldn’t compare to this in sheer comfort. And the food here was the best in the world. Her stomach grumbled just thinking about it.

 A knock on the door brought a pout to her pretty face, but she reluctantly got out of bed. She was very thankful for the strong lock and even stronger guard the Pharoah had given her for safety. Even the insects were less this high up, except the flies.

 “It’s me Na’feti. Let me in.”

 The Pharoah had finally come. She rushed to the door, threw it open and jumped into his arms.

 “Menes! I missed you!” She had rarely seen him since he had rescued her. He held her close as he finished coming in the room and closing the door behind him, with a word to the man to let no one inside.

 “God how I’ve missed you.” he said as he brough her to the bed. He laid her back and nuzzled her neck and she giggled and pushed him off lightly.

 “It’s good to see you, too. I can’t tell you enough how thankful I am to you for saving me. You rescued me right on time. I thought I was already dead, and you were a dream.” Her voice cracked as tears welled in her eyes.

 “I thought you were dead too. I raced to the old healer lady; I didn’t want to lose you.”

 He stopped there, looking in her eyes, checking that she was as okay as she felt. She had never seen such concern on his face for anyone. When he touched her hand, she felt her heart start pounding, remembering his tender touches and kisses quite suddenly.

 “You are my hero. All those years of training, you could have taken them all out.”

 She had forgotten how handsome he was and how overwhelmingly powerful his presence could be.

 “You are the only one I wanted to take out of there. Are you really alright? Please tell me what happened to you?” He held both her hands now as he asked.

 “Oh, it was awful. We were just traveling on the water when the boat rammed us from behind. Then men boarded and killed the oarsmen. They grabbed me but I fought so they beat me till I passed out. I was in a sack at first but then they took it off and put me in a dim room of mud and daub. The men were dressed as barbarians, as far as I could see with my good eye that wasn’t swollen.”

 “One man approached me and tried to get my dress off. Another told him I wasn’t to be violated, but he said the stupid priest wouldn’t know. He pulled out his member in my face. Oh, I was scared but thankfully the priest came to get me then. I tried to run but I think I must have been attacked and knocked out. It gets fuzzy after that. I only remember someone making me drink a brown liquid as someone dressed me. Then being on the altar, the fear, his horrible face, those evil eyes. And you, you saving me.”

 She fell into his arms then giving him a big hug with all the gratitude in her heart pouring out. He hugged her to him and stroked her hair.

 “I owed you one dear, for you saved my life first. I’m so sorry I wasn’t there sooner. I was so scared I would lose you.”

 She felt safe and loved and she knew he really meant it. He looked into her eyes as he caressed her cheek. He was very handsome and much more tender at that moment than she had ever seen him. And then he kissed her again, but this time with more love and passion than ever. There was nothing she could do but surrender.

 His kiss burned as she had never known. He was on top of her then, their bodies moving together with their desires, hands caressing skins. His lips trailed down her neck as she moaned and rose up to meet him, his manhood hard against her. He pulled her dress from her breast and kissed her gently there. For a moment she could think of nothing but his touch as he went yet lower, his lips, his smell, the power of his presence enveloped her.

 Then she remembered who she was and her duty.

 “I can’t, I am a priestess. It is forbidden!,” she pleaded, but he would not stop.

 She had never felt this way, the way he was touching her and lighting her body on fire. She called out his name as her body exploded. He kissed her thighs and belly as he climbed back up to her face. She was still breathing heavily and moving beneath him.

 “I will never hurt you my little priestess. You are mine.” Then he kissed her again softly. “I’ll see you soon my dear.”

 With that he was up and out the door before she could even say goodbye.

 She couldn’t believe he had done it again. Her heart belonged to Osar, but he seemed to have some power over her body which she could not understand. She had wanted to say no, but her gratitude and love had got all mixed in with his fire. She didn’t know if she would be strong enough to resist if he tried to push her farther.

 She knew she could not stay here with him. She had only come back to be of assistance to Osar when he told Pharoah about his visions. She hoped she could help persuade him to leave with them, to move the people to a safe place. Now she felt she had messed up. She hadn’t meant to fall into his arms, her emotions had gotten the better of her. It seemed their very lives were linked; neither would be alive without the other.

 The past few weeks she had been at Osar’s side as he spoke with the People, Cheveyo, they called him. Their kiss had seemed like another lifetime ago as they visited village after village. They believed him, they were willing to follow him to the promised lands. The wells were running low, and fires were breaking out all over the land; the people could feel something bad was coming.

 They had barely had time to speak with one another after she had healed. He had gone out with the scribe every day and long into the night. He had spent his spare time learning healing arts from the old lady or talking with elders who came to visit. Even now he was out there visiting the different villages of the many tribes. She knew soon she would have to speak to her own family and convince them to leave as well. She couldn’t wait to go home.

 At the moment, she needed a bath, and she prayed the bathhouses were still flowing in the Queen’s Garden. It was a heavenly paradise her last visit. As she made her way there, she noticed her guard was still with her and slowed her pace to thank him. He was a huge, seasoned Egyptian warrior named Bear, for obvious reasons. It just so happened he was married to her cousin. It was nice to have him there as she was still scared the priests might take her again.

 It was also fortunate he was there because when she saw the gardens, she took a step back and nearly fell, but he caught her. The place was devastated. Gone were the beautiful tropical plants and birds. The insects had eaten holes in the leaves of all the plants so badly that there was little left. A locust hit the ground in front of her as grasshoppers and crickets jumped everywhere.

 “What happened here?” She whispered.

 She couldn’t believe her eyes.

 “The insects ate everything. Once the Mother Queen was gone, Pharoah decided it was a waste of manpower to have so many men fighting bugs. Then the fountain clogged with dead leaves. Besides, with the ongoing drought it’s best not to use excess water. One bath yet remains, tended by our last gardener. It’s further to the back in a private area. Follow me.”

 He made so many turns she was sure she would never have found it without him. Every which way she looked there were dying plants. This had been the queen’s favorite place, it would have broken her heart to see it as it was, it hurt Na’feti’s own heart to see it. She was thankful when they neared the baths; the plants in this area were somewhat alive.

 He went around scouting for any unwanted lurkers. She slipped out of her clothes, grateful for a decent bath, and happily enjoyed the cool refreshing waters. She closed her eyes and relaxed.

 Someone slid down into the pool near her. She opened her eyes to see Zaidor observing her coldly. She moved as fast as she could away from him. His right-hand man, Ag’abagdon waited upon the bench nearby. His stare was cold and emotionless. She hated him as much as his master. He had been the one to change her clothes and beat her every chance he could with fist to her stomach so the bruises didn’t show.

 “No need to be afraid child. I won’t hurt you. By order of the Pharoah.”

 His smile dripped venom but there was a hungry look in his eyes which sent a chill down her spine. He clearly wanted to tear her to pieces, to finish what he started.

 “What do you want? Where’s the guard?”

 She didn’t waste any words or try to make pleasant. This monster had tried to kill her. He was unclothed himself and his fat cocoa skin glistened with sweat. She felt sickened and dirty despite being upstream in the pool.

 “Oh no need to worry about him, he will return shortly. Now, what do I want you ask?” He leaned forward, commanding her attention. “I want you to listen to me carefully. I am a very powerful man. I command the respect of all the elders and nobles. This city belongs to me. Even your precious Pharaoh does my biding.”

 He splashed water upon his girth and took a drink from a wine tankard nearby. It dribbled down his chin as red as blood and reminded her of that night with him standing above her with actual blood upon his lips ready to consume her’s as well. Despite the heat she found herself shivering.

 “My reputation is something I value highly. So, what I want from you is your silence. Don’t think I won’t hesitate to make you permanently quiet if you lack the discipline for silence. I suggest you forget all about your journey through the subterranean world or else find yourself once again in its halls in one of many rooms no other soul knows exists but me. You should content yourself with your herbs and plants, little priestess.”

 She hated him more than ever at that moment, but she also knew well enough not to challenge him. He truly terrified her and he knew it, so used that fear against her. Osar had told her Pharoah had sent his mother away to keep her safe and wanted her and his bride to follow. She wished she was far away already. The hatred in his eyes told her he would kill her anyway. What he wanted was to finish what he started, and it had nothing to do with her silence.

 There was a sound of commotion, a crash, and then Bear returned. He didn’t seem surprised to see Zaidor there and chose to glare at him as he spoke to her.

 “My lady, are you alright.” He huffed out of breath.

 Glaring back Zaidor answered for her, “She is fine. Just a chat amongst friends. One finale friendly reminder, our temple maidens are to be virgins of the purest quality. If one is found deflowered, even if it’s by Pharoah, she will be sold to the brothels.” He did not break eye contact with her.

 “Get me out of here.” She said and Bear handed her a cloth to wrap around her. She tried her best to cover up all of her body as she got out of the water. She didn’t look at the horrid man, but she felt his eyes shift to her and hungrily devour her form. Ag’abagdon was standing there not saying a word but menacingly watching them, as if he might block their leaving. Bear had her clothes and he simply picked her up with one arm and hurried them out of there, slamming his other side into Zaidor’s sidekick.

 She was happy he carried her because she felt too weak to walk. The fear in her heart had crippled her feet, leaving her helpless as a child. She simply held on and let him take her back to her room.

 He took her inside and laid her on the bed.

 “I’m sorry, I didn’t get there sooner.” He said, then noticed the tears falling. “Are you ok? Did he hurt you?”

 “N, no. I…I’m fine. Really. He just scared me, threatened me if I said anything about him to anyone. I was scared he had killed you too.”

 “It takes more than a handful of scrawny priests to take out this old Bear.”

 “Thank you for saving me.” He grunted and tousled her hair with a big meaty hand. She felt so drained all of a sudden, the emotions of this day and the unbearable heart had caught up with her and she lay back upon nearly a dozen pillows.

 “I don’t want to go back out there this evening. Can you please have them bring my food up here and only let the Paroah or his brother inside. I think I’ll bathe in here from now on. If it’s not too much trouble.”

 “It will be no trouble at all my lady. Please rest now. I promise I won’t let anyone harm you.”

 She knew he meant it with all his heart, but the fact is they were both in danger as long as she was in the palace. Tomorrow she would go home and spend time with her family. They would have much to pack for the upcoming journey out of the country.

 The red star had gotten larger and brighter. She could even see it in the daytime out her window, shining its smile of doom.

 CHAPTER 19

 Zaidor watched her leave and licked his lips. He could hardly wait to strip that beautiful skin from her body. To hear her sweet screams once more. He now had dreams of her scream as he raised the knife. For one glorious moment all had been right, that perfect look of fear upon her face had haunted him. For just one moment, till that brat had stolen her from him. It was obvious he loved her. Now he had to find a way to use that love against the boy.

 Yes, she would be a useful tool in manipulating the Pharoah. Then when she was no longer useful, he would kill them both with pleasure. That guard had to go as well; the man was far too noble the kind that couldn’t be bought.

 Much like general Malek. He was a smart man who recognized power and who craved that himself. But he was also loyal to the pharaoh. Zaidor had promised him all the power and wealth his heart desired, in turn the man would take out the Pharoah in the heat of battle. He had eventually agreed. The newly formed army would be decimated. Zaidor would step in and claim the bride as he took the throne.

 As for the invading army, they would soon be his own hammer for conquering the world. Those dreams of a mighty empire he had poured into the prince’s head had been his own dreams of ambition. Everything was going smoothly; except he was hearing rumors of a prophet rising up amongst the workers. He would have to send someone to investigate because the stories seemed far too unbelievable. They said Thoth had come to lead them to paradise. He was sure it was merely a tale brought on out of desperation in the drought, stories to bring the people hope. They often spoke of a messiah, always waiting for a savior.

 He hoped the drought would wipe out most of them. They were already a huge drain on the economy. He would make any survivors his slaves and beat the pride out of their hearts. Paying them to build monuments and tombs had cost the kingdom far too much already. In order to build his empire some would have to suffer. Change was never easy, but necessary for progress.

 Several bloodied and limping priests came by to apologize for failing to detain the guard, but he sent them away without a scolding. He was feeling too good to let their incompetence disturb him. Perhaps just getting some relief from the oppressive heat was helping elevate his mood as much as his encounter with the girl.

 Aper’El approached with an escort of lower priests who disrobed him, after which, he quickly dismissed them. Then he slid into the waters onto the seat the girl had just left. He hated dealing with the man right after his fun with the priestess, but the man had him trapped a moment.

 “My Lord, so good to see you this afternoon. I didn’t expect you here.”

 “Good to see you as well. I trust you are happy in the new position. Do you like your living quarters? I had it furnished from our finest importer.” He had purposely chosen the most expensive furnishings to ensure the man was completely overwhelmed and eating out of his hand.

 “Yes, oh very much so, the place is great. The job has been a bit stressful with the drought happening. I have to say I find our Pharoah to be wise beyond his years. He has a sound plan to save our nation.”

 “Yes, well I have been his mentor since he was young, guiding the boy along. Much as I guided you, young man. Now look at both of you, the most powerful men in the country, soon to be the world.” For now, he thought. The sooner he got the both of them out of the way, the better.

 “Thank you so much Master. You have been very kind to me, and my people. I am forever in your debt.” The man had his eyes closed and his head leaned upon the marble edge.

 “It is all by the grace of the Father of Gods. We are merely vessels to his will. Did I ever tell you my mother was from a southwestern tribe? She was as dark as night and just as beautiful. Of course, as one can see, I take after my Assyrian father. The point is, I understand what you’ve gone through as strangers in a strange land. You can come to me for anything. Think of me not as your master, but as the father you never had.”

 He never wanted children actually and he hated this man before him, but he wanted his people’s money and would soon have all of that.

 The young man sat up, and met the old man’s gaze, “That means the world to me sir.”

 He gave the man his warmest smile, “As High Priest I will be like a farther to your people as well. This drought is trying on us, but we will all survive with a well thought out plan.”

 “I agree, sir, it’s a good plan. I know our army will procure all the food we need outside of Egypt.”

 The man was so naive it was almost too easy to manipulate him.

 “It will not be the army that saves us, but it will be you who rescues your tribes from the cold hand of starvation and death. They will hail you as their hero as you lead them to victory. On that matter, I will need you to collect taxes from your people, to support the army. The cost of weapons alone is draining the coffers. It will cost much more to move such a large mass of men. I’m about to edict a larger tax upon those in the city as well. We must all pull together to save ourselves.”

 He watched the man’s face fall from the peace of a moment before. Zaidor had no doubt the man would comply.

 “I understand. We can discuss it later during our meeting with the Pharoah in a few days.’

 Zaidor just smiled some more and stood up. Immediately three priests showed up with robes and a fresh jar of wine.

 “Yes of course, we will let him know the plan at our next meeting. Oh, and let the Grand Mistress know I want all the maidens and priestess checked for their virtue. We cannot be too cautious with our vigilance to the Lord. If we keep our hearts and homes clean, God will not have to punish us for our sins but will bless all our peoples.” He could see emotions play across the man’s face but then they settled on calm acceptance.

 “Yes, Master you are very wise. I will speak with her at our dinner this evening. We have struck up a friendship. I’m sure she will not refuse our request for proof of purity for her girls.”

 “Very good. May the Lord bless you. Give my regards to the mistress.” He never looked back at the man still soaking in the waters below. The locusts were singing so loudly he couldn’t hear if Aper’El responded, nor did he care. He was very pleased with the way his bath had gone, very pleased. Everything was going according to plan. He found himself chuckling lightly as he made his way to the dark chamber below. Time for some celebration fun.

 CHAPTER 20

 Cheveyo was alone in a teepee in the scribe’s village. His name was Mazatl and he was on 19 summers. The orphan boy had grown up serving the masters. He was now completely devoted to Cheveyo, and it had been some task for him to shake the boy and get these moments of meditation.

 It was a short reprieve as Mazatl stuck his head in through the flap. “Master the elders are ready to see you now.”

 Mazatl looked on a moment not sure if he should repeat himself, wait for a reply, or assume he had been heard and leave. Cheveyo, who not only heard him, but could also read his mind, pulled himself out of his prayers and told the man he would be there in a moment.

 He had to get to the palace soon and tell his brother about what was really in his heart, tell him what God had promised and shown him. He missed her as well, more than he could even admit to himself. Being around Na’feti so much these past weeks had been the best time of his life. Their journey down to the temple had really been great, but lately it was their closeness he treasured.

 He had stayed by her side healing her for days. He had learned from Nim’sha how to see into her body, find the negative energy, seek where the damage was, then send in positive, healing energy. He had worked till his own body had been nearly too weak to stand, and then she had opened her beautiful eyes and gave him a tiny smile. It was as if his heart caught fire and he realized he was very in love with her.

 Unfortunately, a few days would be all the time he had as the elders would descend upon him, demanding his attention. As word got out, he was invited to visit other villages all around the area. The drought had people scared, the insects and heat made them irritable and volatile. The elders were worried for their people, so they began to rally around him as a ray of hope.

 He would go out again tonight, sit around a fire with old men and women. He would tell them his story and he would pray they believed him.

 Mazatl stuck his head in once more, “I don’t mean to bother, it’s just that the chief of my tribe is out there, and he is not a patient man.”

 “It is fine Mazatl. I’m coming now, please lead the way.”

 He stood to follow the man outside. This lodge was very different from others they had visited so far. Most had used wood beams for the circular walls, which had then been covered completely by mulch. The one they were approaching was much larger than the rest and only had mud on the roof. Once inside, he was amazed at how beautiful the ceiling was, being a circular layering of cedar posts made to look like a basket weave at the top where a square opening had been left to let out the smoke. A fire burned in the center where an earthen and rock hearth had been constructed.

 The elders sat against the back wall upon log benches. Though most wore feathered headdresses they were still shocked to see his was real. He shook the hand of each as he went around for introductions. Then he circled back around and stood across the fire from them with his back to the door.

 “Honored elders, I thank you for seeing me this day. It is my pleasure to speak with you all. As you may know, I’ve recently joined the ranks of the Twice Born. It was truly the hardest and most rewarding thing I’ve ever experienced. While underground and communing with our Creator, I was shown the fate of this world, and the destiny of this people.”

 “As you may have noticed, this summer has been particularly dry and unusual. There is a strange star in the sky. This, my friends, is what I must discuss with you today. That strange star passes our world ever so many thousands of years and brings with it death and destruction. The Lord has shown me this place is no longer safe, it will burn like an oven and be left a desolate wasteland.’

 They began to murmur and discuss, but he raised a hand and spoke to silence them.

 “Please, do not panic. God always has a plan for his faithful children. We must leave this land, and travel to a place across the waters. There is a land choice above all others where we may live free and happily, for all time. A land blessed by the hand of God; our children’s children will become a mighty nation.”

 “The brothers of the Twice Born temple in Jabal Musa and the tribe there are beginning to build sturdy boats so we may cross the Great Waters before it’s too late. God has promised to send a powerful wind to carry us swiftly and safely. There we will find a haven from the destruction. A place to begin our lives again when the land here has become dust and rubble.”

 “If you will believe me and the word of our Great Spirit, then please get your people packing. We will be making migrations to the temple soon. I’ll have canoes ready to bring your families down there. It is in the Dashret, near the Yam Suph, as you might call it. Mazetl has agreed to take the first group in five days. We are limiting it to 100 people so as to not cause suspicion. We will travel at night as to further cloak our journey. When he returns, he will bring more scouts, which in turn can lead groups down as well. Momentarily, we are limited in boats but that will change as I procure more for us. Once I speak with the Pharoah, I’m sure he will understand the need to leave this land. Then we can move the people during daylight in larger numbers.”

 One man stood up; he was not as old as the others. He had keen eagle eyes shining under his feathered war bonnet that made him look two feet taller. He spoke out a concern they had all been thinking, “What about our young men serving in the army? We cannot leave our sons behind. Will Pharoah let them go too?”

 Cheveyo didn’t know the answer to that one, so he gazed into the fire for a moment. Finally, he met the man’s steel gaze.

 “It is true my brother believes his army is key in saving our country. He thinks war is the way to relieve us from this drought. He will do what is right because he has much love for his people. He will know I speak the truth and he cannot refuse.”

 He really believed in his brother’s good heart and reasonable temperament. And they believed in him so he could not fail them. The man that asked the question sat back down. An old elder in the center, looked up into Cheveyo’s eyes.

 “We believe you have been sent from the Great Spirit to guild us home. The People have wandered too long in a land not our own. We’ve had to bury our fathers in a stranger’s soil. All the while we kept our faith, knowing in time the Father of all Gods would have mercy on us, shine down on his children once more and deliver us unto a land of our own. This is the prophecy, told through our legends. We follow you, Missiah Cheveyo.”

 His relief was quite visible, and the old man smiled and offered him a smoke from his pipe. Having got the business out of the way, he sat down and enjoyed visiting with him. The others waited respectfully for their chances to speak with him. He could feel their anticipation and questions. He was happy to have them onboard for the migration. Now he just had to convince his brother of the same.

 CHAPTER 21

 Na’feti and Bear were headed to her parent’s home where she hoped to be far from any encounter with the horrid High Priest. The very thought of him made her skin crawl. They hadn’t said much as both were on edge during the walk. She felt she should at least say something.

 “So…how’s my cousin and the kids? Haven’t seen much of my family lately. I miss them all.” Tears stung her eyes as she thought of them all in the coming crisis, she had to save them if she could.

 “They are doing as best they can in these times. The Pharoah has been generous, little one. But I worry about their safety, things are not how they were before, people have lost their minds it seems. Yesterday someone tried to break into my home. My wife showed him that he chose the wrong house.”

 He chuckled and shook his head. She noticed his brow was still in a worried furl.

 “I know things are only going to get worse. But there is a hope, a way.” He cut her off then.

 “Yes, Pharoah will save us. Don’t you worry there, little lady. He has a plan and I, for one, believe in him.”

 He gave her a little pat on the back as he said this.

 She was about to explain more when their path was blocked by a group of priests and a few young priestesses led by the Grand Mistress who presided over the girls in the Temple Beautiful and Temple to the Most High. She did not like this one bit. Bear stepped in front of her protectively.

 The Grand Mistress smiled at them and addressed her as if he wasn’t there.

 “Na’feti your presence is requested in the temple. Please file in beside your sisters and let us proceed forward to the temple. You are dismissed guard.” Her tone and manner left them no room for debate.

 She quickly joined the group, giving Bear a helpless look before she bowed her head and followed. She could sense the tension in the group, and it made her nervous. The Mistress had always been fair and kind to the priestesses; surely there was nothing to worry about.

 They made their way behind the main temple building without a word being spoken. Na’feti wanted to ask the girl next to her if she knew where they were going, but thought it was best not to break the weird silence. They walked through the area with all the living quarters for the priest, priestesses, and then farther along the staff quarters. They entered a large unmarked square building with a white domed roof. The Grand Mistress led the group into a beautiful alabaster stone room with ornate carvings of figures and animals in several alcoves where other girls sat on benches. She and the ones with her were told to take a seat, which they quickly did.

 She had just settled down when the door open and Zaidor and three more priests entered. Now she was really nervous. It wouldn’t be good if he was involved. She couldn’t help thinking this somehow had something to do with her. Then the Grand Mistress stepped in the center of the room facing the girls.

 “Ladies, you have been called here today to prove you are all still pure and faithful flowers of the Highest God. We have a duty to keep our souls as spotless as this room. Now you will each be called into the room behind the red door and there will be tested for your celibacy.”

 She paused a moment as the girls began to whisper to one another.

 “Girls, girls please settle down and remain quiet. You’ve all been through this before. It will be quick and painless if you don’t tense. Now, without further questions, Lyro’koko, Ka’lita, please follow me.” Her heart sank.

 She remembered that initiation test of purity. It had been awkward and painful despite what the woman said to the girls.

 None of them had ever spoken of that part of joining the priesthood, yet it was one of the main requirements to the temple. They all knew that at some point most would be sold off to the rich lords who demanded young virgins. Few like Na’feti aspired to stay, heal, and serve the temple for life. With everything going on she didn’t see how it even mattered anymore. She would no longer be here to serve anyone but Cheveyo, she would serve him and follow wherever the Father of Gods led them.

 She looked over at the door. There in that room was Zaidor, ready to lay her on another table and stare at her with his hungry dark eyes. It was her two worst moments in life come together. Her breath quickened, then she felt her skin get tingly and as if she might pass out. She couldn’t do this. That much was truly certain. She stood up avoiding the eyes of all the girls, hers were glued to the door where that monster awaited.

 Without thinking anything but I can’t do this, over and over, her lips mumbled the words as she ran for her life, she ran with all the power in her body which still felt weak from hyperventilating. She ran out the door, across the courtyard and all the way to her parents without stopping, without looking behind her. She had felt like running all the way back to the temple in the wilderness where she had felt safe and home.

 She burst through her parents’ door. They were sitting down to eat at the table. She paused at the inner doorway a moment as her father quickly stood and she ran into arms. Tears spilled out her eyes as fast as her story blubbered from her lips. He held her till her words steadied and her eyes dried. Though she was reluctant to leave his safe arms, she finally pulled away. Mom was right there beside him and embraced her some more. She had never felt so happy to be home.

 They sat her down at the table, got her a cloth to wash with and a big bowl of fish soup. After she had eaten most of a bowl, she felt well enough to tell them all that had transpired in her absence. They were mortified and asked many questions. Her mother cried and got up to hold her again as they cried together.

 It was so good to be home again with those she loved. She wouldn’t tell them of the future as the past had been an emotional drain enough. There will be time tomorrow for more weighing conversation. That night she just basked in their love and protection.

 CHAPTER 22

 Ra’Menes had just made it back to the palace with his guards all round him when he encountered his Grand Vizer and Zaidor’s right hand man, Ag’abagdon along with a handful of guards. The two groups merged as Aper’El fell in line behind him and Ag’abagdon behind him. It had been weeks again since he had been back in the palace, and they had much to discuss on their walk to the throne room. There was a hall of lords all waiting for their turn to ask favors of Pharoah.

Aper’El closed the gap between them and spoke to his left ear.

 “We are so happy to have you back with us, it has been hard to communicate by messenger and bird. The kingdom is in crisis. The wells have begun to run dry across the city. Our storehouses are being hit hard as the people come for help. They are flocking in from all over the country. Yet I’ve heard reports others are abandoning the city.”

 His vice was still unsure and a little shaky as if he was sacred Pharaoh would punish him for delivering bad news.

 “Let them leave. We have enough problems without more mouths to feed. Order the wells dug deeper and the aqueducts readjusted for the lower water table. Perhaps a platoon of men can be deployed for that effort. It will toughen them up. What of the taxes?”

 “Yes, all esteemed Pharoah, it shall be as you ask. We have issued an edict on taxes. They have been given 14 days to collect. We have not gotten favorable responses though. The temples refused altogether, and the lords have gathered to speak with you upon the matter. We anticipate they too will claim they cannot pay. There is much unrest in the city and every day we need more guards to control the situation. Perhaps if you addressed the people and explained.”

 “Pharoah doesn’t explain himself. But if you think it will calm them down, I suppose it is time to address them. The masses can be so fickle. Send out word that in three days I’ll address all their concerns. I suppose there is no escaping the lords today. Better we get it over now.” He sighed as he said this and walked into the throne room.

 Conversation was cut off as he was announced. He settled into his chair ready to hear the long list of complaints from this spoiled weak group of men he had always hated. Now, he had to spend hours appeasing them and assuring them that he had it all under control.

 He did have it under control, although it did take some convincing on the part of his Grand Vizier. Pharoah said little and chose to let the man handle the arguments. When they went too far with their questions, he spoke words to shut them up and leave no doubt that he ruled and his word was law.

 His cousin, Ramakui, became heated in his demands for his territory. He felt he deserved a larger share of grains and wanted several platoons sent to protect his lands and township. He argued with the priest that he was more worthy and deserving because he was of royalty. He claimed he had more people than anyone and therefore needed more food than anyone. He wouldn’t take no for an answer or be appeased. Finally, Pharaoh could take his whining no longer and he interjected, stopping the man mid-sentence.

 “Rama, cousin, most dear to my heart. I would do anything for you, my family, but I will not afford you favors in this time of distress. You, as a lord, should understand more than your peasants, that we must make sacrifices for the good of the whole population. I expect you to do your best to support the survival of us all. The Hyksos have donated all their young men to the cause, and I expect as much, no more, from a member of the royal family. If you want food and water for your territory, then you will collect the taxes, and you will send every able-bodied man within your power.”

 He paused to stare glaringly at his cousin, letting the message really sink in.

 The man swallowed hard, but no longer had a word to say. Pharoah stood up and looked over at the seated lords drinking heavily of his wine. They swatted away flies and sweated in the heat. Their servants were wearing out from fanning their masters and he had already replaced a few from his own house to help. It was time to shut them all up and get this over.

 “Gentlemen, make no mistake; we are at war. This is not the time for weakness and selfishness. No, my people, if we are to survive this, it will be by pooling our resources and taking what is rightfully ours. The rains have gone, and you can cry about it, or pray about it, but it will not keep your crops alive. No, we must take action.”

 “My navy is being prepared and the army is in training, I need your strong men to procure what our wives and children need, to protect our mothers. I will need more guards here to protect our storehouses, least someone steal the food while we are gone. Your women will be fine because you and your men will come with me to take this world for our own.”

 They were all wide-eyed and speechless now. A few looked as if they might pass out. His cousin downed his wine and quickly refilled his glass.

 “Because Pharoah is merciful, I will give you ten days to get your houses in order and collect your regiment, for each of you are my new generals. Ramkui, dear cousin, I expect great things from you, for yours will be the largest regiment. Of course, you all will gain many Hyksos soldiers as well. Time is running out. Each of you will be expected to bring the taxes you’ve collected when you arrive at the campgrounds. General Malek will further instruct you from there.”

 Again, he paused to just look at them, sizing them up.

 “Now, I’ve much to take care of. I will see you all at the training camp soon.”

 With that he turned as if going back to his seat but walked behind it instead, through the hanging cloth where his personal door lay hidden. It was one of many hidden passageways he used frequently, especially lately since he was avoiding certain people. Bear waited within with a mug of beer.

 “Those insufferable fools!!” He drank deeply from the mug. “Ahhh. So good to see you, old friend. How is Na’feti? Why are you not with her now?”

 His high over victory with the lords had suddenly come down.

 “She was taken by the Grand Mistress with the rest of the priestesses. It took some digging, but I found out they were running purification examinations on the girls, under Zaidor’s orders. Na’feti left before it was her turn. This morning I learned she was at her parent’s house. I wanted to report to you before proceeding further.”

 Ra’Menes was relieved he was walking in front of his guard where the man couldn’t see the concern he knew was on his face. He took a deep breath relieved that she had gone home and had left the priesthood. That thought suddenly hit him down deep, she was no longer under the vows and restrictions of the priesthood. He needed to go to her, but he couldn’t easily do that in the city. Her parents were simple folks and her neighborhood an artisan street. It would cause a scandal if he went there. He would have to play it smartly.

 “Thank you for all you have done. You’ve gone above and beyond. I don’t think you should stand outside her door, but I do think you and your wife should go for a visit and invite her to stay with you for a while. I don’t want her back where he can have power over her. You are the only one who knows he tried to kill her; you know it is not her purity that is the issue, but he will find another way to hurt her. Tell her to stay hidden inside and I will do all I can to resolve this issue. In the meantime, post an invisible guard for her home. Have him check for any others that may be watching as well.”

 He hoped this would work and Zaidor wouldn’t guess Bear was related to the girl by marriage.

 “Yes sir, right away. My wife will love having her cousin stay.”

 He said with a bow. Pharoah was at his door and ready to get refreshed and lunch after that tedious morning.

 “Thank you. See that Zaidor stays away from her. Will you be joining me for lunch? My brother is supposed to come as well.”

 He was already inside when the man said had to get that guard on Na’feti right away, then he disappeared into the darkness.

 Ra’Menes turned to find his brother was already there waiting with their lunch. Looks like he wouldn’t get that break just yet. It was rare he had time alone anymore. No wonder his dad had little time for the family. His own child would know that pain as well and it was simply the way it had to be. Besides, as a young prince he had spent little time alone either. Always with his brother, his teachers, trainers, guards, and when he was lucky, those special secret times with Na’feti.

 “Brother, glad you could slip in without creating a stir.” He said as he turned and embraced him.

 Cheveyo smiled, ‘I still remember the old passages.”

 Pharoah finally relaxed upon couch. A servant brought in wine, while yet another brought in fresh water. The wine was poured as the last servant cleaned pharaoh’s face arms, legs, and feet. When they were gone, he finally spoke again.

 “What an exhausting morning with the priest and lords. All equally annoying till I finally had to shut old Rama up. I finally shut them all up. They demanded supplies but I demanded soldiers and taxes. They couldn’t refuse me.”

 He chuckled a little, still proud of himself.

 “You have always been so astute. Father knew well you would make a great pharaoh. You always had a natural gift for leadership.” Cheveyo said as he reclined across from his brother.

 “Yeah, well dad never had to deal with a crisis like this drought. You wouldn’t believe things going on in this city, as if everyone has lost their mind. Who can blame them between this heat and the insects. He would not have wanted to go to war but probably would have abandoned the city. I will save it.” Ra’Menes felt confident in his plan, more now than ever knowing more soldiers were on the way.

 “You are wise. Things are only going to get worse before they get better. This is the reason I wanted us to talk. I received a bird from mom, Memphis caught on fire. She says they were all safe but had decided to go further south.”

 Pharoah frowned thinking his mother and sister might be in danger. He wished he were with them now.

 “I heard they were dry down there as well. I’m glad they are all safe and smart enough not to come back here. I’ll have to step up our methods for dealing with a fire in case we too suffer. The wells are particularly dry but I’m working on bringing in more water from the Nile. Although, it too looks pretty low. See what I mean? Dad never had to face a crisis like this.” He shook his head in disbelief.

 “That’s a very smart idea preparing for the worst-case scenario. Um…Have you seen Na’feti? I haven’t heard from her in quite a while.” Cheveyo sat up as he said this.

 “I just found out she left a purity examination. It was said she may have gone home, or she could be hiding out elsewhere. Apparently Zaidor was there, and she may have been scared after what he did. That is unless you don’t think she is pure anymore. Did something happen down there with the two of you?”

 Now it was Ra’Menes’s turn to sit up intently.

 Cheveyo turned bright red and could barely mumble a response.

 “I... I respect her role in the temple. I would never disrespect her in such a way.”

 “Well regardless, I have sent another to spy on her and keep her safe. You need not worry about her.”

 “Oh no, I know how much she really wanted to be a part of temple. She must be devastated. I should be there for her.”

 Cheveyo’s voice was so strained with worry it made him suspicious his brother was having romantic feelings for their friend.

 “Look, I’ve thought about it and I’d rather the people don’t see you just yet. Sorry but things are strange these days. I’d rather not have them attack you, my brother. I’m sure she is fine, and my man is on it as we speak.”

 “Alright, I will continue to lay low as you wish. I understand you have a lot on you. There was something important I needed to discuss with you. When I was going through the trials, God showed me the future. There is something coming, a great beast from the skies. It will destroy this world as we know it, except where God leads us to safety. There is this land choice above all others where we can live, not just survive. Our children will become a mighty nation for many years to come.”

 Pharoah gave him a cold hard look, as he drank more wine.

 “So, you are scared and ready to run. You don’t have to make up stories for your weaknesses. Are you seriously asking me to leave now?! With all these people depending on me to save them, I’m not running away. I thought you were onboard with going to war to save our people. So, you lied to my face when you agreed and called it a brilliant plan.”

 He could strangle him like a chicken for this.

 ‘I do think your plan is brilliant. It may just save you all. But I can’t deny what I saw, what God told me. I just wanted to ask if you would release the Hyksos young men?”

 “So, you were jealous all along of my success and now that I am Pharaoh. You can’t handle it. Those men are the bulk of my army, I cannot do this without them, and you know that.”

 “I’m not jealous, I just wanted to share with you that things are going to get so much worse. I want you and your new family to survive whatever this is, The Destroyer is it’s name. It has been here before and will come back. We need to get everyone out of this city.”

 “No, you need to get out of my room. Go back to the Hyksos, live with them, pray to your god. But I will never release my army. If the people are to survive it will be with my plan, and my army which will save them, not wandering out in the wilderness. I trust you know the way out.”

 He got up, and went into an adjoining room, leaving Cheveyo to see himself out, which he did quickly, disappearing through the secret passage his brother had just entered from.

 CHAPTER 23

 Na’feti was in her mother’s herb garden harvesting roots. It was a pitiful mess of what it had once been. Few plants remained. She heard an odd sounding bird and looked up from her work to see a large, hooded figure at the garden gate. At first, she was scared but then realized she knew that large frame.

 “Osar, I mean, Cheveyo, you found me.”

 She jumped up and went to let him into the garden. Once safely behind the high garden wall, he took his hood down. His skin was shining in the sun almost prismatically. She squinted her eyes for a moment to adjust.

 “You knew I would find you my dear.”

 Then he crushed her to his massive chest. He smelled like he had come from heaven, though she couldn’t quite place the scent. It was masculine as new leather, yet warm and comforting, like fresh baked bread. She wanted to stay in his arms but then remembered she had dirty hands. She quickly moved away.

 “I’m sorry,” she said and raised her hands for him to see how filthy they were. She realized she also had a cluster of roots in her right hand.

 “It’s fine. No harm done. I was worried about you. Have you been harmed, did Zaidor touch you?”

 “I’m okay, really. He never touched me. I ran away before he could examine me. I just sat there so scared, and I realized it didn’t matter if I served in a temple since we were leaving anyway. I just all the way home.” She felt distressed just thinking about being there.

 He gave her another hug and for a moment she breathed him in, then she pulled away once more to go wash the roots and her hands.

 “I’m just glad you are safe, sweetheart. I missed you so much. It’s been hard to concentrate. So, were you able to talk with your parents?”

 His voice came from behind her like a gentle wave which sent tingles over her skin everywhere it touched. The memory of their kiss was suddenly before her eyes and upon her lips. She blinked rapidly to wash that too away, reminding herself that though she wasn’t a priestess anymore. However, she was still a woman devoted to a cause and she would keep her head clear.

 “I did, and they took it surprisingly well. I think they were already thinking of getting out of the city before I told them about the Doomslayer. With the water so low, people are drunker than ever, which when combined with extreme heat and a plague of insects, makes for a volatile population. It’s all so awful.”

 She had turned back to him, but he was petting her cat. It seemed odd for a bird man to be so tender to a bird hunting cat. He had always been kind to animals though.

 He caught her looking and stood up self-consciously.

 “I, uh, I came by to let you know a caravan is leaving tonight if you want to send them on it.”

 His voice still had a powerful effect upon her, and she wondered if others were affected as well due to his new body and its abilities, which he had yet to tell her about them all.

 “Well, we still have a few things to sell, but yes, I think they could be ready tonight. I’ve also spoken with many of my other relatives. Do you think you could help me get a few camels and tents for my grandparents? Their camel died recently, and they cannot find another one for sell nearby.”

 She hated to ask him for anything, what with him being so busy trying to save everyone, but she hoped with his status as Master, he could get them things they could not find.

 “Yes, of course I will see that they have all they need for the journey. You need not worry; I’ll prepare a wagon of food and water for each caravan; no will have to suffer more than the heat and bugs will allow. If I may ask, will you stay with me? I mean, I would really love your help and healing knowledge as I try to get the rest of our people out of here.”

 He looked so deep in her eyes that she felt him touch her very core, almost like he was reading her mind, but somehow deeper.

 “That’s fantastic, thank you. I will do all I can to get everyone ready. I had already planned on staying behind with you from the start. I’m not afraid of what is to come, I know God will lead us home. I’m not leaving you.” As she said these words, he smiled, and it took her breath away.

 “You have made me extremely happy. You are an amazing woman, and I don’t know what I’d do without you. I promise I’ll be back before sunset. Be safe sweetie.”

 With that he gave her another hug with a kiss on the forehead, then he glided out the garden gate.

 She sat there a moment after he was gone, just taking it in a final time. She had played in this garden her entire life. This was the only home she knew, and it was hard to believe she was leaving to never return. Cheveyo said it would all burn. She looked around at what was left of their beautiful garden. It already looked devastated. Between the drought, bugs, and packing there was little left of her childhood. Even the stones seemed sadder and older now without all the exotic plants that brough color and light to this space.

 She wiped away the tears that had begun to fall, then gathered the roots she had dug and headed inside where her parents had made tea. She sat down to get a cup, then began to inform them of her conversation with Cheveyo. They seemed relieved to be finally leaving, but they were less enthused that she would not be joining.

 Her mother was about to cry when she said, “Natty, the whole family is leaving, why would you want to stay behind? If things get worse as you say they will, it will be very dangerous. Why would you not come to safety with us? You are the one insisting we must go. I don’t understand, daughter.”

 “Am’ma, Baba, I love you both with all that I am. The decision to stay is the hardest thing I’ve done, but I know it is the right decision. The Master needs me to help get all the people to safety. If I go, it will be because I’m selfish and only care for my own self. You know that is not me. I joined the temple to heal and help just like you Am’ma. The Father of Gods has blessed the Master, and we will come to the Siani shore to meet you. It is he who will lead us to our true home. I will not leave his side; I will be there soon to hug you again.”

 They all three held each other close for a long moment. Then they pulled apart and dried their eyes. When she tried to leave, her father made her stay.

 “I will go inform the family and get your grandparents here. You stay and help your mother. You know more about all those herbs. Besides I’ve got a few things left to sell. I’ll be back soon.”

 He kissed her forehead and left the room, heading to his shop. She was thankful he chose to do that for her, she wasn’t sure she was emotionally ready to go around to the family without crying at every house. Better they say one goodbye all together.

 She and her mother spent hours packing up medicines along with the last food and household items. She had a few small bags of her own, one for clothes and personal items, one for medicine, and one with a blanket and pillow her dad had made for her. They knew no matter what, it would be a long journey, better to be prepared for sleeping on the road.

 It wasn’t long before members of the family were began to arrive. The street was full of carts, wagons and people. It turns out her dad was friends with most of the artisans in the district and when they heard the migration news, they too wanted to leave.

 Then Cheveyo showed up and word of his presence spread like wildfire until everyone gathered around him in front of their house. They called him Thoth, and looked at him as if he were a god. They hung on to his every word with adoration in their eyes. When he ended his speech with the promise of paradise, they sent up an ear shattering shout of joy, then quickly dispersed as he urged them to be ready by dark.

 The sun was sinking fast as people scrambled to pack the last of their possessions. Babies cried for attention as busy mothers rechecked homes for forgotten items and fathers secured straps on animals and wagons. Children ran around in games of tag and chase, laughing and squealing; they added an element of joy to cut the nervous air. They all knew they would never see their city again.

 Cheveyo picked her up and helped her upon a camel, loaded her things, and climbed up himself behind her.

 “We will lead them to the main caravan outside the city. There you can say goodbye to your parents.” He wrapped an arm around her then and she felt her whole body light on fire.

 “Alright, that sounds good. I thought you were taking us away now; I was going to protest but you always read my mind. Wait, are you reading my mind? Is that one of your powers?”

 He chuckled, “I don’t have to read your mind to know what you are thinking. But yes, I can, in a sense of the word. It’s more like I can sense people’s emotions, their projected feelings.”

 “Hmm still kind of cheating. What am I feeling now?”

 She looked around and up at him now with his arm still holding her close. His scent and power were overwhelming.

 “You feel safe and…love.”

 With that he took her face in hand and kissed her with all the love in his heart and hers wrapping around them for a moment. Then they heard a shout and the whole street cheered and clapped. They pulled apart, both glowing red from embarrassment as they realized the commotion was for them. She bent her head avoiding eye contact, but he smiled and waved at everyone, then gave the signal to proceed.

 She was super happy to be moving forward and hoped her parents didn’t see, but looking back her father gave a huge grin and a sly wink. She slunk back into his huge chest and wing. She realized she loved Menes, but she was in love with Cheveyo. She now understood the difference. She knew she would follow him to the ends of the earth and back. As they moved the caravan forward through the night, she knew there was no turning back now.

 CHAPTER 24

 The night glowed red with a distant fire from an erupting volcano across the sea. The days had been gray from smoke which filled the air from fires around the country and now across the waters. Ra’Menes sat up straight in a big cedar chair, its colors predominantly a deep red, almost a bloody hue in places. He looked regal and menacing in the flickering light of flames from the fire.

 Though it was far too hot for a fire, the smoke kept the insects down to a minimum. He thought the combined effect of light and smoke added to his aura of power. He had to be strong before this council of seasoned warriors. As their new leader he had to show them he was a force not to cross. His words were law and his power infinite. If he showed any weakness, they would never follow him blindly to their deaths. They would turn on him and devour him in this time of crisis.

 General Malek began his report by standing up and pushing back his chair.

 “My Lord Pharoah, the time to act is now. I know not all the ships are ready as Captain Kamula just informed us, but I propose we let him stay here and finish them. He can meet us when they are finished. Every day we delay the less of a city we have to defend anyway. The people are leaving in alarming numbers. The stone masons are gone! The whole tribe, except the warriors we have here. All the brick builders are gone, The River tribe has stopped sending baskets. Even the Egyptian artisans and craftsmen have gone, and they are somehow draining the storehouses and coffers when they go. We have to do something now. There is a sickness spreading because the river has turned to blood! Several regiments have broken out in boils. If we don’t go now, there won’t be an army left to command.”

 “The river has turned to blood because God is angry with us.”

 Zaidor materialized out of the shadows and into the light as he spoke.

 “We have strayed from the path of righteousness and now must atone for our sins.”

 He gave his classic malicious smile which he thought was irresistible but at this moment made Pharoah’s stomach churn. Maybe because he knew the intent behind that smile.

 “We don’t need some religious nonsense, we need action! Prayers are not going to save these people.”

 Malek was spitting mad as he spoke, showering the man sitting nearest to him.

 Zaidor stepped closer and snarled, “You dog of war, you filthy peasant! How dare you speak to the High Priest of the World in such a way. I could have your head on a platter for my breakfast. You know nothing of higher realms and lack the basic knowledge a palace winch has. You should sit down when your superiors are speaking dog.”

 Both men had turned as red as pomegranates, which happened to be the drink of choice tonight. Pharoah had to shut these guys down before either got out of hand.

 “Gentlemen there is no need for anger and insults in these trying times. Come, sit, and have another glass of wine. We are all on the same team here.”

 He tipped his glass toward Zaidor who conceded to find a seat near Pharaoh’s left side, while Malek sat back down and finished his drink. A slave immediately appeared with more wine and a glass for Zaidor. She was his favorite slave, a beautiful young Nubian woman from an unknow southern tribe which had been conquered.

 All her people were dead or slaves somewhere. She was quiet and very loyal to him for treating her kindly. He had taken her on several occasions and oddly now in this insufferable heat and room of angry men he suddenly felt his desire rise. But he had no time for that with these men demanding an answer.

 Before he could say anything further, a young page burst in the tent out of breath, it appears he had run all the way from the palace.

 “My Pharoah, it’s the queen, the baby.”

 The boy collapsed upon the ground, a cloud of dust stirring around him. The slave girl kneeled next to him trying to revive the boy.

 Pharoah couldn’t wait, he jumped up shouting at his men at the door to get his camel ready. He quickly buckled his sword and ran out the door. He barely noticed Zaidor wasn’t far behind and Malek had come out but simply stood there as if dumbstruck. He knew war but women were a mystery to him.

 Ra’Menes raced through the night wondering how the boy had run that far and how long it had taken him, would he make it to her in time to help. His camel was the fastest in the known world. It had won many races and tonight he whipped it faster than ever. He didn’t know if the queen and baby were alive or dead. It was a fear he had only known once before as he raced through another night to save Na’feti. It felt like another lifetime ago as he looked up at the red star still gleaming through the smoky clouds.

 He as he neared the city gates, he heard the death bells ringing, then people began to wail in the streets. Were they crying because the royal child had died? He pushed his camel harder toward the palace with Zaidor and Malek not far behind.

 An older woman covered in blood yelled at him for help, but he was going by too fast, and only caught a little of her cries.

 “My babies! Help my daughter, my grandbaby, Help us!”

 He didn’t slow or look back; he couldn’t think of what the bloody woman meant. What had happened to his family was his main concern, what was happening to his city would have to wait. Guards helped him down then followed behind as he ran to her chambers.

 Bloody rags were piled outside the door where he left his guards. He burst through the heavy ornately carved doors where he found the queen on the bed in a mess of sheets and blood. Her ladies were thrown about on the floor and furniture crying endlessly. All their silken dresses were stained with red in places.

 He ran to her side and found her in the fetal position around the fetus. She whispered, ‘My baby, my baby,” over and over. He tried to get her attention, but she wouldn’t acknowledge him.

 The midwife touched his shoulder. “My Lord, the child was stillborn. But the Queen will not let it go or let me tend to her. She has lost a lot of blood; I fear she may not make it. I’m sorry.”

 Her voice was sad and defeated as if they had been through a rough ordeal. Looking at the state of the midwife and the crying ladies all around, he could only imagine.

 He was heartbroken to see the red little blob that would have been his child, but it was worse to have his beautiful queen dying before him. He knew Na’feti would be able to help her. He went to the door and sent for Bear, only to be informed the guard had not been around in a while. It was said he and his family took off with the caravan out of town.

 His mind was a whirl, if Bear had moved, did Na’feti go as well? Had she left town without saying goodbye? He didn’t think she would run off, but it was his own fault for not being able to keep her safe in the palace.

 He turned back to the room and demanded the women get clean water and clothes. Then he went back to his wife and began stroking her hair and speaking soothing words. Soon the midwife and a priestess were there with clean water and rags. He dipped a cloth in water and wiped her hair. She was still faintly whispering “Baby”, but she had no strength to hold onto the sad bundle as the midwife slid it away.

 They began taking away the bloody sheets as he held her head in his lap. The ladies cleaned her hands and legs gently, but he was scared if they moved her to dress her, she might bleed more so he had them place a clean sheet upon her.

 Unfortunately, it didn’t matter, he had come too late. She breathed out her last breath moments later and he felt the difference immediately, yet he held her a little longer unable to believe he had just lost wife and child.

 Tears streamed down his face, then the ladies realized what had just happened and let out a whole new series of wailing, louder than ever. They tore at their hair and clothing while lamenting loudly about the room.

 He couldn’t take it and left swiftly. Zaidor and Malek were suddenly there behind him apologizing, expressing condolences. He didn’t really hear them and caught only a bit about other mothers and fetuses dying throughout the city. He wondered if it was Zaidor demanding sacrifices to appease his God. He told the man to proceed with whatever ritual he had to do to stop this madness. He told Malek to wait on the march, to wait until he buried his family. Then he shut the door in their faces and locked it behind himself.

 He grabbed a tankard and headed for the balcony. He could hear the wailing of the women throughout the city below. He couldn’t understand what was happening. He shut the storm doors blocking out some of the misery settling over the city. He drank the last of beer upon the table then moved to the wine. It wasn’t long before he had drunk it all and raged against the walls and furniture until he passed out.

 In the morning, he awoke to Zaidor pounding on his door. It was already daylight, and his first sight was the disaster of his room, he felt as though his head had been done the same way inside. His head was pounding like the priest on the door till he finally opened it.

 “My Lord, please accept my apologies for disturbing you but we are ready to head to the river. All those who have lost a child will are making the journey. I’ve a pure white calf for you sire.” The man surveyed the room as he spoke taking it all in from busted furniture to the empty tankards and jars.

 “Yes. The ceremony. Give me a moment to get awake.” He felt numb emotionally, but willing to proceed to appease the man and the masses.

 Behind the priest, entered slaves to clean up the mess along with his personal servants there to help him. They quickly bathed and dressed him as others brought in his breakfast on a new table while Zaidor kept talking.

 “I’m afraid to say the fair ladies of the late queen, took their own lives in their grief last night. The Queen and …um…child, well, they are already beginning the preservation process. Malek is angry we will delay the campaign for over two moons while we wait for the funeral. I didn’t hear it all first hand; he was ranting to Ag’abagdon in training this morning. I believe he told the man to show some respect. My Lord you must take all the time you need to morn your wife and child. The whole country morns with you. We have all lost this day. The children and elderly are all sick, their deaths are the songs of every hour. I have sent every available healer, but I fear few will be left by sundown.”

 The man’s voice was like nails scraping his brain.

 “Thank you, High Priest. I’d rather not face the people today as we travel. Get me a covered carriage and meet me at the stables. Let’s get this over with.”

 Having said that, he turned away from the priest and examined the food upon the table while ladies oiled his skin. His clothes were blood red today and he thought it fitting as it seemed blood had replaced the very life-giving waters of the Nile. Zaidor left in an insulted air, only mumbling his compliance, apparently offended at being dismissed so easily. He let him think it was grief talking. So long as he shut up and left.

 Pharoah found what he was looking for and poured a fresh glass of wine. That would take the edge off. The slaves had opened the doors and windows for fresh air but there wasn’t fresh air anymore, only smoke and the stench of death.

 He shooed everyone out of his room and stood at the window again. It almost appeared as if they had two suns behind the gray clouds. Surely it was a trick of light and not that strange star that had been growing and glowing russet in the sky night and day.

 He hated to think Osar might know something about all this, that maybe there was something bad in the sky. He didn’t really know, but he didn’t like it.

 He was just about to leave when he heard a knock at the secret door. When he opened it, there was Na’feti. She fell into his arms, and he held her tight, both of them crying. Then they were kissing passionately, and he pulled her down on top of him as he hit the couch. He had never wanted anyone more in his life, he could think only of making love to her.

 His hands had already torn away the cloth from her breast and his mouth followed suit. He wasn’t surprised when he slipped between her thighs to find her warm and ready for him.

 “I thought I lost you too. I couldn’t bear the thought of living without you.”

 She felt amazing and he couldn’t wait to make love to her after all this time. In that moment all their stress and pain disappeared. The world crashing down around them seemed like a memory. Somehow all their pain transferred into a passion they could not contain. The sound of her moans drove him crazy. With all that had gone on these past few months this time with her was paradise in comparison.

 Then there was a knock upon the door. He pulled her closer, kissed her harder, he didn’t want to let go. The knock came again. Every time he had her close, he was interrupted by someone. He wanted to ignore the door yet, just like earlier, the knocker would not go away.

 “I’m sorry, my love, but it seems we never get a moment alone. Let me see who it is.”

 He watched for a moment as she jumped up straightening her clothes and looking so shy it was even more of a turn on. He hated to get up and answer the door, but knew he had to.

 “Stay here’ please.”

 He opened the door a crack and there stood his Grand Vizier.

 “My Lord, the procession is ready and waiting for you.”

 Just great, they would not leave without him.

 “Fine, I’m coming.” Then he shut the door again. He turned back to Na’feti standing there so beautiful and flustered. He embraced her again.

 “I need you now, will you come back tonight?”

 “I don’t know if I can, the children need me. They are dying all over the city. I left Osar in the Hercules temple; they have been bringing people in all day. Whatever it is, it’s affecting the old and the young the most, especially the unborn. Um…I’m, I’m sorry about your wife. I don’t think even Osar could have helped her, and he healed me. He is doing all he can. I’m trying to help. I think the water is toxic and causing deaths.”

 He stopped her there with another kiss.

 When they pulled apart, he whispered, “I love you” into her ear and she said it back as she hugged him tightly.

 “So go and save those people, we are bound to duty.” With an arm around her waist, he tightened his grip and said the next part against her lips. “But remember, you are mine.”

 With that he kissed her sweet lips one final time then released her. Their eyes locked a moment then they both turned to exit the room through opposite doors, neither knowing when they would see each other again.

 CHAPTER 25

 Down by the river, the stench was overwhelming from the deaths of all the fish. Hundreds of frogs jumped to and fro chasing insects. There was an alarming number of snakes and crocodiles basking in the heat all along the banks. Hippos congregated in groups near mudholes left by the retreating waters. The bodies of dead animals littered the once beautiful sandy beaches.

 It was the perfect place for the gruesome work ahead. Zaidor knew the horror of the landscape would further shock the drunken, grief-stricken population. They would be so easy to manipulate.

 All night, men worked to build a small stage and altar for the occasion. He brought in guards to protect them from the hungry predators lurking about. Their job soon became warding off insects and amphibians, which swarmed in masses and jumped on every hand, hammer, and board.

 The people of the Trees had left; they were a skilled wood-working tribe. Now he feared for his life with this platform constructed by simple slaves. He just prayed it held till the ceremonies were over. He determined right away he would not stay for the duration. Between the heat and the critters, the place was insufferable, but the stench made it quite unbearable.

 Before the stage, massive clay jars were being filled with crimson river water. It took every available slave for this endeavor as most of the workers were gone. He really wasn’t worried because this smaller population would be easier to control. Already the crowd ranged in the hundreds and would only grow as he had sent word the army could attend as well. Cheveyo wasn’t the only one who could stir up the people.

 He called a priest to him and ordered the man to space his brothers out throughout the crowd so that even the men in the back could hear his words. He quickly ran off to comply.

 It felt good to be the most powerful man in the world. Then he saw the Pharaoh arrive, spoiled little brat thought he was in charge. He would learn differently today.

 Zaidor did not stand as Pharaoh approached. It was a sign of disrespect and a powerplay move on his part. He knew the people would see it, but Pharoah in his grief would not notice Zaidor at all. He sat down upon the makeshift throne chair, keeping most of his face covered by a scented cloth. The Grand Vizier had traveled with him, but he knew his place was to stand behind Zaidor. He kept his head down and his face concealed by his hood.

 Zaidor arose and stood in the center of the stage behind the altar. He opened his arms and said, “My beloved people, I welcome you all here this day. Your hearts are broken, you have lost so much. We have all lost so much.”

 He looked at Pharoah for a moment. The man didn’t look back but scanned the crowd with red eyes. He appeared hung over and tear stained.

 “Our beloved Queen has left this world. She and her child will make that journey with your own children and mothers. Our Queen will walk them safely to the netherworld, a guiding light on their journey. She will hold your babies to her bosom as close as her own.”

 Now he could see that the army was arriving and finding their families here and there. He wondered if Pharoah even cared at this point. It didn’t matter, now was his time to grab their loyalty and trust. He would lead them through this just like he would save them from the invaders.

 “My people your hearts are broken, my heart is broken, but I lift my eyes to God and know he will deliver us from this evil. God has been angry with us for our sins. We must atone for our sins, my brothers and sisters. We must beg for God’s mercy. Only by his forgiveness may we be saved. He has directed me to command you each to bring an offering for the sins of your family.”

 He paused a moment as they cried out in agreement and some women wailed loudly for forgiveness.

 “Now our sins have turned the river to blood, but on this day, if you atone for your sins, then God will make the water in these jars drinkable. There will be fresh water for all.”

 A tumultuous cheer rose from the large crowd. He motioned for Aper’ El to bring the first lamb.

 “This lamb is for the house of Pharoah, May God Bless you always.” Pharoah narrowed his eyes at the old man but held his tongue. Then Zaidor said a few words in some other language and drove the dagger in its heart. He pulled out the heart and splattered the blood upon the altar, upon Pharoah, then finally upon himself.

 The heart was thrown into an oil burning brazier. It sizzled on the hot metal. A large firepit had been prepared and the lamb was laid upon it.

 He reached in his robe, grabbed a pouch, and tossed a handful of powder into a jar of bloody water. He chanted loudly as the water cleared. Then he dipped his hands in, bringing them out clean and full of fresh water.

 “Come my people, fill your cups with the mercy of the True God. Bring your offerings unto God and all shall eat and drink.”

 He motioned for the guards to allow some in to get water and others to line up for offerings.

 He presided over many more offerings before he cleansed more water. The people were given a portion of the offerings, but the rest of the bodies were thrown upon the fire. Once finished, the meat was to be shipped to the army and the palace. Still each person left with clean water and a little meat for their family. They were satisfied in this small way and too overcome by trauma to think about the fact that they had just given the biggest portion of their best animal to the church and state. They only saw hope and instant gratification. Never mind about the whole river being poisoned, at least they had water today.

 Suddenly the ground shook violently and most fell to their knees. The horses bolted from handlers and the hippos stampeded downriver. A sound like thousands of horns blowing filled their heads, seeming to be coming from everywhere. Hundreds of birds fell from the sky and crashed into the river, the banks, and the crowd. For a while it was chaos as the people cried out in fear and anguish.

 Then just like that it was all over. The people panicked, but Zaidor quickly stood up and addressed the crowd.

 “Be not afraid, my people. God has just shown us how mighty he is. We have been blessed with our lives. Let us rejoice, for our fire still burns! The offerings have been accepted!”

 The people shakily climbed to their feet and continued bringing their small animals and receiving a minimal amount of water. Then he saw the crowd parting and a large figure walking toward the stage. He glowed in the smoky day, a bright light against a darkened landscape. His robes of white turned red on the edges as he approached the sacrificial grounds.

 The figure walked upon the stage and Zaidor could see that this was a being was far from a man. It was the Prophet the people had been speaking about, Master Thoth returned. Zaidor stepped back as the man came upon him. A hush had fallen upon the shaken population. Then the glorious figure began to speak.

 “My people I come before you with a humble heart and ask you to hear my words. I have journeyed down the path of the Twice Born and met our Creator who gave me a message to deliver to all of you. The Destroyer has come from across the heavens to scorch the face of this land and cleanse it from our dark deeds. Fire will rain from the sky and the earth will turn in her bed as the Great Beast breathes fire upon our heads. Soon the sun will be no more, and the moon will break to pieces. This is only the beginning. Things are going to get so much worse.”

 He paused as a great groan came up from the people. Zaidor suddenly realized who this was, Osarmoses now called Cheveyo. How had he missed this bit of information? The man had been transformed into something quite amazing. This is why they kept him away from their secret temple. He was High Priest yet still they wouldn’t allow him into their inner sanctuary. What magic was this which would turn a man into a feathered bird being? This was the knowledge he had been trying to obtain. He had been all over the temples here but now he knew they kept very powerful magic at the hidden temple. He had to get his hands on this.

 Cheveyo went on addressing the people, “Friends and relatives, I want you to know there is hope. The Great Father of Gods, He Who Cannot Be Named, showed me there is a land for us where we will prosper and live long into the future. The Creator has preserved a choice land above all others and has promised if will give our hearts to Him we will be delivered there safely and live for many generations to come. If you will but follow me, we will travel to where ships await our passage to a new world!”

 A cheer broke out through the crowd, they were captivated by him.

 Fresh water was forgotten as the people pressed forward to speak with the godlike figure they saw before them. The guards strained to hold them back.

 Pharoah then stood up and joined him centerstage.

 “My people, My people! It is your true god speaking to you. Do not listen to this false prophet. I know you are scared but you need not let fear sway your hearts. See how I have brought you fresh water here, he cannot give you water now, only promises of some land across the sea. He did not save our women and children and he will not save you. Eat and drink my people, running away will only leave you starving in the wilderness. I am your Pharoah; I will feed you and provide all you need.”

 The people gave a cheer for Pharaoh as well. It seemed they were of two minds between the brothers.

 As Zaidor watched the two brothers bid for the loyalty of the people he wondered if he should follow Cheveyo into the wilderness and get those records. He could speak up now and support him, but he had too many other plans to fulfill first.

 “Please, we must leave without delay. God will guide us safely. My people, search your hearts, look to the skies, things are getting worse every day.” Cheveyo begged the people to go, then turned to his brother. “Brother, you know this is madness, that man, these bloody rituals. This is not the way. You were trained under Artimis too. He and your father would be appalled at this.”

 “I am not my father!” Pharoah shouted and waved the guards to carry him offstage.

 Cheveyo fought against them yelling, “Please brother, come to your senses, we must leave this place. We have to leave!”

 But Pharaoh had already turned away and descended the stage with a group of generals and soldiers surrounding him.

 In that moment, a fight broke out in the crowd and spread like wildfire. Everything became chaos amongst the people, as they tore at each other in drunken despair, urged on by the adrenaline of fear. Women and children fled in fear or were getting trampled along with the small animal offerings left. Even the water jars were smashed in the destruction of the mob.

 Zaidor ran with the other priest to their carriages as the guards fought off the crowd. They would have to leave what meat hadn’t already been loaded. He thought it such a senseless waste, but there was no going back as he could see the people destroying the stage and fire pit. He would be lucky to get out with his life.

 Things had gotten out of control, but it seemed all was as it should be for his plans to succeed. Alkenan was coming tonight to discuss the attack. In light of today’s events, instead of telling the man to delay a while, he would let the invasion proceed. Everything was falling into place.

 CHAPTER 26

 Na’feti held onto the central post of their home as the ground shook violently. The sick lay on the floor all about her but she could only pray for her life and hold on. She had been housing the ill and their families in her home since her parents had left.

 It seemed a lifetime ago that she embraced her mother and sent them off to await their fate. Since then she and Cheveyo had traveled to the rest of the outlying tribes. She was impressed by the joyful songs of the Tribe of the Ancient Wood. They were carpenters, furniture builders, and sculptors of statues. They knew the quiet secrets of the forest and reflected its many hues. Even with the world turning upside down, they smiled easily and sang often.

 It had taken all of Cheveyo’s powers to convince them the forest would be gone, and they too should leave. He told them this fertile land would become a barren desert. He swore the sands of time would bury their forest and this city.

 She had been reluctant to leave their hospitality, but messengers came begging for help, and so they rushed on to the next tribe, a people stricken by sickness of the stomach, lungs, and skin. The smoke wreaked havoc upon their lungs. There was no fresh water on hand, so people drank alcohol or from muddy wells. The toxic water and alcohol poisoning caused many to have vomiting and diarrhea, till they died from simple dehydration.

 She and Cheveyo began to gather people at her house where she still had some medicines left behind. Cheveyo came and went about the city. He often spoke in secret meetings for the final migration.

 He also spent a little time teaching her some basic energy transference healing techniques. Still, as usual she saw little of him.

 Today when she came back from Pharaoh, her heart aflutter, he had thankfully not been there to witness her emotional confusion. He would have read the guilt in her heart, seen the shame upon her face. She wanted to tell him, not have him find out in his crazy psychic way.

 Then the first earthquake happened with a terrifying, soul-piercing sound. It was both high pitched and low toned like some massive beast ripping the sky. Her home swayed as a tree in a storm. The jars and baskets flew off the shelves. She screamed and fell to her knees, crying out for help, but no one could assist her as the young ladies around her were doing the same.

 By the third quake, they were somewhat better prepared, yet no less scared. The horrible noise seemed louder than ever, like a giant horn blowing inside your head, it invaded all thoughts. Its volume increased and pain shot through her skull. She made herself open her eyes to see people clutching their skulls with their noses bleeding. She saw her own was dripping blood, but at that moment, the sound peaked with a mighty crescendo sounding as a beast tearing their world apart. She screamed, they all screamed, closing their eyes to the mind searing pain.

 Then it stopped. Everything stopped. There was no sound and no light. She thought she had gone deaf and blind as she groped through the dark to check the patients. Her hands touched flesh cold as ice and she drew back in shock. How many had died in that last quake? Had the sky scream killed them? It had felt like her brain was being stabbed with a thousand hot needles.

 She stood up and breathed deeply, orientating herself in the dark. This was her home, and she knew where everything was, and everyone lay. At least she had before it had all gotten scrambled. She carefully made her way toward the fireplace, there should be hot coals in the hearth or a fire starter nearby. Her foot tapped against someone, but she was too scared to touch them in case she might find another dead body.

 She located the fireplace, but the coals were cold. The Firestarter was in its’ place, and she rejoiced to see a spark. It meant she was not blind, but day had turned to darkest night. Unfortunately, all her best efforts could not get a lamp to light. Eventually two of the girls found her and together they huddled in a corner. Crying on each other and recovering from the shock.

 Then Cheveyo entered the home as a light driving back the thick blackness. He came to her and pulled her up in an embrace.

 “Na’feti, I am so sorry I didn’t make it sooner. Are you ok?”

 She could hear him! She tried to reply but no sound came out. She wanted to tell him she was so scared, so sorry, so confused, but she could only nod as tears fell down her face. People were coming in behind him and they began to move the dead from the house.

 “It’s fine, you don’t have to speak. It appears I’m the only one who can speak or be heard. Come here. All of you.”

 He walked her to the garden. There were no stars, no clouds, no sky, all was blackness but Cheveyo. He glowed as a single star against the blackness of space. Everyone followed him out and others came in from the garden gate, drawn by his light in a darkened world.

 “Dear relatives, The Destroyer has come near and has torn our sky asunder. The worst is yet to come, but first we must endure this time of darkness, in which not even a fire can burn. Stay strong. I don’t know why you can’t hear or speak with one another. Many are already going mad from the darkness and silence. I want all of you who can hear me to take a few moments to pray. Hold hands with one another. Trust in our True God the Great Spirit to guide us through this. We have a long road ahead and it will only get harder. This is just the beginning of the terror that is to come. But we can survive this if we keep our faith strong. We mustn’t give into the fear gnawing at our hearts.”

 They all joined hands as they crowded in around him, the only thing to be seen or heard. Some prayed in their hearts and others shouted to the heavens but not a sound disturbed the night. After a while, when he sensed all were done praying, he began speaking again.

 “We are going to have to leave this place. I’m not happy about moving in this darkness, but I do have a solution. I need a few strong men to come with me to the Sphinx. Hidden beneath its right paw we will find lights to guild our way and ancient records that need to be saved. Then we can prepare to leave. God will protect our path and we will make it to the promised land.”

 He looked around to see them wide-eyed, but nodding. Then he went to the well and kneeled down placing his elbows upon its rim. He prayed mightily unto God and as they prayed with him, he seemed to glow a little brighter. In this darkest of dark they swore they could see a golden radiance streaming from him down into the well.

 Finally, he stood and drew up the bucket. He poured it into a nearby jar and passed it around. The squire immediately began drawing another and Greywolf stepped up with another jar which he too passed around.

 “I know you are all thirsty, please come and drink your fill. It will not go dry, so fill your containers for travel. Please be respectful, the darkness will make things difficult. We want everyone to have a drink.”

 She loved how kind and patient he was as the people pushed forward. She was determined to never leave his side again as something bad always happened. He was her light in every sense of the word and especially right now. She could not bear the thought of that darkness again. In just a few hours, she had nearly lost her mind. They all had. The sound of his voice in a silent world was as wonderful to hear as his shining skin in this deep night.

 In the still darkness there was no concept of time. It seemed many hours passed as they provided water for everyone. Afterward food was shared throughout and gradually people rested. She fell asleep leaning against him.

 When they awoke Cheveyo announced that he would be taking a band of men to get the lanterns of God and the sacred records.

 “I’m sorry this means I must leave you all for a little while. Please no one move. It is very dangerous out there. You can’t see or hear them, but the people are losing their minds, and there are crazed wild beasts feasting upon them. Stay here and protect each other till we return. It won’t be total darkness; I can leave you with this fire stone.”

 He pulled a rock from within his robes. It glowed like it had fire inside its rough surface. It wasn’t very bright, but it was a light. He raised it up and placed it upon a broken column. It had once been a cool garden sitting area with four alabaster columns which held up a white painted cedar roof adorned with flowers and grown over with vines. It had been Na’feti’s favorite spot in the garden, now it was rubble, but for a little while it would hold their hope.

 She didn’t give him a chance to say no, but followed right behind him as they left the building. He led the way to the Sphinx through winding, broken streets. Everywhere they went there was evidence of the ground’s upheaval. Many buildings had collapsed, and the roads were barely passable. They had to walk very close to Cheveyo because they could not see at all.

 Soon they came to the river where once a dock had been. The boats were a disaster area of sunken smashed wood. The smell was of rotten death and putrid mud. Thankfully there were no large reptiles to be seen. They managed to find a small undamaged boat amongst the debris. They also found long poles and a few oars. Once on the river, in the complete darkness, the bloody waters seemed more horrifying, and she imagined all sorts of monsters beneath its surface. Cheveyo held her close, sensing her fear. She dreaded the trip back across this nightmare landscape.

 It wasn’t far from the river to the Sphinx but the journey took them several hours. Cheveyo took them along a well-worn path behind most of the buildings. She wondered if it was the servants’ path to the river from the temple. He did indeed lead them around the back of the Sphinx, and then through a secret door. He hummed some beautiful tunes, and where he touched the back of the Sphinx, the stone slid inward.

 Once inside, he directed them to yet another door, one that seemed to slide out of the wall. They traveled down a long stone corridor beneath the mighty Sphinx to a triangular door, just like the one at the temple by the sea. Cheveyo waved his arms and said some words which seemed to trigger a mechanism and the door began to slide open, the deep grinding sound of stone upon stone. As it slid open, a bright light came from the widening cracks. She could see an array of objects within, but it quickly shut behind him before she could get details.

 He emerged moments later setting down two large stone boxes. Then he returned with three large wooden chests and placed them by the boxes on the floor. Then he opens one of the chests, bringing out the lantern within, and a blinding light caused them to hide their eyes. He quickly closed the shutters upon the lantern till only a thin sliver was visible. He handed it to her and showed her how to open the shudders to expand the light.

 “We should all rest a bit. We are safe within these walls.”

 Then he directed them to a room off the corridor where they could stay. It was full of scrolls and tablets, but they found room to stretch out upon the rolls. Cheveyo sat at the small table and chair and read through scrolls while they rested.

 It wasn’t long before they were all restless and ready to move on again. They shared what little food and water they had left, then it was time to go. He grabbed a few scrolls off the table and motioned them out the door. Then he picked up the largest box, the men shared the weight of the others, and she carried her lantern.

 Outside, there was a scramble for places to relieve themselves before they could continue further. Then they were back upon the servants’ trail.

 They hadn’t gone far when Pharoah appeared before them. He had a wild look in his eyes as he tried to tell them something. No sound emerged from his lips. Using gestures, he implored her to come with him. She shook her head and stepped closer to Cheveyo who set down the chest and stood protectively by her.

 Pharoah was angry and seemed to demand her and then he pointed to the chest. He and his men advanced with swords drawn but Cheveyo stopped them with a blue ray from his palm. It froze them in their tracks, in suspended animation, the angry still sketched upon their faces, especially Pharoah.

 “Brother, I’m sorry you would not listen to reason and come with us. This city will be destroyed and all you love with it. I will always love you, but we must part ways.”

 With that he picked up his chest and motioned for them to continue. She walked past a frozen Pharaoh whose eyes followed her. She saw only misery there, not anger, in the light of the lantern. She mouthed the words,” I’m sorry” as she went by, then hurried after Cheveyo. It hurt her to walk away, but she couldn’t stay, and Pharaoh wouldn’t go. His wife and child had just died and now his brother and friend were deserting him. He wouldn’t leave the dead unburied to follow the living. If only she could speak to him, and he could hear her, things might be different, then again, perhaps there would be no reasoning with him anyway.

 “That won’t hold them for long. I suspect he will bring more men after us. We need to hurry and get everyone out of the city as fast as possible.”

 He said to them over his shoulder as he picked up the pace and they had to nearly run to keep up with him. She held the light higher for the men carrying chests.

 Once they neared her house, the people saw them coming and rushed to meet them. Men helped relieve the men carrying the chests and boxes of their burdens. When they were all gathered again in the garden, he addressed them in a voice that reverberated upon the walls of the few still standing buildings. As he spoke, he opened the first chest and began placing lanterns upon the ground.

 “We have obtained the light needed. Now we must get ready to leave. Those of you who need to go home to gather anything or anyone I will send you out in groups of ten. We don’t have much time I think before Pharoah comes to stop us. Please step forward.”

 He handed out the lights and then reached for the one she held as well. She was reluctant to see it go for then it seemed they were plunged into darkness again.

 As soon as their eyes adjusted, they began organizing the people. They filled every vessel they could find with water from the well. Thankfully, the first group to leave returned quickly. Then things went much faster in getting the people ready for the exodus out of Egypt.

 They worked in silent darkness which somehow made things easier than the usual bickering amongst people. No kids cried and no fights broke out. The few large animals left were used to pull wagons carrying supplies, the food and water, and to transport the elderly and the lame. There were no pregnant women anymore. The Destroyer had seized infants and closed wombs. The few children left were held tight in their mothers’ arms.

 They spaced the lights along the line, but there were too many people. They would have to stumble along in the darkness, but at least the lights would keep them from getting lost. The road northeast was mostly smooth, and those who led the way cleared the debris which might trip others.

 It was slow going at first with no sound and little real light. They had to keep an easy pace to avoid injuries. It was sure to be a long night again with no hope of day ever coming.

 CHAPTER 27

 The meeting with Alkenan happened before the second quake. Zaidor had rushed from the river to his chambers and then to the catacombs.

 Ag’abagdon, Aper’El, and a small group of priests were close behind him. Alkenan wasn’t alone in the room when they entered, but instead, was surrounded by a gang of warriors. Judging by their demeanor, he knew right away things were about to go south very quickly. They were greeted coldly by Alkenan while his guards stood at attention.

 “Zaidor, I didn’t think you would come.” He reached out his hand in a friendly shake though his voice was hard and unfriendly.

 “That bit of ground shaking is not enough to keep me from my important duties, like meeting you. How are you? I trust you had no trouble getting here.” He smiled his own cold smile.

 “I am not fine. I am tired of waiting in the damn wilderness. My men have grown restless and I’m not holding them back any longer least they attack each other.” His face grew red as he spoke, but his voice didn’t rise, instead it turned to a deep growl.

 “Is this why you brought your guards here? Are you planning on acting tonight without even talking with me? The Pharaoh has just lost his wife and child, and this is not the time. The whole city is in mourning, as many have died. Let us delay just a bit longer, Alkenan.”

 This time the man did yell.

 “I will delay no longer! The time to act is NOW!”

 With that he lunged at Zaidor, a dagger in his hand. At the same time his guards charged the priests behind him.

 Zaidor quickly countered with the sword he had been gripping under his robes. Suddenly, the ground shook again and an ear-splitting sound tore through his brain. All of the torches went out and he no longer knew where his adversary was, it was total darkness.

 Zaidor crawled to the door, which thankfully, was open. He could no longer hear anything and assumed the sound blast had burst his ear drums. Standing, he felt his way along the wall as fast as he could. He knew these halls well enough to find his way back to his chambers. Often, certain tunnels lost light when a lamp or two burned out, and he had to navigate by feel to find his way. It wasn’t long before he was in his room. He locked the door behind him and made his way to his fireplace.

 He couldn’t even get a spark or anything to light. He tried several spells, but none worked. The air felt thin, and he couldn’t breathe. As his panic increased, he spun in the darkness, not sure what to do. He finally stumbled into his wine cabinet and drank until the fear dissipated. Then he drank until he passed into a deep sleep haunted by nightmares of beasts stalking him through the night.

 When he awoke, nothing had changed, no sound, no light, it was mind numbing. He felt he might go insane in this state of nothingness. He crawled to his balcony, bringing a large container of wine with him. Once there, he sat staring into the blackest of black. He just kept sitting there waiting for something, anything to happen. Time dragged on into forever. At some point he ran out of wine and began to feel madness taking ahold.

 Then a light, a faint moving light upon a path. It must be Cheveyo, it had to be. Judging by the distance and direction it was near the pyramid. Now this was something, someone alive. He felt confident in his drunken stupor that he could easily find and follow him. He must be going for the secret sacred text.

 Zaidor felt around for what few things he wanted to bring. A few scrolls and robes. He regretted there was no time to find the wine cellar, but he didn’t want to lose Cheveyo.

 Once in the hallway things were not quite as easy going as the back corridors. There seemed to be debris everywhere and so much of the palace had been damaged in the shaking. He made it to what he thought was the throne room. He slunk along the wall looking for the entrance to the corridors.

 Suddenly, he was attacked by unseen and unheard-of foe. He didn’t care who they were, he fought with all his might and killed whoever it was, or at least he stabbed the person in the stomach. He felt the blood upon his hands as he pulled his knife out of the assailant, then ran in the direction he happened to be facing. He tripped over another body, but this one was long dead, hard, cold, and unmoving.

 After that, Zaidor proceeded more cautiously, but still as fast as possible. He hated this darkness. When he finally made it to the main corridor, he knew from there he could easily find his way out. However, it wasn’t as easy as he thought, because he was headed the wrong way and he ended up in the dining hall. That led to another altercation; this time with two assailants wandering around the large space. They just happened to touch him or otherwise none would have known the others were there. It was his ill luck to accidently bump into one and then had to fight the other when their fight hit him.

 The other two would ultimately entangle in battle, giving Zaidor the opportunity to run again. This time into the kitchen which he discovered as he crashed into a pile of pots. It was strange as there was no sound of clanging metal.

 He remembered there were two huge doors to the outside for bringing in all the large quantities of food to feed a kingdom. He also recalled that the cook kept a large stash of wine there for cooking and serving. He grabbed all he could carry in his bag, then one in each hand. He immediately opened a jug and took a long swallow as he stumbled in the dark, and through the heavy doors into the street.

 He was fairly certain that he was going in the right direction, but he could see nothing at all. He just hoped he hadn’t missed Cheveyo, or worse that he had gone in the wrong direction and would end up in the wilderness before he ever found him. He wasn’t a fit man, nor was he at all sober so his journey was slow going. He didn’t know that the man he sought was safely inside, while his group rested for hours. Zaidor, too, would doze off after drinking another jug of wine.

 When he awoke, he took off once more through the endless night. This time he would catch a flash of light which spurned him with renewed vigor despite him being very inebriated. In a world of complete darkness that light became his everything, his one hope of survival.

 When he finally caught up with Cheveyo, he was a bloody mees of cuts and bruises from falling so many times. In his inebriation he still had the clarity of thought to stay back a bit and follow. He saw that it wasn’t just the Twice Born freak as he had thought, but the little priestess and a gang of Hyksos. She held a light for their path, and they carried large and heavy looking chests. No doubt the scrolls and treasures he sought.

 His cunning mind cautioned against attack, especially after he saw Cheveyo immobilize Pharaoh and his guards. Apparently, Ra’Menes hadn’t met Alkenan yet or he would be dead. He hoped that man had died in the catacombs, buried under layers of stone.

 When they made it to the river, he had a harder time finding a boat in the dark than he would have liked. The only way he found the river was by their light on the other side, but that would be gone too, as it appeared they had made it to shore. He rowed with all his might towards them. Luckily, he was nearly there when he lost sight of them altogether, and within a few moments touched shore.

 He scrambled up the bank, crawling over dead bodies of both human and animal. He paid no mind to anything, being just drunk enough that he couldn’t smell the death rot or comprehend the nightmare scene around him. Again, he had to find a way blindly across a city of disaster.

 Up ahead he caught that glimmer of hope and the little priestess he swore to kill with his bare hands. He was glad she had survived so he could have the pleasure of taking her life. He followed them into the artisan’s district. There he hung back as he saw many people gathered at one place, a home apparently. He scrambled into a building, falling over many things and thanking Ba’al there was no sound to give him away. He found a balcony which let him catch sight of a walled garden with the lights shining from within.

 Cheveyo and Na’feti began to disperse the lanterns amongst the people, who then prepared to exit the city. He saw some of the people go out amongst the homes to gather supplies, mostly containers for water and leftover food.

 He pulled another container of wine out and proceeded to drink and think as he watched the people below. He noticed Aper’El and a group of priests loading an ass. He would join in with them when the mass began to move. Perhaps even slip in at the end and work his way to them. Then he would find a way to get those chests from Cheveyo. He would be back on top again. With pharaoh gone the people needed a strong leader. This could all still work out to his advantage.

 Chapter 28

 Cheveyo’s sharp eyes scanned the population. He was amazed at how many people were in this long line on the road. They had been moving people out of the city for months, yet many more still stumbled through the ruins beneath him.

 He hated this darkness and the eerie silence that surrounded a huge group of people. It was unnatural and disturbing. But all that changed in an instant. There was a mighty sound of a great strike, followed by a piercing whistle that caused him to cover his ears. He noticed the people below were reacting similarly.

 He flew straight to the front where Na’feti carried the lead lantern upon a camel. Before he could get to her, the night was split by a ball of light shooting across the sky. All eyes followed its’ path. Then the darkness receded as hundreds of fiery balls lit up the heavens and slammed to the ground with mighty booms. One landed near the rear of the line and the people screamed and scattered.

 The light and sound had come back into their world with a blast. The mass migration became a fear marathon. People were running in terror. Most were still upon the road, but some just ran out into the wilderness, or sought cover of any building or tree. In the confusion and ensuing chaos, many were trampled.

 By the time he made it to Na’feti, she and her camel were as terrified as the rest of the people. It was running ahead of everyone, her lamp swaying wildly. Not far behind, a group of warriors ran as fast as they could to keep up with the light. He flew up to her and found her bent over, holding on for dear life. He grabbed the fallen reins and stopped the raging camel. He petted and calmed her camel as Na’feti sat up looking shocked, so pale and wild eyed.

 Picking her up easily, Cheveyo stood her upon the ground, but held her close as firestones of all sizes rained down around them. The world lit up with fire. Dry vegetation and homes burned quickly, filling the night sky with a red glow. They hadn’t known that the darkened silence had been a blessing before Hades fell upon their heads. Screams of people and falling projectiles bombarded their brains, as did the horrible sounds of destruction all around them.

 She looked up at him with tears in her eyes.

 “I want to say it’s good to hear again but this is awful. Is this what you saw, the sky falling upon us?”

 “Yes darling. I know it looks bad, but we can survive this. We must get these people forward to the temple and the ships. Do you trust me?’

 He held her face in his hands, lost in her eyes, as the fires above were reflected in them, making them shine.

 “I’d follow you to the ends of the earth. You know that.”

 Then, they shared one deep kiss while the world ended at their feet. It was short but just what they both needed to ground them in the moment.

 Graywolf had showed up with a group of warriors. So, he turned to them but held her hand beside him.

 “Keep moving forward upon this road. Go quickly, it should take us to the top of the salty sea. There is a strip of land between the waters where we can meet the road going south towards the temple. I’m going down to the end of the line to round up the stragglers and make sure all make it safely.”

 The men nodded agreement, but she spoke up quickly before they could say anything.

 “I’m going with you. Boost me up on the camel.”

 He shook his head. The thought of her being harmed made him nauseous.

 “You are supposed to lead the way, not run around in this madness.”

 “Please,” she begged, “I can’t handle being so far from you. Please, I just want to help. Don’t leave me alone again.”

 It was clear her short time in the darkness had terrified her to the core. He could not refuse her pleas. Truth was, he couldn’t bear to leave her to this insanity either.

 “Fine. I’ll be right up above you, so you need not fear. Keep the light, it will help us see those in need. Graywolf has a light, it is good he has come to the lead.”

 He turned to Graywolf as he spoke. The man had not moved but held his lantern higher.

 “I know the way, Master. I will not fail you.”

 He bowed in respect then gathered with his warriors, who after a brief conference, began walking down the road and the caravan moved behind them.

 He picked her up and put her upon her seat, then flew into the air, swift as an eagle. He could see her along the road beneath him. She kept the camel at a nice trot so she could yell out encouragement to the people.

 “It’s okay people. God will protect us. Keep moving forward. Everything will be fine.”

 Wherever she shined her light they saw hope and began to move forward again. He watched her below and was so proud of how she bravely rode on, despite the fire from the sky and the terror around her.

 As he flew ahead, he noticed a break near the end of the caravan. There was a smoking hole where a small meteor had hit and quite a few people had been injured. The end of the line was halted and scared. He descended and immediately began attending to the wounded. Someone handed him a shirt and a container of water. He didn’t notice till later it was his own cousin/brother Aper’El’Aron by his side.

 He used the healing techniques he had learned with the old lady, pushing positive energy into the wound and taking out the pain. He heard Na’feti ride up in the back of his mind, then her yell for assistance brought him out of his labor. The lantern gave a much-needed light to the scene, a cleaner light than that of the fires, though people had begun to pass torches up the line.

 “Cheveyo, I’m here to help. How many have you tended? Do you have a litter yet.”

 “I have seen to those five over there and this man here. There are several more I think in critical condition. On that blanket there. But no way yet for transportation that I am aware of.”

 He hadn’t even the thought of it to be honest. He had been concerned with stopping the blood flow or setting broken bones.

 “Ok, I will help you attend those others. The camel can pull a large cart. If you will find one, I will get it ready for the wounded to travel, then you tag out on the critical patients.”

 She was so brilliant under pressure, he loved how she took control and demanded people bring water and blankets. Then she rushed to the suffering people upon the ground. He flew up and quickly located the right cart in the village ruins nearby.

 Bringing it back, he was amazed at how helpful everyone was in this crisis. Men and women rushed in to get the cart hooked to the camel. Others came up with what they could for blankets or cushions. He went to Na’feti, who looked up and smiled from where she bandaged a leg. She motioned with her lips toward the woman lying on the other side.

 He knelt and began pulling a large stake of wood that had shot out from a cart exploding in the blast. It was on the woman’s side and when he removed it, blood and flesh filled the hole. He pressed rags to it, then concentrated with all his heart on closing the hole. He didn’t even notice as she began instructing the patients to be moved to the cart.

 He had never tried to heal such a large wound so fast. He could feel his own energy draining. He pushed energy as hard as his body would allow. It took more than he knew out of him for when she was healed, he collapsed beside her.

 He awoke to Na’feti’s beautiful face covered in dirt and worry. She gave him water and some flat bread. He was so thankful because he just remembered he had forgotten to eat for he guessed days.

 “Cheveyo, Are you ok?” She looked at him with such concern, but his mouth was full, so he nodded.

 “Good. We’ve loaded the last of the wounded who couldn’t walk. Two scouts are here to see you.” She remembered that last bit as they were walking up.

 They were both covered in soot and ash. Their white robes were now gray and black. There was no distinguishing feature between the two, but one was taller and it was he that approached first and spoke.

 “Master, Pharoah has been spotted following on the road. He is not far behind and moving with what’s left of the army.”

 “Thank you, guys. Regroup with food and water then return to keep an eye out for his approach.” Turning to Na’feti he said, “He’s coming. Let’s get everyone moving as fast as we can.”

 He knew his brother came for all the gold the people had taken, for all the food they had packed away, for the very people, themselves, who had chosen to follow him. Most importantly, he came for her.

 Ra’Menes loved her from the start just as he had. Yet Cheveyo always kept his love hidden in his heart; a gift he dared not give. When Na’feti had healed him, his brother had confessed that she was the queen of his heart. Over the years, he noticed that his brother’s fire only burned brighter. And though he tried to hide it, Cheveyo knew his love for her, too, had grown to a mighty forest fire burning out of control.

 He looked over at her, so beautiful in blood and filth. He noticed she was talking with his relative the Grand Vizier. In the distance his keen eyes spotted a group of priests moving with the crowd. Amongst them, the unmistakable silhouette of Zaidor. Somehow, he was not surprised the man had survived.

 He didn’t have time to think about it, as an elder was approaching. The man had long white hair which had come loose from its braids. The fringe hung from the sleeves of his shirt and the sides of his pants and swayed as he walked. The man carried an intricately carved staff with feathers and beads hanging from it.

 He bowed slightly and then spoke, “Master, thank you for saving my companion. We are at your service, Nishatoka, Chief Tribe of Flowing Waters. We all thank you for saving us.”

 He bowed back to the old man, “You honor me Chief. But we are not out of danger yet. Save your praise for when we are actually safe.”

 As if to emphasize his words, it was then that the ground shook so violently that it caused most of the people to drop onto their hands and knees. He held onto the old man and Na’feti who materialized beside him.

 When the earthquake ended, he urged everyone to leave swiftly and they hurried to join the main caravan. Aper’El’Aron approached with two elderly people and a young lady.

 ‘Cheveyo, I apologize for interrupting, but my mother insisted we meet you. Na’feti said it would be alright.” He held his mother’s hand as she stepped forward.

 “It is fine, Aper’El, but then we must move quickly.”

 They finally caught up with the main body near the top of the sea.

 “I’ll be right back.” He told Na’feti. Then he flew straight up to get a better view. The vast majority of the people had made it to the road of the Temple. He could see their lead light far in the distance to the right. The wind here was much stronger and in the light of meteors he saw the waters of the salt sea raging in giant waves as never before. It appeared those on the road were high enough to be safe, but he wasn’t certain about his own location. The Uat-Ur, or the Great Green Sea rose up to their left in waves that tore away massive chunks of shore. They walked upon a narrow bridge of land at the mercy of the Great Spirit.

 Then he saw behind them that Pharoah was nearly upon them, and he quickly dropped down.

 “What is it? Are they dead? Are we lost?” She must have seen the worry on his face.

 “We have got to get these people moving faster. The seas are sure to flood this land and…Pharoah is near. I’ll go back and meet him. I’ve got to convince him to leave us in peace.”

 “I’m coming with you. You are not leaving me alone.”

 “Na’feti, please I can’t fly with you in my arms. I need you here to get them going faster. Don’t worry I will be right behind you.” He tried to push calming feelings toward her, but her face looked mad.

 “You are going to separate us? He is my friend too. Maybe I could be of help, I’ll ride your back.”

 He grabbed her hands, “I know you are afraid, but it will be safer if you stay here. I will be fine.”

 With that he flew up. He heard her start yelling for people to run. Then he was too high in the wind and screaming projectiles.

 All too soon he was above his brother who rode faster than the people could run before him. It wouldn’t be long before they caught up with the tail end. He hated to think what might happen then.

 He flew down and swiped his brother off his horse and the two rolled in the ash. Back and forth they fought a while until, finally, Pharoah threw him off. They both got up panting and ready for the other to pounce.

 “What are you doing? Osarmoses, I should kill you right now. You betrayer, you are not my brother. This is your fault. My people gone; my woman is gone. Where is she?”

 He was spitting mad, and it left trails down his mouth where it washed away the soot.

 “I told you this was going to happen. All I did was the will of Heaven! You should have listened to me; they would already be safe. She is with her people following God. She doesn’t want you or this crazy dream. You’ve damned these people.”

 “Shut-up! I am God! I’m sick of you damn priest and all your religions! She is Mine!”

 He screamed this and drew his sword charging his brother, who flew up 15 foot, hovering above hm, just out of reach of the weapon.

 “You are no god and now you will see the wrath of a True God, brother. She will never be yours.”

 Pharoah turned a shade of crimson that matched a fireball overhead then he screamed at his men, “Shoot him down! Shoot him! I want his head!”

 Cheveyo flew up even higher as fast as he dared then raced towards the caravan. He didn’t know how he was going to stop an army from following them all the way to the temple.

 He prayed that God might deliver them from Pharaoh’s hand. He prayed for the safety of the whole population. He prayed because there seemed no other way to go. He could think of no solution. Even if he could freeze Pharoah and some of his men, he could never freeze them all and not for long. The man would still catch up to them and hunt them down.

 He could see the tail of the caravan ahead; it looked as though they had nearly reached the high road, but it mattered little with Pharaoh hot on his heels. He willed himself to fly faster.

 Just then a huge ball of fire shot over his head and slammed into the salt sea lake. The impact was a wave of sound that nearly knocked him to the ground. He caught himself several meters from death just as a wall of water rose high enough to block out the sky.

 He shot up with all his power, just missing being drowned. He had to fly even higher then because another wall of water came up from the lake and slammed down where he had been. He could see men and horses floating by swiftly and then Pharoah, with that which was left of his army, arrived upon the new shore to the expanded sea. Another ball of flames plummeted down into the Uat-Ur, close enough to send a massive wall of water across what had been land.

 At this point Pharaoh was no longer a concern as God had answered his prayers. He raced to Na’feti hoping she was alive.

 He found her on the high road standing beside the wagon full of the wounded. She had dropped a jar of water and was staring at the sky. Everyone’s faces were turned upward. He landed near her and then followed her gaze when she didn’t acknowledge him.

 The sun could be seen in the midmorning sky behind a layer of smoke, looking deep orange and bigger than ever. It was a welcome site after an endless night. Then a second sun rose upon the horizon, four times the size of the first. It was a ball of red fire burning with a ruddy glow which turned the landscape into a crimson hue. It sent chills down his spine looking at the bloody morning. The higher it rose, the bigger it became. Its surface rolled with smoke and flames, and it filled their hearts with dread. He grabbed Na’feti in a hug, pulling her eyes away from it.

 “We must get these people moving faster. Get on my back and try not to choke me. We are going to the front.”

 He turned around and kneeled so she could get on his back, then took off and flew a little above the convoy. The wind was still raging, and the waves swept from lake to sea now in massive peaks. They could feel the salty spray as it nearly reached their height.

 He flew with all his strength, praying in his heart for their protection from the second sun.

 CHAPTER 29

 Ra’Menes screamed to the sky. When the meteor struck and the waters rushed in before him, he had nearly been swept up in the torrent. A tree just three feet away was ripped from the ground before him and washed in a massive wave. His horse bucked in terror and ran, but he held on tight till he could stop the best.

 Now, as the red sun consumed the sky, he screamed all his rage at it, all his anger at Osarmoses, at Zaidor, at losing his wife and child, at losing his people, at losing the love of his life. Tears of torment rolled down his cheeks. Finally, the anger subsided, and he quieted down, his eyes still upon the growing red sun.

 “Pharoah, I’ve gathered the men left sir. I…uh…we are ready to return to the city sir. The people there need us.”

 “Yes, general Malek, we should return.”

 With that he whipped his horse to run full speed which it did only too happy to be far away from the wild waters. He didn’t feel the same, the opposite in fact. He wanted to swim across the angry sea and get his woman back, but she had made her choice, she had left him. He didn’t care about the disasters befalling them, in his mind she ran away.

 He rode hard with his men on his heels. His heart felt numb after everything, for the moment, no pain or anger, nothing. So, he rode through the red morning, not even really seeing or hearing. Which is why he didn’t see the invaders riding toward them until it was too late to stop. He simply drew his sword and clash into the first man to reach him. A second barbarian came on his other side attempting to stab his horse which reared and kicked the man’s face.

 His army had fallen behind him and now the clang of metal and cries of men mingled with the screams in the skies. In the odd light, the blood looked like black liquid death spewing from the men. He jumped down from his horse and smacked its rump so it would leave the battlefield. Some part of his mind marked its direction as he slashed the midsection of a foe, then pivoted to the next.

 It was strange how calm he felt given the circumstances. The woman he loved had run off with his brother. To add insult to injury they had cleaned out the treasury and storehouses as well. He hoped they died in that god forsaken wilderness.

 Adrenaline had him feeling no pain from numerous blows as he cut his way through men. So, these were the invaders he had heard about. He felt like his fear had been wasted, this little band was no match for his army. But then he noticed fewer and fewer of his men around. It finally dawned on him that he had lost many men in the flood and now he was losing this battle. He began retreating as quickly as he could towards the direction his horse had run.

 Every few feet he had to engage in combat so it seemed he might not escape. With the idea of death and defeat weighing heavily on his mind, his arms grew weary and he stumbled. A giant fist slammed into his face and sent him reeling. He somehow kept his feet, and turned to face his attacker. The man was huge and dark. Pharoah knew right away this was the boss. The man, though large, had the leathers and posture of a wealthy man. However, he fought like a man from the streets, and it took all his talents to avoid being squashed to mincemeat. This must be the famous barbarian prince, Alkenan, who had slain his family and half his own subjects. It is said he burnt their city and every village he found, taking everything of value along the way.

 “This is my city now Pharoah. I suggest you leave right away, or I’ll set your head upon a spike.” He growled and lunged at Pharoah. They grappled for ground as Alkenan sought to strangle him. He repeatedly punched the guy as hard as he could in the ribs, hoping to break a rib or two.

 He was fighting for his life, but he realized he wasn’t fighting for his city and subjects. There was nothing left to fight for: the palace was in ruins, his family dead or gone, there wasn’t even a morsal of food left anywhere, and the water was blood. He could just let this monster destroy him now, squeeze the life from his bones right here. Yet, he wanted to live, even with the world ending, he could not walk away from life itself.

 He managed to get in a good kick that sent the man back a pace. He followed that one with a few more in rapid succession. His rage rising once more that this man dared try to take what little he had left in this world, he struck out for Alkenan’s head. God had taken his family, Osarmoses had taken his subjects, Na’feti had taken his heart, there was no way he was going to let his man take his life. He hit the man as hard as he could in the face and felt the bones shatter beneath his knuckles. Alkenan staggered back, then down on his knees.

 He could have stayed and killed the beast, but he ran. He ran with all his strength toward the hills nearby. He ran not looking back to see if his men had survived. He ran, not caring if someone chased or didn’t. He just ran as far and fast as he could. He ran till his lungs burned and his legs felt like mulch. He collapsed under a tree, gasping for breath. He looked around and realized he had made it to the top of a very large hill and could see quite a distance. The battle was a small clash of dark shapes. The sea a distant blackness swallowing the land.

 He felt warm breath upon his shoulder and was shocked to find his horse had found him. Apparently, it had run as far as it could as well. He welcomed the company and stroked its muzzle. Fire still rained from the sky and slammed the ground.

 He decided he needed to head south and find his mother and sister. From his perspective he could see a village partially on fire down below. It was probably his best bet to find supplies.

 It didn’t take him long to get there, even though both he and the horse walked with fatigue. He searched for water and eventually found a small central well. It wasn’t the clearest, but it was drinkable. He searched for what little wasn’t burnt and found a few jars and makeshift lids to hold some water for his journey. There was scarce in the way for food. A hard half loaf of bread, a few moldy potatoes, a dried fish, and a small bag of grains. He even found a suitable staff to use as a weapon though all the fight had gone out of him.

 He only rested a few hours for the sake of his horse mostly. Then he took to the south while the first sun set, leaving the world bathed in the blood light of the second sun. Its radiance was a sheer terror that weighed upon your soul. Half the time he felt as if he were dead already walking in the netherworld. He waited for enemies to attack, for monsters to jump out of every rise. After many hours of riding through terror, he collapsed upon his horse from sheer exhaustion.

 He awoke to the sound of men’s voices. The horse had led him to a Bedouin camp. He figured it wouldn’t hurt to travel with people. This nightmare landscape was unbearable alone.

 The night had become bitter cold, and he could see his breath. He walked into the warm light of a tent where people were sitting around a fire. A smiling elderly lady invited him over to sit by her. She was like a comforting blanket and a grandmother’s hug which made him feel at home.

 CHAPTER 30

 They traveled an ancient road above the lake leading into the salt sea. They counted days now by the red sun as it dominated their sky till darkness came once more. The nights were better without the sickening red light which haunted the day. No moon shown through the thick smoke clouds and no stars graced the skies. Now only balls of fire crashing to earth lit up the night.

 Zaidor paced their tent, his mind a whirl of plans. He couldn’t take living like a peasant anymore. He was the High Priest. He deserved to be treated like royalty. He was tired of starving and suffering. He had connected with Aper’El and the other priests left. They had found him a tent at least. They had to share it, which he didn’t care for, but it was better than sleeping on the ground under the falling stars.

 “Gentlemen, we need to be vigilant in our efforts to help the people. They have been left without leaders or direction, but to follow this mutation, this non-human creature, into the wilderness. Better we had stayed in our temple, but it could not be helped. I want to send you all out tomorrow to walk amongst the people, pray with them, give them hope that we have not abandoned them. Show them our faith is strong and we are still here to guilde them.”

 He paused in his pacing a moment to gaze upon their faces. They were at full attention. He felt more like himself with every word.

 “They are so lost we must be the light through this dark night. To do that we will need a new temple. I had a divine vision last evening. The Lord is with us and wants us to build a home for him. We will make a tent temple that can be moved as we do until this is over and we find a suitable new home. We will need to take up a collection from the people. It should be of the finest cloths you can find, all the fastenings should be pure gold, and we will need an altar of gold so God will be with us always.”

 The men cheered him and praised God for deliverance. Aper’El’Aron assured him he would begin at once and promptly left. Then the other priests, not to appear sluggish, followed him out.

 Alone with his thoughts, Zaidor was only too pleased by the outcome of this conversation. Cheveyo thought he had won the hearts of the people and gotten away with all the treasures of Egypt, but Zaidor was about to take it all back. Now he didn’t have to worry about the spoiled brat Pharoah or the psychotic prince who was invading the place right now he assumed.

 Out here he would have their full attention, their complete adoration, and all their gold. He knew how to use fear to his advantage and in the days to come he would make use of all it had to offer. He would finally eat like the king he was destined to become. Although being a priest was better than being a king because no one questioned the word of God as they did a regular man. It was how the pharaohs had maintained absolute control over so many different populations.

 The next day he caught up with a group of nobles and began to work his magic. He was ever sympathetic to their loss and promised to help them obtain their status again. All he had to do was make promises to desperate people, most of which were half - mad from the terror and shock of all they had experienced. The second sun created fear in peoples’ hearts which made them easy to manipulate. He could have promised them rainbow castles and they would have believed him.

 It took the caravan a week to reach the pass to the temple. There the people found a wide flat expanse of land in which they could camp. The beach was a sight to behold as it seemed every gull from the sea had chosen to roost here. Likewise, the people found that a large herd of deer had chosen this area as their safe zone, and warriors went to work killing and skinning game. The people were overjoyed at the prospect of fresh meat, and many began singing and rejoicing. Under the raging red sun, they experienced renewed hope. He would use this to his advantage.

 Cheveyo announced that he and a group of Hyksos would travel through the mountain pass to retrieve the bones of the first father and mother. He told the people to camp there and rest until his return. They were only too happy to comply and immediately began setting up the camp.

 Zaidor, too, was happy for the chance to have the people to himself without the presence of an iconic figure to counter his commands.

 He initiated the building of a tabernacle at the site. As soon as he could, he started holding services once he was sure Cheveyo was truly gone. He called for all gold and silver to be brought to his tent until the Tabernacle to the Lord could be built. He demanded wood chopped for his priestly quarters and the tabernacle. Within hours the first post was going up, fires were built, and blacksmiths’ hammers forged the metal into fastenings, rods, and figures. Soon the altar was born of flame.

 Before the day was over, he sat in front of the tabernacle of fine cloth and gold. It was only the first layer and the rough beginnings of what he had in store. He recruited men to be priests and set them to work right away preaching his word to the people, encouraging them to come and sacrifice for forgiveness from their sins so that they might be saved.

 That night, he had men raid Cheveyo’s tent. They took the sacred text retrieved from the Sphinx. Zaidor spent the rest of the night pouring over the scrolls.

 The next morning as the Destroyer sun began to chase away the night with its crimson light, Zaidor stood before the people dressed from head to toe in deep red robes. The ground slightly trembled and the sky rumbled and screamed but somehow, they had learned to tolerate it. If you didn’t, it would drive you mad. Some did and they often ran out into the wilds screaming.

 He cleared his throat and scanned the crowd waiting as a hush fell upon them.

 “Friends and relatives, I thank you all for coming. We came together today for our first service in the wilderness. Good morning. I know it doesn’t feel like a good morning with all the chaos we have been through, but I want to share with you the joy in my heart. On this day the Lord has blessed us. We were brought safely through the fires of Hades to this place, this place where food runs upon the shore. This place which has a fresh spring, where our thirst may be quenched. This is a blessed day! Let us give thanks to the Lord.”

 Aper’El’Aron and his sister Miriam joined Zaidor before the tabernacle tent. They sang a beautiful old hymn. The crowd sang along too until most were in tears and on their knees praising God.

They were so moved Miriam started another song and the crowd sang even louder this time, the sound revibrating off the mountains and rising above the tumultuous sea.

 Zaidor smiled and spread his arms up high and wide.

 “Praise him who gave us life and carried us through the dark. God spoke to me in the darkest hour of last night. A bright light woke me. There was a huge glowing being, brighter than the sun to behold. He spoke to me in a voice like thunder. He told me this was a most blessed people. He said he saved you from all the others, he chose you to be the bearers of his word. No enemy will stand before you. He said the Canaanite land was a choice land and our children’s children would dwell there for many years to come. He promised he would vanquish the Chaldeans before you. That the Hittites would tremble and fall. Our God has promised to be with us always if we remain faithful.”

 The people cried out praising their god. They hugged one another, they praised Zaidor. They poured out all the emotions they had held tight through the shock of the ordeal or fatigue. He raised his arms to quiet them down again.

 “My dears, God also told me he has been angry because you turned away from him. You lost yourselves in the lap of luxury and comfort. Since you put gold before God, he has asked you give your gold to build our Lord a great seat where he may dwell with us through these coming trials. He has led us to the wilderness to chastise us, now we must sacrifice to make atonement for our sins. Then God will come down and dwell with his people always and He will bless all our paths.”

 He signaled for the priest to bring out the golden calf they had constructed. It was actually clay, very thinly painted with gold. He would never have wasted the gold on an icon. No, he had melted it into rods and hid in the tabernacle within the seat of God.

 He needed a big sacrifice to Ba’al to get the god’s attention. He knew a spell to trap an entity that should work. He had found it upon an old tomb wall deep in the nobles’ burial valley catacombs. This was long ago as a young man, grave robbing. He had also found many scrolls that had led him down the path of the dark arts. Most spells were simple potions with correct symbology, but some things were a bit more complicated, such as the one he would try today.

 “We have before you the sacrificial cow, the goddess giving her life to the higher needs of her people. You will bring your offerings before the altar; they will sprinkle the blood upon the goddess and burn their hearts to God so He might find favor with you and forgive your sins. His love is all we need. Now is the time to let go of the past, let go of all that has held you back from being your best. We are all in this together, so everyone please hold your faith strong. We must help one another. We must share all that we have so that all may survive.”

 “Do not fear, God is with us and has chosen me to help guide you home. We will rebuild. This time we need no pharaohs; God will lead us. Now, if you bow your heads, we will say a prayer, then Miriam will lead us in a hymn.

Line up with your absolutions. Please be patient, we are doing our best. We will be accepting donations for finishing the tabernacle, silver, gold, cloth, even labor is needed. God Bless you all. Let us pray.”

 He nodded to Aper’El who began a prayer in a high litany as beautiful as any song. Zaidor watched a while until the people began to line up for the slaughter. They mostly brought gulls recently caught in nets on the shore. He stepped inside the tent to begin his own ritual, hidden from their eyes. He had warned no one to enter on fear of death from God. He just hoped this worked as it had never been performed by modern man and it would take him hours to complete.

 At some point the crowd outside saw what looked like lightings striking the tent; they cowered in fear, but the priest assured them it was God coming to the people and blessing the tabernacle. This sent the people in fervent praise and prayer, but the priests kept the sacrifices going, until all the meat had been collected.

 That night, Zaidor and his priests slept like fat cats; full and content. Zaidor was more than pleased, he had succeeded in all he had set out to do and now he was once again the most powerful man alive.

 CHAPTER 31

 It took the group over a day to get to the Hidden Temple of the Twice Born. The last time they had come had been an easy trek on the well-worn road which was beautiful in spring bloom. This time, they climbed the back pass because a rockslide blocked the main road. There were no flowers in bloom, just a scorched landscape still smoking and burning in places. The red sun made it all look blacker and bleaker.

 She wasn’t sure what she expected to find once they reached the top but it was nothing she could ever have imagined. It wasn’t just the lack of people and habitations; it was the sheer devastation. Earthquakes had turned the landscape into upheavals that were treacherous to climb. The temple complex had nearly been leveled, only the central sanctuary remained. The sides were crumbing but the main structure stood tall, yet eerie, in the red glow.

 Cheveyo paused before the blackened ruins of what had been a lush outer garden. Statues lay on the ground in pieces and not a living thing grew, all was decay, all was ash. She saw a tear fall from his eye, which he quickly wiped away.

 “This is worse than I thought. What devastation. I just hope there is someone left,” Cheveyo let out a heavy sigh, “Come on let’s go see if we can find someone alive. This was a delay we didn’t need for nothing.”

 No one else said a word, they just followed him silently. They didn’t know what to say. Graywolf’s serious face didn’t hide the pain in his eyes at seeing his home destroyed. He grew up here on this mountain. Raised to serve the temple his whole life. Now there was no temple.

 The door to the temple slid open easily as if there was no devastation. Inside the marble was cracked but held its shine which gleamed in red sunlight. No torches were lit but Nafeti had brought the lantern and now removed it from her bag and opened the shudders. The flush of pure white light made them all close their eyes for a bit. Then they proceeded to the inner sanctuary. They were surprised to find quite a few candles lit in the room. Many of the benches were down and the walls were broken in places. The main altar lay in a heap of stone where the roof had fallen on it.

 The Master sat on a bench near the front. His feathers were soaked in blood, grayed with ash, broken and frayed. His face streaked with black, he looked at them blankly a moment until Cheveyo said, “Master, are you alright?”

 The man blinked and seemed to see them for the first time. “Cheveyo! Oh, you are a sight for sore eyes!” He stood and embraced him tightly.

 “It’s good to see you too, Master. Where is everyone?” They stood there in embrace, arms held at elbows.

 “They went on to the ships. I stayed waiting for you, son. Come with me, there is no time to waste.”

 He turned away to a door to the right of the altar pulling Cheveyo with him. He seemed as eager as a child showing a parent something they made.

 Na’feti and the men followed them through the door and down a steep staircase in the dark. Na’feti raised her lamp high so everyone could see the treacherous footing clearly.

 “It is good you brought the lantern. It means you have followed my instructions and retrieved the sacred text from the Sphinx. Now you will get the Great Book and the bones of our ancestors, The First Man and Woman, The Mother and The Father, whom we’ve guarded many thousands of years.” Cante Tinza said as he pulled a key on a necklace from around his neck, which he then used to unlock a door at the end of the staircase.

 None of the walls or floors were cracked down here, which seemed strange. They entered a beautiful antechamber, which was alabaster stone painted with bright flowers and happy scenes. Somehow this room was a place untouched by nightmare. Three golden sarcophagi rested on the stand in the middle of the room.

 “Have your men carry these outside. You must follow me, Cheveyo. You may come too Na’feti, but give the men your lantern. Come quickly.”

 He walked to the back of the room where there was another thrice cornered door. She handed over the lamp and followed.

 Cante Tinza placed a hand upon the door and began to hum a melody of low notes that gradually rose to a pitch so high she could barely handle it. Then a light flashed from his palm and the door opened. Inside, the room was lit with lanterns upon the walls, they were the same as the ones they had retrieved, burning with an eternal light from a crystal core.

 Upon a white marble table sat a massive stone tablet, over a meter tall and almost that wide; it was a sight to behold. The words upon the stone moved like fire, and wrote, MY BELOVED CHILDREN, FEAR NOT, FOR THE GREAT CROSSING HAS BEGUN.

 She had never seen anything like it; the fire was brighter than regular flames, it burned white and gold. It was beautiful and sent tingles of excitement through her whole body. Her arm hair stood on end as she watched the words appear.

 “This is the living word of God. Long ago it was touched by the finger of The Creator. We have been the keepers of it for as long as we have been. It will guide you through this chaos and ever after. Trust in the Word of God always. Cheveyo you will have to carry it as it is too heavy for your men to do it safely. There is a harness of straps which only a Twice Born can fit.”

 Cheveyo stared at it in awe for a moment, then breathed deeply and picked it up while Cante Tinza wrapped it in cloth and fixed the straps underneath and around. There is no way any normal man could have lifted that by himself, maybe four men, with one on each corner, but he handled it with ease. Only the Master could lift it upon Cheveyo’s back. Once it was properly secured with the straps, he had to make it carefully through all the different doors as well as upstairs. Graywolf came back with the lantern to light their path up and out.

 When they were finally back outside, with visual reminders of the terror reigning in their new sky, Cante Tinzu told them he would not be going down with them. Cheveyo did not want to accept the news.

 “Master, please there is nothing left for you here.”

But the Master sank to the ground. He knelt beside the man and held his hand.

 “Cheveyo, you are the hope of the people. You need to get them to the promised land. I was crushed by a falling post. I pulled myself free just a few hours ago. I can feel my body shutting down. If you heal me, you can’t get down the mountain with the Word of God, and I can’t carry you both. It is too late for me.”

 Cheveyo bowed his head and reluctantly accepted the man’s logic.

 “Go, there isn’t time to wait for me to die. Go now.” He insisted as if he could see the future; they had just started to descend when a meteor struck the temple, exploding everything left. The force of the blast knocked them all to the ground.

 Cheveyo had to have their help to get back up. She noticed the stone had cracked a little but thought it best to wait till they reached the camp before she told him. He was very upset about the death of his mentor. They had gotten close in the weeks they spent together. Now she could feel his broken heart, the tears he cried inside.

 The climb down went much faster than up, and they didn’t need to take a night’s rest but pushed on to the main camp. When they reached the top of the rise above the camp, Cheveyo paused. He surveyed the population below with his eagle sharp eyes. He gasped as if shocked then turned nearly red himself.

 “No, no, no! This is very bad.”

 She couldn’t see as clearly as he could in the dying red light, but she could tell the population gathered before a great tent where a large gold cow gleamed in the firelight. Even from this far, she could see the stream of blood coming from the cow and traveling down to the beach.

 She didn’t have to guess who had initiated this bloody worship. She could see him, as well, with his red robes bright in the bonfire light. They had built a huge fire and it lit up the gruesome scene below.

 “Zaidor! I thought he died! Cheveyo, what are we going to do?”

 “We are going to get the people to the boats. There is no time to waste. Zaidor and his bloody religion can stay behind.” He had a steel look upon his face that reminded her of his old distant self.

 “Wait shouldn’t we rest for the night. You packed that huge stone so far; don’t you need a break?” She couldn’t bear to think of him suffering.

 “’I’m fine. It’s only a few more hours to the southern coast. I can’t set this down just anywhere. Besides you heard the Master, there is no time to waste, I feel it too. We must get on those boats.”

 He took off at an inhuman speed and they struggled to keep up with him as they carried heavy loads as well. To make matters worse, the ground began to shake as they neared the bottom. They hurried as much as possible in the dying light.

 At the end of the trail, the men fell out upon the grass, unloading their burden. They were in the field behind the camps where the herds of goats and sheep had been left to graze. All of the animals were huddled against the rocks in fear. There were even wild animals out of the mountains, lions and bears, lying down with the domesticated and the prey. The animals had been traumatized by the chaos; many had gone insane, the rest had clung to humans and each other. No creature wanted to go through this alone.

 She followed Cheveyo on through the encampments right up to where the crowd gathered. Zaidor was giving a speech about the importance of tithing and sacrifice to the church and God. Cheveyo walked right up to the tabernacle and stood beside Zaidor, blood staining his sooty feathers. A hush fell upon the crowd.

 Zaidor stopped mid-sentence, his jaw hanging open. You could see he hadn’t expected him to make it out the mountains alive, much less with some massive object strapped to his back. His look was absolutely priceless, and she giggled quietly behind her hand.

 Then Cheveyo addressed the crowd in a voice which boomed to even the farthest person, so those still in the encampment came out to see.

 “What have you done! Do you worship Hesat now? Is Hathor your god? Are you sacrificing to Isis? Or is it really Ba’al? These gods have not saved you from the Destroyer! They did not lead you through the dark of night when no fire would burn, and you ranted like madmen without tongues! They were not guiding you when the sky broke and fell upon your homes. No, it was the True God, The Unnamable Father of Gods who carried you as babies in His arms to this very shore. It will be He who brings us home to the land of good and plenty, flowing with milk and honey. A land where our descendants will be safe when the Destroyer passes again.”

 “Our Great Creator does not demand your bloody sacrifices. All creatures belong unto Him, what use has he for their deaths? The stench of your abominable sacrifices offends his nostrils. The Lord of Lords requires you come to him with a broken heart, asking forgiveness for your deeds, and He will forgive you. Slaughtering innocent animals will not absolve you of the evils in your heart.”

 “Just a ways down the shore are boats ready and waiting to take us across the great waters. We must hurry. All those whose hearts are true and belong to the most Supreme Spirit, The One God Above, come with me now.”

 Zaidor interrupted him, shouting and red faced, “Blasphemy! You are not a human, you are not a god, you are a demon sent to lead the people astray! You seek to take advantage of our terrible situation, leading us away from our home, our ancestors. You brought us out here to this desolate wilderness to die. You are a monster, an agent of the dark lords. I am the High Priest of the True Way. Aper’El’Aron and his family are priestly bred and dedicated to serve the temple where God has come to dwell with us and lead us out of this wilderness to the land of our forefathers. Begone you demon! Leave this people!”

 She had to admit with him covered in soot and now blood he wasn’t the shining figure of before, but he was still magnificent in her eyes. She could feel the power he exuded from her perch on a rock near the back. Graywolf and the sarcophagi bearers had joined her as well. One man sat on the sarcophagus below them.

 Cheveyo stepped away from Zaidor then and it looked as if he might be obeying Zaidor, admitting defeat. Her heart wanted to scream to him not to give up. Then she noticed he wasn’t giving up but taking the stone to a level rock away from the bloody scene, where he could easily take it on and off. All eyes followed him and even Zaidor said not a word. They all held their breath waiting to see what he would do next.

 He carefully took off the harness then removed the cloth from the stone. People gasped at the sight of it, much as she had.

 “This is the Living Word of God touched by His very finger. Read and know in your hearts the truth in my words.”

 The stone lit up with the Word of God before their eyes. It told them not to fear, for God was near and would carry them to the promised land and be with them always if they would give their hearts in love. The people closest wept and fell to their knees. Others pushed forward to see and they too were filled with emotions. She stayed back and waited with their cargo as the guys also went forward to behold the Living Word.

 Many said it spoke directly to them with a personal message different than what the masses saw. Many claimed it was written in their native language, though there were many different languages amongst them. The blind swear they saw it too, and even those who could not read said they understood the words perfectly.

 Zaidor and his priests stood there in a daze for a while as if they too, were amazed by the tablet. Finally, Zaidor began to react by yelling, “Evil magic, trickery!” He did all he could to get their attention and pull them away from the stone.

 After a while Cheveyo covered the stone and shouldered it once more telling the people it was time to leave. It was at that moment that the ground shook more violently than before. The golden cow crashed down amidst the blood-soaked ground and the tabernacle shook violently. Zaidor began shouting instructions to take it down and take all that had been donated.

 Many people ran to their tents and quickly grabbed what they could as the ground settled down. It was a camp divided in the end with some following Zaidor up the mountain pass and the rest taking the coastal road with Cheveyo to the boats.

 Looking back, she could see the animals from the field following them. Beyond that, standing at the head to the pass on a high rock, Zaidor stood, watching them leave. She could sense his hate from there. Then the ground shook again and opened up right where the bloody ritual had taken place. Many people would have died if they had stayed there. When she looked back again, Zaidor was gone. Despite the current conditions, she still felt a big sigh of relief to know she would never see him again.

 The sea danced in madness sending waves within meters of their feet. The moon rose for the first time in weeks. The sky was still smokey and meteors steaked across it, but for a little time they could see its light once more. It was full but unusually red as blood. Its face had changed, and they could see that firestones were slamming into it as well. Still, it was a welcome sight and gave a little light to their journey.

 Before long, they had reached the southern tip and had a tearful reunion with relatives who had gone before. Two huge boats rested a short distance from the dangerous coastline. A path of logs laid into a road stretched beneath each and led to the water. They were unlike any ships she had ever seen. First, they were huge, made to hold a whole population and all their animals. Then there was the way they were made. They came up to high points on each end, but the whole thing was a sealed hull with a big door on the side for loading and a hatch on the top. There were a few windows, but these were closed tight against water.

 It was the construction inside that really blew her mind. He had designed it to withstand the wild waters. There was a second hull built into the main hull. The two fit together on great rings which allowed the outside to spin while the inside hull remained stable. He showed her sheep’s’ bladders had been filled with air and held in nets at the two peaks on each end to ensure the boat would stay level, no matter how high the waves or strong the winds. The hatches were means of getting air into the inner hatch.

 Inside she found out there were two stories. The top was for people and the lower for animals, plants and storage goods. The toilets were down with the animals as well. It was a bit harsh to smell but at least all the feces were in one place.

 The lanterns they brought had been placed throughout both ships as no outside light could enter the watertight hull. They would once again be their only hope against indefinite darkness.

 She wanted to stay by Cheveyo’s side, but her parents asked her to bunk with them in a little area near some of their family and old neighbors. Though they were all about to be cramped on a ship, it felt almost like home to be with the people she loved again.

 After warm welcomes all around she politely excused herself and went to find Cheveyo. He was near the bottom of the ramp helping an elderly lady walk up the steep slope. She weaved her way down amongst the crowd coming up.

 He saw her and shouted her name. She smiled and finally made it to him.

 “We are all settled in an area near an end. It is so good to see my family. How are things out here?”

 “That’s good. I put the Word in a special room downstairs. I’ll show you later. All the sarcophagi are there as well. We should be leaving soon.”

 He looked out upon the water, and she followed his gaze. The water rose in waves as tall as the pyramids or more. It sent chills down her body.

 “I’m scared” she said with a shiver. The air here was damp and cold. She was ready to be safe in the hull, away from all the falling frocks, all the earthquakes, away from the Second Sun’s red gaze. A priest ran up asking for Cheveyo’s help in securing the first ship. They were loaded and ready to go.

 “I’ll be right there.” He told the man. Then he passed her the elder’s arm, so she could help the lady up the ramp.

 “It is going to be fine. God will not let us be lost or drown.”

 He smiled and she knew he was right, she felt it to her core.

 “Go to your family. I will find you when I get everything ready.”

 Then in a voice everyone could hear he quoted what the Word of God had told them at the temple.

 “Fear Not, for the Great Crossing has begun! May God be with us!” Then he flew up amid a cheer from the people.

 By the time she and the elder made it up the ramp most of the people behind them had gone in. They were some of the last to enter. Before she went in, she looked back and saw the first boat slide down and hit the water. It was instantly swallowed by the waves. Her heart dropped in her chest. It seemed it had been instantly destroyed. She saw it in the distance, poised on top of a massive wave for just a moment, moonlight reflecting upon its side, then it was gone again, slammed to the depths. Now she understood the curious construction of the ships. Now she saw the true danger that awaited ahead. She didn’t know how they would survive an ocean of this magnitude. The dream of a promised land seemed unreachable amid the raging world the Destroyer had created.

 THE END

**Epilogue**

 Gasping for air, Na’feti fought the man’s hands from her throat. He was nearly fifteen feet high and with hands that could quickly crush her. She pulled a small dagger from her leather wrist band and stabbed his forearm as hard as she could. He howled in pain, yanking his hand back and giving her an opportunity to escape.

 They were in a great forest with trees bigger than any she had ever seen. Miraculously the fires hadn’t destroyed these jungles. Her advantage might be the thick underbrush if she could find a good game trail. She was hoping at least to be hidden from the giant’s sharp gaze.

 He was unlike any person she had ever encountered. It wasn’t just that he was so tall, Cheveyo was inhumanly tall. No, this guy had flaming red hair which looked horrifying around his gaunt face in the crimson sunlight. His eyes were dark sockets beside a massive beak of a nose. His teeth were the most terrifying part to her; pointed fangs which gnashed before her eyes as she scurried through the thick undergrowth.

 She wondered if his senses of smell and hearing were heightened. It was hard to stay quiet while running for your life in a jungle! She didn’t even know which way she was running or how to get back to camp. How had a simple scouting mission gone so wrong?

 She crouched beneath a thick bush with leaves bigger than elephant ears. He crashed through the plants somewhere close enough she could hear his heavy breathing. She was too scared to move for fear he might hear her. All she could do was pray.

The adventure continues in Book Two

**War Hatchet**