

MICHAEL DECKERT

A NOVEL

A detailed illustration of Nefertiti, the Egyptian queen, standing and facing slightly to the right. She has her characteristic long, dark hair and is wearing a light blue, off-the-shoulder dress with a sash. The background is a warm, golden-brown color with faint, stylized Egyptian hieroglyphs and a profile of a woman's head.

THE
OF SISTER
NEFERTITI

THE SISTER OF NEFERTITI

Novel by
MICHAEL DECKERT

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The Story:

Thebes, Egypt more than 3000 years ago: In the newly built temple of god Aten, the high priest Hetepaten is found dead in a mortuary chamber. Apparently he has judged himself with a sickle sword. This is the only explanation, because the chamber was protected by temple guards and there was no other person in it. But many believe in a murder because the high priest was a promoter of the new Aten religion praised by the Pharaoh.

Mutnedjmet the sister of Nefertiti, is trained in writing the hieroglyphic script in a writing school. She is a young woman of great intellect and suffers from having to live in the golden cage of the royal family. For power tactical reasons she is refused to marry commander Haremhab, because the royal house is afraid that he could become a danger.

Because of the mysterious death of Hetepaten, there is panic in the royal house. The Pharaoh Amenhotep IV and his advisors, among them also Mutnedjmet's father Ay, suspect that if the Amun priesthood learns about the death of Hetepaten, this could mean the end of the new Aten cult with which they want to depose the Amun priesthood. And so it happens: Ptahmose the high priest of Amun and opponent of the Pharaoh has got knowledge of the matter.

The mysterious death of Hetepaten must be solved as soon as possible. So the royal house devises a supposedly clever move: Mutnedjmet is ordered by the Pharaoh with the investigation, not only because she is a clever woman, she belongs to the royal house as well as to the Amun priesthood.

Mutnedjmet starts with the investigations about the death of Hetepaten and does not yet suspect what deep entanglements

and intrigues between the Pharaoh and the priesthood she will get into. She must decide whether she wants to stay on the side of the Egyptian traditions or whether she is willing to reveal the truth. Because Ptahmose, the high priest of Amun, already came up with a diabolical plan: He consults the mighty oracle of Amun....

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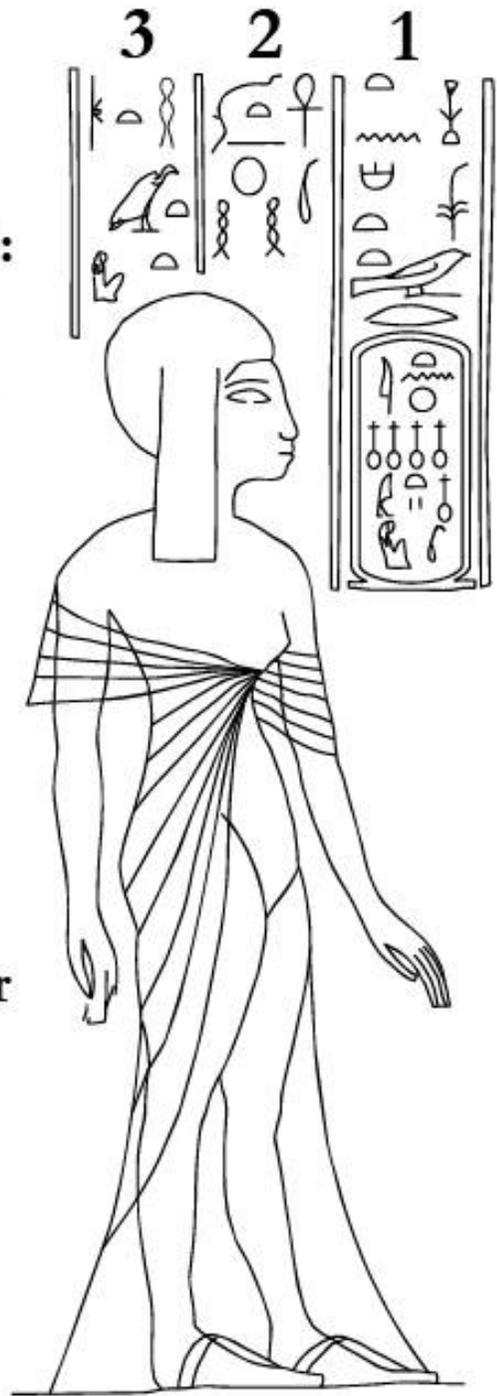
Mutnedjmet in a picture in a tomb in Amarna, Egypt:

Hieroglyphs read from right to left:

1. Sister of the great royal wife Nefertiti

2. May she live always and forever

3. Mutnedjmet



The following events took place more than 3000 years ago during the reign of the Egyptian Pharaoh Amenhotep IV in Thebes, the centre of the world at that time. They were deleted from all history books due to their explosive nature. Therefore, they never actually took place.

Prologue

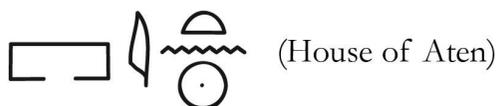
Over the city of Thebes in the heart of Egypt lay an opaque, thick veil of mist. Darkness had spread in the early evening in the large complex of the Amun temple district.

Hetepaten, the high priest of Aten, came out of one of the magnificent mud-brick buildings and walked along the road to the east. He passed the holy pond, where the water in this early hour reflected the gloomy, unclear sky like a dark soup. He trotted the sandy path towards the Gempaaten, the newly built temple of Aten, which was located a little outside. Over his cloak shined a golden pendant in the shape of the ankh-sign on his chest.



As if from a hazy cloud, the mighty building of the Gempaaten slowly appeared. The gigantic colossus had only recently been built and its freshly hewn stone walls radiated the will to change and power of its builder: Amenhotep IV had only been the new ruler of Egypt for four years and had appointed Hetepaten next to himself as high priest of the newly built Gempaaten temple.

Hetepaten walked through the pompous pylon on which, besides elaborate figures of the ruler, the words



were carved into the virgin limestone, leaving no doubt about the new spiritual supremacy of Thebes.

He entered the temple. He did not even look at the soldiers who guarded the holy place and immediately bowed down before him. Hetepaten walked through the imposing entrance hall with its wide, majestic columns.

He walked through the temple halls deeper and deeper into the complex of buildings. The pale light of the partly already burned torches illuminated the rooms. Otherwise only windowless darkness. Hetepaten entered a long corridor at the end of which there was a small gate to a chamber. Next to the gate stood four menacing mortuary guards, armed with large wooden clubs. At the sight of the high priest they immediately threw themselves to the ground without a word. Hetepaten walked past them into the mortuary chamber.

The gate was followed by a long corridor which led into a large, very wide but not very high room. The light of a torch that was only glowing allowed a view of a dark sarcophagus that stood abandoned in the middle. Hetepaten did not disturb the darkness any further. Slowly he stepped in front of the coffin and knelt down devoutly.

These were the mortal remains of Sechimi, a mortuary priest and a long-time professional companion, to whom Hetepaten owed much. Sechimi and his wife Netjeret had been ordered to the kingdom of Osiris, when they unfortunately came into the territory of a hippopotamus mother, who considered them a threat. In Egypt more people died from raging hippos than from crocodiles, so the two of them had no chance.

Hetepaten had Sechimi hew out a magnificent, small grave in the rocky valley near the grave of the last Pharaoh, where his faithful friend was to be buried in a few days. Silently he now remembered his companion in the deep mortuary chamber of his mighty temple.

The haze of the night would not disperse over Thebes that day. Junatonef, the son of Hetepaten, followed the same path as his father, walking the sandy way from the Amun temple complex towards the Gempaaten. When he wanted to walk

through the pylon, two soldiers, their clubs in position, stood in front of him. Junatonef faltered.

“Junatonef.” he hissed unkindly at them, “by the life of Aten!”

Now the guards recognized the son of the high priest and immediately threw themselves humbly to the ground. Junatonef passed them angrily and entered the temple. He was of average build, dressed in a precious loincloth. But the precious loincloth could not hide its mediocrity.

One day he was to inherit his father’s office, but how could that work if not even the palace guards knew him. One of his brothers could beat him to it. Unthinkable for Junatonef. So he walked through the temple with some fake majestic behavior.

For him, the new office of the father meant promising professional opportunities. And when Hetepaten called him into the Gempaaten, he did not have to think about his decision for long, gave up his prestigious job in the city administration and became a temple priest.

Junatonef strutted through the long corridor towards the mortuary chamber and when he saw the guards there, he puffed up a little more. Thanks to Aten, they recognized him and let him pass.

Junatonef quietly entered the mortuary chamber, his eyes wandered through the room, but in the darkness he could only see the faint outlines of the sarcophagus in the middle. He reached for one of the oil lamps that were always ready at the entrance and lit it on a glowing torch. Slowly the wick caught fire.

Junatonef stepped forward and saw a dark shadow on the floor in front of the coffin. As he walked on, the outlines of a human being slowly began to emerge. The shape became more and more distinct. Then the blood in his veins froze. In front of him, his father lay on the ground in the middle of a

huge pool of blood. A medium-sized sickle sword protruded from his chest.

“Father!” he cried excitedly. “By the kingdom of Amun, father!”

He ran to Hetepaten, tapping into the pool of blood, shaking his lifeless body. Then he ran, leaving blood-red footprints, back to the gate of the mortuary chamber, “Quick, by the life of Aten, quick help!”

The guards reacted immediately and stormed armed with torches into the mortuary chamber to Junatonef, which was now fully illuminated.

“What happened here, tell me what happened here, you unfortunates, what happened?” cried Junatonef desperately.

The four guards stood rooted to the floor, looking around in panic, in the mortuary chamber. But only the dead Hetepaten lay in front of the coffin. Otherwise the room, which had only one exit, was empty. And next to the hand of the high priest on a papyrus in precise and perfect hieroglyphic writing:

„I HAVE SEEN THE REALITY AND SWEAR FROM THE ATEN. AMUN IS THE TRUE GOD OF THEBES. SO THAT OSIRIS MAY LET ME ENTER HIS KINGDOM, I HAVE TURNED THE SWORD ON MYSELF. BECAUSE WHO DOES MAAT IS FREE FROM INJUSTICE. I, HETEPATEN, ETERNAL SERVANT OF ALMIGHTY AMUN.”

Chapter One

Like a golden disc, the sun rose softly over the city, driving away the fog that slowly dissipated. Thebes in year four of the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep IV. The most powerful metropolis in the world. The Nile, the lifeline of Egyptian culture, divided the city into two halves. Thebes-west on one side, monumental temples and palaces. Thebes-east on the other side. Next to the magnificent Luxor temple, the real center was further north: the temple district of Amun, the all-god, who has ruled this area since a long, long time, was the leading temple district for the whole of Egypt.

Around the temple, life pulsed in the dusty streets and in the countless adobe houses of the priests and servants. About eighty thousand people worked for the sacred district of Amun, and thousands of priests performed their duties daily. Thebes, the focus of an unrestricted world power.

But just as the Nile divided the city in two, the new young Pharaoh also divided the metropolis in two. His god was not Amun, but the sun god Aten, to whom he had a new residence built a few hundred meters east of the Amun temple: The Gempaaten. A monstrous provocation.

Right next to the huge Amun temple a row of two-storey brick houses rose. On the ground floor were the rooms of the scribe school. An atmosphere of calm and concentration was in the air. About 50 scribes were engaged in their high-precision craft.

In a small adjoining room sat a young woman at work. Her name: Mutnedjmet. She nimbly dunked the sharpened writing brush into her water bowl, stroked over the colour chart of the palette and drew the hieroglyphics on the papyrus with unerring and meticulous strokes.

A woman scribe was not unusual in Egypt. Almost all professional careers were open to the female sex. But to find this woman in a writing school was not commonplace. Because this woman was the sister of the wife of the almighty ruler of Egypt. The sister of the queen. The sister of Nefertiti.

“Well, any news yet?”

Mutnedjmet turned around and recognized Thutmose. Thutmose was a kind of artistic all-rounder, actually a sculptor, he also taught at the school for writers. For Mutnedjmet he was more than a teacher, a fatherly friend.

“Not yet. But she cannot say no again,” replied Mutnedjmet.

“For some people, marriage turns out to be a torture,” Thutmose said.

“Not for those who must fight for it as hard as I have.”

“As a member of the royal house, you have your obligations.”

“Sometimes I wish I was a simple scribe and didn’t have a royal mother-in-law to meddle in my marital affairs.”

“Believe me, even simple people have mothers-in-law who interfere with things. Even when they are not the mothers of the Pharaoh. Besides, the venerable Tiye, may she live forever, allows you a lot of freedom.”

Mutnedjmet was a clever woman. She was not only interested in jewellery and clothes, like most of her peers, she wanted to learn everything about the world. Reading the hieroglyphics gave her access to a new and exciting knowledge beyond the protected palace walls where she had spent a good part of her sheltered childhood.

All members of the royal family and all high officials in Egypt attached great importance to learning to read and write. The queen’s sister had a private tutor, of course, but this was not enough for Mutnedjmet. She wanted to get to know real life and insisted on attending a school for writers.

In all important temples of the country there were such training centres. For many centuries they were elitist institutions for higher officials.

But for some time the clergy discovered how to make good money with writing. Anyone who could afford it had his relatives mummified after their death and bedded in a more or less magnificent sarcophagus in the realm of the dead. But what the tomb and the mummy could not afford to miss on their journey to the afterlife was: a book of the dead.

So the priesthood trained hundreds of scribes and copyists, who produced thousands of books of the dead in laborious precision work. There were books of the dead in the most diverse designs. Richly decorated, with figures and colorful detail work, individually designed. Or rather simpler versions, in which a few lines were left blank at the beginning, into which names and some personal sentences about the deceased were then written afterwards. Mass production.

Especially in the Amun temple there were spiritual marketing experts who knew exactly how much a book of the dead consecrated by Amun was in demand. And so they had different versions produced. Tailored to the individual purse.

Many talented writers were needed, and so it came about that slowly even Egyptians from the lower social classes were able to enjoy such an education.

And it was precisely this mixture in the writing school that fascinated Mutnedjmet. People from all social classes, experiencing the pulsating life of the population, not only shielded in the golden cage of the royal palace.

Basically an impossibility for a woman of her position. But Mutnedjmet had to accept a great privation for political reasons. On average Egyptian women were married at a very young age and gave birth to their first child also at this age. An absolute necessity, since the average age of even the upper

classes was thirty-five years. For Mutnedjmet, the suitable marriage tactics had not yet been found, and so the influential Tiye, mother of the incumbent Pharaoh, granted her great desire to the waiting young woman, who saw all the young people around her with their heart-warming children and was becoming increasingly saddened by her own fate: Mutnedjmet was allowed to attend the school of scribes. Anonymously, of course. Only Thutmose knew her identity there and had the royal order to watch over the young woman.

But today, everything was to change. Horemhab, a young officer who had already served under the old Pharaoh, had been to the palace to obtain a marriage license for himself and Mutnedjmet. Not for the first time. He had already twice been turned down by the queen's mother-in-law, who had the decisive word for such matters. But now, after a decisive promotion to a high position on the staff of Amenhotep the young couple thought they had a good chance of getting a successful decision. Impatiently, Mutnedjmet was expecting news at any moment.

“So, who was able to solve the task I prepared for you yesterday?” Thutmose asked and unfolded a long piece of papyrus on one of the deep stone tables. Some students stood up and came immediately to the table. Mutnedjmet also stood up and walked to her teacher with interest.

“Well, what was it about?” Thutmose asked.

“We are to copy this old book of the dead for some big shot,” said one of the students.

“The big guy is an important harem official of the old royal palace,” Thutmose taught, “he gave us this papyrus with the order to make a copy for the grave of his venerable uncle. He said that it was a valuable unique specimen, since it dates from the twentieth year of the reign of Pharaoh Senusret I. - in the kingdom of Osiris he should live forever. My question to you

now was: Is it really a book of the dead from the old times around Senusret I. or just a cheap modern forgery?”

“Well, it really looks old,” said another student, pointing to the torn out edge of the papyrus. The teacher’s gaze revealed that this was not a particularly intelligent remark.

“What do you think...Mutnedjmet?” Thutmose asked.

Mutnedjmet slowly stepped to the unfolded papyrus, knelt down at the table and stroked it with her hand. “Now, as far as I know, entire books of the dead were not made at the time of Senusret I. If it were real, it would probably be one of the most outstanding unique copies of all. In the possession of a harem master? That is unusual.”

Thutmose’s eyebrow twitched thoughtfully upwards.

“Not easy,” she said. Then Mutnedjmet pointed to a column of hieroglyphics, “here the sentence - ...on the throne of Osiris... - irritates me a little. Especially the orthography of the word *throne*:



At the time of Senusret I. the word throne would have been spelled quite differently:



This here is a clearly new spelling, as we have been using it for only a few years. Therefore, the book of the dead can under no circumstances date back to the time of Senusret I.”

She looked up at Thutmose, “this is clearly the work of a forger.”

“Excellent!” praised Thutmose, “the young men in this room take the young woman as an example to follow. It is a fake. And what are we going to do with this fake?”

“We will fulfill the wish of the big guy and copy the papyrus without difficulty, because it will offer a rich sacrifice in real

silver to the temple of Amun,” replied one of the students glibly. General smiling.

“I see that knowledge of scripture, as so often, brings with it a deeper knowledge of life,” Thutmose said.

“Congratulations to the great scribe,” it sounded from the door.

Mutnedjmet and Thutmose turned to the entrance and saw Ay standing there. Mutnedjmet immediately ran to him to embrace him.

“I have raised a clever child,” Ay said.

“I agree,” Thutmose replied, “the young lady is our pride and joy.”

“To recognize a forged papyrus is no big deal,” Mutnedjmet said modestly, “is there any news yet? I can hardly wait.”

Ay’s face darkened a little, “Come on, let’s walk.”

Ay was Mutnedjmet’s adoptive father, whom she had taken completely into her heart. He and his wife Tey could not have children and had taken Mutnedjmet and Nefertiti in when their father, a high noble official from the northern Mitannian Empire, was probably killed by Hittite mercenaries. Mutnedjmet’s biological father had studied for a short time in Thebes and became Ay’s good friend at that time. Why her biological mother finally gave her two daughters, who were still kids at that time, into the care of Ay and his wife after the death of her husband, had never been completely comprehensible. Perhaps she thought that there were better future prospects for her children in the mighty Egypt. But perhaps there was also a lot of money involved. No one knew or wanted to know. But she was never seen again.

Ay and Tey raised the two girls like their own children, they were the sunshine of their lives. And they carefully planned their future.

The high point in Ay's life was when Nefertiti was married to Amenhotep and thus became queen. Through this move Ay became the closest advisor to the royal house.

He always tried to treat his two adopted daughters equally and so he was infinitely sorry that Mutnedjmet's previous wishes had not yet been fulfilled. But Horemhab was his adversary, a competitor who wanted to gain influence by marrying his daughter. At least that was how Ay saw it.

Ay and Mutnedjmet walked a little further, along the holy pond, which was next to the school of scribes. The young woman's face darkened, she suspected nothing good.

"Well, look, believe me, it's hard for me to tell you ...," Ay said hesitantly.

"She *did not* agree to the marriage contract."

"The venerable Tiye is still not quite sure about Horemhab."

"She just doesn't like him. You don't like him either."

Ay fell silent. Mutnedjmet stopped. "...you don't like him because he was promoted, because he became your *competitor*. *That's* why you won't allow me to be happy."

"That's not true. Believe me. It's not right. But have you ever asked yourself what Horemhab's real intentions are?"

"He *loves* me! He told me I am his lotus blossom, a thousand rays of sunlight that illuminates his life every day."

Ay looked glum, "the venerable Tiye thinks that he wants to extend his influence by marriage and that this is not in the interest of the royal house at the moment. I'm not saying it is, but are you really sure about him?"

"You simply don't want my love."

"But of course we'll grant you your happiness. Nothing in the world is more important to me than seeing you happy."

Immediately he sat down on the stone steps on the bank of the holy pond.

“Nefertiti was allowed to marry. She has been married for four years and already has two wonderful daughters. My older sister has *always* been preferred to me.”

“You know that’s not true Mutnedjmet, but are you really sure about Horemhab’s true character? Won’t you examine him more closely, put him to the test to find out the real him?”

“I don’t want to test him. I want final approval of my marriage contract.”

“Well. I can’t really help you there right now.” Ay embraced Mutnedjmet, who looked at her reflection in the murky pond of the Amun Temple.

“I was called to the Gempaaten,” Ay said, “there was an important event. I’m sorry, I must go now. But don’t be afraid, a solution will be found.”

He rose and went on his way. But it was obvious to him that the misfortune of his daughter had deeply affected him.

Chapter Two

“I have recognized reality and swear from the Aten. Hetepaten is said to have written this. Never! I can’t believe it,” Ay shouted angrily.

“A dark cloud of deep sorrow surrounds me,” said Amenhotep, “the high priest of the Gempaaten in a pool of blood in the holy halls. He was killed by the deadly thrust of a sickle sword. How could he do this to us, how could he do this to himself. I am deeply saddened.”

The morning sun penetrated the royal palace near the Gempaaten. The Pharaoh Amenhotep IV sat in the large audience hall on his artistically carved throne decorated with gold leaf, which was clearly raised by a brick structure. The room was lavishly furnished with precious objects. Valuable statues, limestone reliefs on which the god Aten was represented as a shining sun disk. Underneath them were carved the images of Amenhotep and his wife, paying homage to the new god. The will to power of the youthful new Pharaoh was clearly noticeable. Like many of his predecessors, he had already ascended the throne at a very young age. It was now the fourth year of his tenure.

In front of the exalted throne Ay crouched on a low chair. Before him, the papyrus of Hetepaten. A few meters further on, the Syrian Dudu and foreign policy advisor to the Pharaoh, nervously paced up and down.

“I can’t imagine that,” said Dudu, “Hetepaten is said to have turned a sickle sword against himself! I cannot imagine that, my all-encompassing ruler. It was him who wanted to take a new spiritual path. He was the one who advised us all to do so. Who was in the lead in building the Gempaaten. And it is the High Priest of the Aten who should renounce the Aten! In

writing on a papyrus! And then to judge himself with a sickle sword. We are to believe that?”

Dudu had been appointed by Ay to the new team of advisers around the Pharaoh. Before that he had been active in distant Syria in the administration of the Egyptian provinces there. Ay and Dudu had met each other when Ay was still travelling the provinces in the services of the last Pharaoh. He appreciated Dudu as an outstanding analyst and pragmatic thinker. Now Ay had been promoted under the new Pharaoh to the superintendent of the royal horses and thus to general of the cavalry. He recommended to the new king to bring Dudu to Thebes as an adviser.

“Dear Dudu,” said Amenhotep, “you are really an excellent foreign policy tactician, but you know little about spiritual things. The logic of the gods is not the logic of men, and we must submit to a sign of the Aten.”

“Venerable ruler,” Dudu replied, “but there is no possibility that Hetepaten was forcibly transported to the afterlife. ...by those who do not welcome your reforms?”

“I agree with Dudu,” Ay interjected, “suicide is out of the question for me.”

“What other explanation than a spiritual one is there for this act?” said Amenhotep. “Death befell Hetepaten in the temple mortuary chamber, which is only accessible through a single gate. The room was guarded by four soldiers. No one but Hetepaten was inside. So who but himself could have plunged the sword into his chest. I personally convinced myself of the fact. It was obviously a clear sign of the Aten. He had chosen the course of events in such a way that there was no doubt about his will.”

“Who knows, maybe the guardians killed him,” Dudu said.

“The guards were Hetepaten’s trusted men, hand-picked by him,” Amenhotep almost had to defend himself.

“Impossible is nothing,” Ay said, obviously not convinced by this theory either.

“What about Hetepaten’s son Junatonef,” said Dudu, “he found him after all. Perhaps he not only found him, but also sent him straight to the afterlife. He always wanted to inherit his father’s job as soon as possible.”

“Well,” said Amenhotep, “the soldiers unanimously stated that Junatonef was dressed only in a loincloth when he entered the chamber. He could never have hidden a sickle sword in it.”

“Perhaps he had hidden the sickle sword in the chamber,” Dudu said and cornered the Pharaoh.

“I agree with you, venerable Pharaoh,” Ay defused the situation, “that Junatonef is said to have killed his father, I don’t think so. But above all, Hetepaten’s suicide note would be counterproductive. The end of Aten would also mean the end of Junatonef’s influence. But I agree with Dudu. It stinks to high heaven!”

“Already my father followed the dream of god Aten,” said Amenhotep, “but always in close communion with the other gods. Perhaps I should not have ignored my mother’s warning. I acted against the traditions of Thebes. And now I am not sure whether this was right. Perhaps we should reconsider our path?”

“All-wise Pharaoh, you will live forever,” Dudu interjected, “I implore you, your path is the right one. Think of the provinces and cities beyond Lower Egypt. For generations the people there have been treated like stepchildren. They thirst for a ruler who will stand up for them. Do you want to leave the power to the old families of Thebes again, who become more and more immobile, richer, fatter and limit your influence. To the clergy, who have not even allowed you to appoint a high priest of your choice after your accession to the throne. You are exactly the right person to carry out the long

needed changes of the kingdom. god Aten thirsts for it, as do the Egyptian people. You are the divine messenger. You are the new ruler of Egypt. Do not be diverted from your path by deceptive signs!”

Amenhotep was moved by Dudu’s speech, his eyes wandered to Ay.

“Dudu has spoken a proper word,” Ay said. “My Pharaoh. You certainly don’t want to be again number two behind the high priests of Amun. You are the only divine being. Now is your chance to prove it. We stand by your side, you can be sure of that.”

“So what do you suggest?” Amenhotep asked.

“We need to investigate the case very carefully,” said Ay, “we need a clever, intelligent spirit to bring light into the darkness of the events in the Gempaaten. Let me try to follow a path, then you will see that your way was the right one.”

“Above all, we must be careful that the Thebes people don’t get wind of this,” Dudu said, “If the Amun priesthood learns of the suicide of the Aten high priest, we will have big problems. Especially when they get notice of this papyrus.”

“Well, dear Dudu,” Ay said, “I hardly think we can keep the passing of the high priest to ourselves. After all, Hetepaten’s deputies belong to the Thebes people. I’m sure they’ve already been told.”

“Then the forty days of funeral celebrations will become hell for us,” Dudu objected, “every single day of the funeral ceremony of Hetepaten will tighten the rope around our necks.

“We absolutely have to shorten the funeral ceremony,” Ay said, “quick action is the most important thing now. My Pharaoh, I implore you, you must now show that you are the divine. The decisions you make now must show the Egyptian people that you are the voice of Aten. Only you!”

The young Pharaoh leaned back into his throne. His gaze wandered over the mighty statues and columns of the audience hall and caught the stone relief of the Aten's bright sun. Amenhotep eyes were shining. And there he was sure. He did not want to let go of the power over Egypt.

Chapter Three

Mutnedjmet sat in her spacious room in the west wing of the royal palace on the low, elaborately carved bed and stared out the window. It was already late in the morning, but today she had not gone to scribe school as she usually did every day. The pain about the decision of her family was too deep. She felt left alone by her relatives and repressed.

Meanwhile she got up and strolled to the window. She looked out into the atrium, in which there was a water basin in which fish swam through the clear cool water. Soft, pleasant light fell through her window, but nothing could brighten the young woman's mood. Mutnedjmet had tried everything to free herself, but she was locked up in the golden cage of the palace.

There was a knock at the door.

"Yes," said Mutnedjmet.

The door opened slowly and Ay looked inside. He put on a lovingly mischievous face, which he had always used to amuse Mutnedjmet when she was little and often sat sulking in the nursery. But Mutnedjmet did not let himself be won over. She turned away from her adoptive father and looked again at the clear water pool.

"So, how are you today? Have you gotten over it a little?" Ay asked.

No answer. Ay walked up to Mutnedjmet, wanted to lay his hand on her shoulder to comfort her, but then didn't dare. For the first time he seemed to really notice that the little child had long since become a young woman who wanted to go her own way.

"What do you want," said Mutnedjmet.

"You mustn't blame me for the decision of the mother of the Pharaoh. You will always have an ally in me, I promise. But

you have no choice now but to accept her decision. Even if we all dislike it.”

“I’m sure you’ll like the decision very much.”

“I admit that I am of the opinion that the present time for a wedding between Horemhab and you is not the happiest. In the final analysis, I have only your best interests at heart. If you persist, you will not be denied a wedding. Let me give you a little tip. Being the queen’s sister has many advantages other people don’t have. But there are also some disadvantages that you must accept.”

“Have you come to tell me that?” Mutnedjmet replied.

“You’ve seen right through me,” Ay said. “No, I came for another reason as well. There was a terrible event in the Gempaaten yesterday. Hetepaten, the high priest of Aten is dead.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

“Yes, I’m sorry, too. He was one of our most loyal companions.”

“Well, I hardly knew him. I had little to do with the Gempaaten, as you know.”

“I am sorry to burden you with this, but I wanted to ask your advice on this matter and ask you to keep what I am telling you now only for yourself and not to tell anyone else. Do I have your word?”

“What’s this about?”

“Do I have your word?”

“Of course you do.”

“Hetepaten lay in the mortuary chamber of the Gempaaten yesterday, dead with a sickle sword in his chest. Next to him was a papyrus on which he had written his parting words. In it he renounces god Aten and says that the belief of Aten was a great mistake.” Ay’s gaze fixed on Mutnedjmet and never let

her out of his sight for a second. Her reaction was decisive for him.

“That’s terrible,” she said. “He stabbed himself? For what reason do you say? Because he abjured Aten? He himself had the Gempaaten built. It seems a bit mysterious to me.”

There was a brief flash of light in Ay’s eyes. “Well, you’re not the only one who feels that way about it,” he said, “but the thing is very mysterious, I agree with you. The mortuary chamber was guarded by four soldiers when Hetepaten entered it. It has only one entrance and no one but Hetepaten was in the room when he was found dead. Somehow the whole thing doesn’t make sense logically.”

“Very mysterious,” repeated Mutnedjmet.

“You will now guess why I am telling you all this,” Ay said. “Tonight the Pharaoh had a dream, which he has just shared with me in his audience room. Hetepaten appeared to the almighty Pharaoh in this dream and asked me, Ay, to act as an advisor around his journey to the kingdom of Osiris. Of course I will comply with this request - to help a good friend to start his journey into the hereafter. It seems to me of utmost importance to bring the true circumstances of his death to light. For this reason, dear Mutnedjmet, as mortuary priestess, I ask you to make the funeral arrangements for the venerable Hetepaten.”

“Why me of all people?”

“Because you are a child of great and keen intellect.”

“You’re trying to distract me with flattering words, as usual. But this time you will not succeed. I don’t know what you’re up to, but I know my heart has other worries at the moment. Why should I of all people be able to help you? I’ve always stood by you, but now I think you need to find someone else.”

Mutnedjmet strolled back to her bed and sat down. She pretended to ignore Ay. He turned to the window and looked out.

Her adoptive father had a perfect command of using other people for his purposes. The goal of all his efforts was to gain more and more power and everyone had to submit to this goal. But this time Mutnedjmet wanted to go a different way. Of that she was sure.

Ay looked out of the window.

“Evil forces have conspired against us,” he said, “forces that want to create their own truths. The vision of the Pharaoh is another. There can be only one correct vision of good and evil. So justice can be done to all people. Only this will please the great god Aten.”

* * *

Bright knocking noises resounded at the edge of the city. A sunny day. In the sculptor’s workshop of Tuthmosis there was as always busy activity. A dozen of assistants were busy chiseling statues from stone blocks, making wood and stone sarcophagi. With highest concentration and precision they sawed, hammered and engraved hieroglyphic signs into the finished stones.

It was a large area that belonged to the workshop, with several adobe buildings at ground level, where some of the accounting and sales staff also did their work. In the centre there was a cheerful cooing: a small dovecote, the hobby of Thutmose. Sculpture was a good business in Egypt, there was a great demand and Thutmose was constantly expanding his business.

The teaching position at the temple’s own school for scribes served exclusively for his image, because his stonemasonry company was making enough profit so that by now he could

count himself among the wealthy middle class of Thebes. In addition, he liked being a teacher and enjoyed his work.

On this day a new large block of white limestone was laid on some wooden blocks next to the main house. Several stonemason's assistants were working at the same time to carve the colossus, which weighed tons. They had gone to their work in great haste, and Thutmose himself stood beside them and supervised the work.

Then Mutnedjmet strolled along the path, her subdued mood reflected in her expressionless gaze. Thutmose noticed her immediately, "Greetings Mutnedjmet, why weren't you at writing school today? It is not like you to be absent from your favourite pastime."

"I am sorry. I have other worries at the moment," replied Mutnedjmet.

Thutmose looked at Mutnedjmet sadly, "I know all about it, I can guess how you feel now."

"It just sucks."

"Believe me, the day will come when your wishes will come true. You just have to be patient."

"I doubt by now that that day will ever come."

Both looked wordlessly at the monumental limestone block, which was undergoing heavy processing.

"A new job?" asked Mutnedjmet.

"A particularly urgent commission," replied Thutmose, "A sarcophagus for a very high personality who was ordered to the kingdom of Osiris. A mission of the highest priority."

"Let me guess: Hetepaten."

Thutmose looked at Mutnedjmet in surprise, "I thought it was secret..."

"Nonsense, the whole palace is already talking about it. It's hard to keep a dead high priest a secret. Well, it has caused a great deal of controversy. You shall hastily hew a sarcophagus

and I shall become Hetepaten's mortuary priestess. But not with me."

"Who says so?"

"The Pharaoh had a dream. I get no wishes, but I'm supposed to do everything immediately when he has a dream."

"When the Pharaoh dreams, there is a reason, dear Mutnedjmet. A dream of The Pharaoh is a decree that cannot be wiped off the table so easily. This has been the case for centuries. You're very young to understand. Great care must be taken, no one can ignore a dream of the Pharaoh."

"Well, he didn't mean me directly. It was Ay's idea for me to take over the task."

Thutmose leaned thoughtfully against a stone block lying in the sand. Brooding, he looked at Mutnedjmet, "Look Mutnedjmet, you must try to look behind the scenes a little. Hetepaten was one of the most influential men of certain groups Ay belongs to. If they want to use you as Hetepaten's death priestess, I'm sure they have their reasons. Don't you think so?"

"That may be so, but I've already declined. The royal house does not fulfill my wishes, so I have no reason to fulfill the wishes of the royal house. I'm supposed to meet with the Pharaoh today, but I won't go. Nefertiti shall excuse me."

"Think, dear child, before you make hasty decisions," said Thutmose, "Ay no longer belongs to the priesthood, so he has no access to the temple, in contrast to you, when you are appointed a mortuary priestess. At the same time you work as a scribe for the Amun temple. Ay obviously wants to entrust a person of his trust with you with a very specific matter. A person who would also have to accept the Amun priesthood."

"It is clear to me that Ay is up to something profound, otherwise it wouldn't be Ay. But this time I shall stand firm. I

won't let myself be used for everything. I am not a will-less being."

"Well, that's what I would suggest to the Pharaoh. *You* want to marry, *he* wants a mortuary priestess. That can be arranged. Wouldn't it inspire your will if you could negotiate a marriage license in return for your services?"

Mutnedjmet became apparent, "this could be."

"Then speak to the divine Amenhotep. I am sure you can get a little closer to your goals."

Mutnedjmet's depressed mood was gone in one fell swoop. A glimmer of hope had risen on the horizon.

* * *

"There you are." it suddenly sounded dull from a distance.

Thutmose looked up, "I think someone wants to speak to you," he said to Mutnedjmet.

Mutnedjmet looked in the direction of the voice. Horemhab stomped waving along the sandy path towards the stonemason's workshop, holding one hand over his face to avoid being blinded by the sun.

"Horemhab!" cried Mutnedjmet and ran to him.

Thutmose watched them both and then turned back to his stonemasons. When Mutnedjmet reached her lover, she embraced him. But his face remained expressionless.

"I've only just been told," he said.

"Tiye refused, I know," said Mutnedjmet, "maybe I'll find another way."

"I am glad that you think so positively, my beloved, but I must confess to you that I no longer have great hopes. They are conspiring against us. No one wants our union but you and I. I fear we will not get what we want."

Horemhab was a strong young man and the dream of Mutnedjmet. A great future was foretold him in the king's

forces. He had introduced himself to her during a royal ceremony, which made a big impression on Mutnedjmet. Since then, she had been courted by him. He made her feel special, not always number two after Nefertiti. Horemhab reminded her subconsciously of her beloved adoptive father Ay. He too strove for power and influence, was a skilful tactician and strategist. With him she wanted to found a family. He would protect her, for her he was security for a common future.

Mutnedjmet snuggled up to him, “Let’s forget the others and think only of ourselves.”

“I think about you all the time, but the inner pain I feel is unbearable, because I know that our happiness will never be a reality.”

“We can’t even think about that.”

Horemhab pulled a small golden pendant with chain from a bag and held it around Mutdnejemet’s neck.

“For me?” she asked with pleasure.

“So that we may always remember us in our thoughts,” Horemhab said.

Mutnedjmet’s gaze darkened slowly.

“I thought about it,” Horemhab said, “you are my greatest love, but as I said before, a love that only we both want. Every morning I wake up with my thoughts of you and every night you wander through my dreams. Like a glowing dagger, pain rushes through my chest every time I think of our happiness never being fulfilled.”

“Don’t say that.”

“I am sorry, my lotus flower,” Horemhab said melancholy, “but we must make a decision so as not to make ourselves unhappy. Our love makes no sense. It is better if we do not see each other anymore. Otherwise the pain in our hearts will become unbearable.”

Mutnedjmet was thunderstruck. Her face all white, she stuttered, “but I don’t understand...we mustn’t let it get us down. Our wishes will come true, I firmly believe that now, more than ever before...”

Horemhab looked to the ground, then stroked her hair tenderly. Slowly the embrace of the two parted, Horemhab turned away from his beloved and walked sadly along the path. Mutnedjmet stood shocked, alone and abandoned in front of the stonemason’s workshop. She could not yet believe what had happened. Just as the knocking of the stonemasons drowned out the scene, she could feel the pounding of her heart in her temples. Tense, she held the pendant in her hand. She had to act, she now knew that.

Chapter Four

It had already become late afternoon. Immediately Mutnedjmet marched through the royal palace towards the rooms of the Pharaoh. The closer one came to the king's audience chamber, the more the rooms smelled of incense. A scent with which only the clergy was normally surrounded.

Mutnedjmet saw Amenhotep usually only very rarely. She had never seen him in person before, his social status was too high. In the early days of Egypt the Pharaoh was a god in person, today he was seen as a human being, but as one who was closer to the divine than anyone else.

Mutnedjmet's stomach started to churn, for now she not only met the Almighty personally for the first time, but also wanted to conduct skilful tactical negotiations. She was suddenly afraid to forget everything she had set her mind to. How would Amenhotep react to her request?

Mutnedjmet arrived in front of the audience hall. Although the entire royal palace was splendidly furnished, the royal chambers were going far beyond this. They were high, imposing rooms with many richly decorated columns. The power of the goddess was clearly noticeable through the mere architecture. One of the masters of ceremonies directed her to a gold leafed waiting bench. Immediately Mutnedjmet sat down.

She had heard about the Pharaoh mainly through her sister. Nefertiti had already born two daughters to Amenhotep and Mutnedjmet was often engaged as a playmate for them. Mainly at her own request she had taken her two little nieces into her heart. Nefertiti rarely told her sister about her marriage, but the Pharaoh was supposedly a very sensitive person. Sometimes a bit hot-headed, especially when it came to new political ideas, but otherwise a wife could hardly complain

about him. Moreover, Ameophis was younger than Nefertiti, which was not detrimental to her influence.

It was time. The gate to the entrance of the audience hall was opened. Mutnedjmet rose and went on her mission. When she entered the mighty room, she saw the Pharaoh in the distance, surrounded by some guards and servants. Mutnedjmet approached, but Amenhotep, who sat on his throne, did not seem to notice her. Rather, he was enjoying some Mediterranean citrus fruits, which stood on a side table him. He casually spat the seeds on the limestone floor in front of him, brightly lit by the sun.

Thin incense passed through the light, which made the hall appear gilded. None of the servants present dared to look directly at the Pharaoh, as if he did not even exist.

Mutnedjmet was in the presence of the divine Pharaoh, the ruler of Egypt, the most powerful man in the world.

Suddenly Amenhotep noticed the young woman. “Oh, Mutnedjmet, sister of the most glorious queen, I am glad that we finally have the chance to talk.”

Mutnedjmet immediately threw himself to the ground.

“Come here,” said Amenhotep.

Mutnedjmet moved closer to the Pharaoh.

“The venerable Ay has already told me a lot about you. That you are a child with a very sharp mind. I like people with sharp minds.”

“Thank you my almighty ruler,” Mutnedjmet looked up and looked at Amenhotep for the first time closely. Well, he was very young and by no means a beauty. His nose was too long, his chin very straight, the high royal crown on his head intensified this effect. But Mutnedjmet hardly had time to think about his appearance.

“I understand you wish me to consecrate you as mortuary priestess, so that you may prepare the way of our venerable Hetepaten to the kingdom of Osiris.”

“Oh my almighty Pharaoh,” said Mutnedjmet, “you shall live forever, I would so much like to help the venerable Hetepaten. In fact, as you just said, it would be my greatest wish, but I’m afraid I’m not up to the task.”

“What makes you think you’re not fit for this role? Ay disagrees completely.”

“I am too weak, omniscient Pharaoh. My soul and my heart are too weak for this responsible task. I would collapse under the weight and inevitably fail. My beloved Horemhab has tried several times to support my weak heart, but he is not allowed to do so. So I beg you, my Master, do not ask me to do a task I cannot manage.”

Amenhotep’s eyebrows lifted a little. “Well, Ay already warned me that you’re a rather strong-willed woman. A woman of sharp and wilful mind. But that’s exactly what we need for our purpose.”

“My ruler. Nothing I would like to do more than to fulfill your wish, but it would be a shame to refuse a task. But I know that you have the divine opportunity to strengthen my heart. Surely I could try to accomplish the mission if I had that chance. Only god can see the reality and you are the closest to it. Egypt pays homage to you. You have acknowledged Aten as the highest, you have always tried to see the truth.”

Amenhotep rose almost angrily, “I have not only *tried* to recognize the truth, I have *already* recognized the truth!”

Mutnedjmet lowered her gaze to the ground. Had she gone too far?

“But many others refuse to see the truth,” he said harshly, “I will lead Egypt into a new age, that is my mission. A mission I

have received from the almighty Aten, who speaks through me.”

He turned to Mutnedjmet, “When will the sun rise? Mutnedjmet. Tell me.”

Mutnedjmet looked at him in disbelief, then said hesitantly, “in the *morning* almighty Pharaoh?”

“In the *morning* the sun will rise,” said Amenhotep, “in all of Egypt and not only in Egypt, everywhere it is so. That is the truth. In Upper and Lower Egypt, the sun rises at dawn every day, for all to see. There can be only one truth, Mutnedjmet. And therefore only one god. No one in my kingdom shall lift his gods above Aten. This shall last for all eternity. For the Pharaoh, for the vizier, for every farmer in every field. And above all, for the priesthood.”

Mutnedjmet was spellbound when Amenhotep spoke so fervently as a quivering volcano spewing fiery clouds.

The king sat down again.

“Horemhab,” he said. “You want to marry him, the venerable queen mother, Tiye, told me. But she thinks this is not wise. Ay also agreed with this opinion. Well. Horemhab is a good general, they say.”

“There can be only one truth,” said Mutnedjmet, “Aten will know it. My heart feels much stronger already, because of your explanations. Give Horemhab and me a chance, if I fulfil my task to your satisfaction. I ask you for it.”

“All right, Mutnedjmet. If you do your duty well, I will approve your marriage contract to Haramhab. And no one will be able to dissuade me. Visit Ptahmose today and inform him of your assignment.”

Mutnedjmet looked at Amenhotep a little unbelievably.

“The Amun priesthood has long been known,” he said, “and it was to be expected. You’ll get an audition with Ptahmose. I’ve arranged it. But beware of him. Inform him of

your assignment, but say no more. You are answerable only to Ay and me.”

“As you command, almighty.”

Amenhotep stood in front of Mutnedjmet, took crossier and flagellum in his hands, holding them parallel to each other. A master of ceremonies hurried up and put a sash, which would henceforth identify her as the priestess of the dead, to Mutnedjmet’s chest. The young woman knelt down.

Amenhotep said, “Aten hereby appoints you as the mortuary priestess of the Gempaaten. That you may prove yourself worthy of this task.”

* * *

It was not unusual in Egypt to hold the office of a priest for some time. There were hundreds of part-time priests who served one of four months and took turns. Because the pay was poor, especially in rural areas. The mortuary priesthood was mainly performed by women. “Recipients of the soul” they were called, their sensitive handling of the mourners was appreciated.

However, priestesses were mainly active in the field of ritual and not in clerical administration. Because in the administration sat the power, and the control over gold and silver. This sector was reserved for powerful family clans. And so there were two classes of priests: the influential and the non-influential.

Mutnedjmet’s new position was to appear harmless. And the highest clerical administrator of Amun had to be convinced of this.

It had already become late afternoon. The sun was setting and it was foreseeable that the light would soon disappear behind the mountains above the rock valleys.

The huge complex of the Amun, limited by a wall, was entered by Mutnedjmet. Although she walked this path daily, the massive temple caused her some discomfort today. Mutnedjmet entered the building through a side portal.

She told the main temple guard her name. Surprisingly, this immediately caused a courteous hecticness among the servants. She had been announced from the highest authority and she was expected from the highest authority. An important servant of the priesthood showed her the way.

They passed through the portico, crossed the central courtyard and entered the chambers of the high priesthood. Mutnedjmet seemed as if with each step she took, the columns became more powerful and the rooms became darker.

Suddenly, the servant stopped in front of a small gate and pointed Mutnedjmet in with a gesture of his hand. The young woman pushed aside the door curtain and entered the room. Gloomy, a bit stiff, like a musty bear's den that smelled of danger. In a corner next to the window, a slightly older little man sat on a chair. On the walls, high shelves with countless old papyrus scrolls. He rose immediately and came towards Mutnedjmet.

“Oh, one of our best writers is paying me a visit,” he said.

Mutnedjmet immediately threw herself to the floor. This was Ptahmose the almighty high priest, it shot through her head in disbelief. This was not how she had imagined one of the most influential men in Thebes. No pomp, no golden statuettes, no raised throne. In his hand Ptahmose held a cup of dark beer, which he stirred with a wooden stick.

“Arise, my child,” he said, “come - see.”

Ptahmose went to a high birdcage where some doves were sitting and did not make a sound. Immediately she got up slowly and followed the high priest. He dipped the wooden stick into the dark beer and then held it between the bars of

the cage with the doves. The birds began to lick eagerly at the broth.

“I alone know what they like,” Ptahmose said, “I don’t know where that comes from. Now tell me, you have been given a special assignment, I was told.”

“Yes, venerable Ptahmose. I have been commissioned as mortuary priestess to prepare the way of the venerable Hetepaten to the hereafter.”

“I heard about his death. It hit us all hard to hear that. It is all the more gratifying that a member of the Amun Temple will take over the mortuary priesthood.”

“Yes, it’s a great honor for me.”

“For us too, my child. For us too. I hear you’re an excellent writer. So says your teacher. What path do you plan for your future?”

“I don’t know, venerable,” Mutnedjmet replied with restraint.

“A young woman from the royal family who voluntarily attends a public writing school,” Ptahmose said. “That is rare. Life in the royal palace is certainly a very pompous one. But is it also challenging?”

“I don’t want to complain,” said Mutnedjmet with her eyes lowered.

“Well, the Amun Temple offers everything to please a young aspiring heart. We always need clever employees. And when I say employees, I mean people who know how to lead. Above all, it is important to us to win priests with spiritual experience for important offices. After your debut as mortuary priestess you will be a much requested force in the clerical circle of friends of our temple.”

“If you think so,” Mutnedjmet replied in a controlled manner.

“What awaits you in the king’s kingdom? A subordinate role. We here at the Amun temple have for thousands of years ensured the welfare of the country.”

Ptahmose placed his hand trustingly fatherly on the young woman’s shoulders. “To belong to us is to have great influence. To know that all wishes will be fulfilled. Especially for a young woman of the royal family. You would no longer be dependent on the decisions of the royal house.”

Mutnedjmet could hardly think straight. The high priest, the highest administrative officer of the country, head of over eighty thousand people, spoke to her in a trustworthy tone, which she never expected. The whole thing threw her more than a little out of sorts. A little flattered by the generous career prospects, Mutnedjmet presented herself factually.

“I am honored that you see in me such an excellent member of the temple,” she said, “I will try to fulfill all my duties to your complete satisfaction.”

“I am told that at the death of our esteemed Hetepaten, divine powers were at work,” said Ptahmose, “what do you know about that?”

“To observe this more closely should perhaps be one of my tasks,” Mutnedjmet heard himself say carelessly.

“Never challenge the gods!” Ptahmose replied in a hard voice. “You are not yet among the chosen ones. Only they are able to recognize the revelation. The truth is very complex in its nature. Never question things the gods have sent us. The change of the world is only allowed by the gods, man must renounce it!”

“Of course venerable Ptahmose, this is also my opinion,” said Mutnedjmet.

The high priest’s manner confused her, for she vacillated between familiarity and toughness, between openness and authority. But one thing was clear: Ptahmose did not want any

change. For centuries, everything had followed its predetermined path. The Amun priesthood had extended its power far and movement was the very last thing it wanted.

“You must proceed with caution,” Ptahmose suddenly said in a silken voice. “If the death of Hetepaten was brought about by the gods, we will accept this. No one will ask a question. But if his death was wanted in this world, then the matter must be approached with much diplomacy. Always keep me up to date. The door to me is always open for you. I, too, have the highest interest in the mysterious events. If they are not divine but profane, the entire clergy is in great danger.”

“I will keep you informed of everything, venerable Ptahmose.”

“But if it was the will of Aten that Hetepaten should be departed from this world, so be it.”

“Yes, then it shall be so,” said Mutnedjmet, “I will follow your guidelines.”

When Mutnedjmet emerged from this more than ambivalent meeting with her high priest, his intention was clear to her: On the one hand, he did not want to allow any innovation of the system. On the other hand, there might have been an assassin skulking within the temple walls of Thebes. And Ptahmose might be next. He was all about playing it safe. But above all, he was about power.

* * *

Mutnedjmet had left the Amun Temple and had gone to the Gempaaten, the place of the mysterious death. She now had to get to the bottom of the matter, make up her own mind. And this was best done directly at the site of the event. Next to her was Amunsetep, the second priest of Aten and deputy of the dead Hetepaten.

“It is a great honour for us that the almighty Pharaoh has chosen you, the sister of his wife, for the office of the mortuary priest,” said Amunsetep.

“I thank you for these words, but at the same time I ask you to pay no further attention to my background. Please see in me only a simple mortuary priestess,” replied Mutnedjmet.

“As you please,” Amunsetep replied.

“When did you discover the dead Hetepaten?”

“It’s hard to tell now,” said Amunsetep. “I was informed a while after Junatonefs find and then I came straight here. It was a terrible sight. It robs me of my sleep to this day.”

Amunsetep was a fearful man. Not a leader, that was obvious. And that was certainly the reason why Hetepaten had accepted him as his deputy. Amunsetep would never have ever had the ambition to become his follower. And so Hetepaten could be sure that his high priesthood would have been passed down in the following generations within his own family.

The two of them arrived at the mortuary chamber. Amunsetep commanded two guards, who immediately lit some torches to illuminate the room. Then the guards left the chamber again. Mutnedjmet and Amunsetep stood alone on the cold sandstone floor. Mutnedjmet’s gaze wandered through the room. The wooden sarcophagus of Sechimi still stood there. On the floor in front of it, in the yellowish torchlight, a dark rust-brown spot shone, like a dull witness to the terrible.

“Did it happen here?” asked Mutnedjmet.

“It did,” replied Amunsetep.

“Tell me everything you can remember.”

“A sickle sword protruded from his chest. What misfortune. His clothes, drenched in blood. He wanted to pay his last respects to his friend, then the wrath of Aten struck him. He had so sacrificed himself, built a temple for his god. But how it

should be and how it will be, was written down by the ancestors. No one must question this.”

“And no one else was in the room at the time of Hetepaten’s death?”

“So it was reported. There were four guards outside the chamber who testified to this with their lives,” said Amunsetep.

Mutnedjmet crept slowly, like a fox, thoughtfully around the sarcophagus.

“Only one entrance,” said Mutnedjmet brooding, “and four guards. How long had the guards been standing there?”

“Ever since the sarcophagus was delivered. They watch over the soul of the deceased, so that he can pass unhindered into the kingdom of Osiris.”

“How long had Sechimi and the sarcophagus been in here?”

“He was taken a few hours before sunset. Shortly after mummification was completed.”

“So the day before. Who carried out the mummification?”

“Imuit the mummy master. As with all members of our temple.”

More and more thoughtful Mutnedjmet circled the sarcophagus.

“Open the sarcophagus!”

Amunsetep was shocked, “Oh no, I can’t do that. Opening a closed coffin could prevent the deceased from passing into the kingdom of Osiris. A burial chamber must never be opened.”

“Is this a burial chamber?”

“No,” Amunsetep admitted, taken by surprise.

“Where is his burial chamber?”

“In the great place in the rocky valley, of course.”

“Exactly. Open the sarcophagus. I am commissioned by Amenhotep, the next of Aten, he shall live forever. I take full responsibility.”

She looked coolly at Amunsetep.

“On your responsibility” he said, turning around and calling two of the guards.

“Open the sarcophagus.” he ordered them.

They stood at the foot and head of the coffin and lifted the heavy wooden lid. Slowly the mummy of Sechimi became visible. The linen sheets in which he was wrapped smelled of fresh resin, a smell that now began to spread throughout the chamber.

Sechimi, like the dead Hetepaten, had been of middle-class descent, which did not make the way to the top of Egyptian society impossible, but it did not make it easier. As a young man, Hetepaten narrowly escaped the intrigues of the Amun priesthood by taking the blame for him out of pure friendship. Sechimi’s career had come to an end, he had ended his existence as a simple mortuary priest.

Amunsetep stared spellbound at the body. As soon as she stepped closer, she stroked her hand along the wooden edge of the sarkophagus. It was a coffin built exactly to the measurements of the deceased. All sides and also the lid lay close to the mummy. Thus the wooden shrine also reflected the figure of the deceased on the outside. An individually manufactured masterpiece, which could only come from the workshop of a Thutmose.

“Is good,” said Mutnedjmet.

The guards closed the coffin again and left the room. Mutnedjmet strolled up and down, “So the sarcophagus was brought here, then the mummy of Sechimi was put inside. The chamber has only one entrance and this was constantly occupied by four guards. Later Hetepaten came in and shortly afterwards his son found him stabbed to death on the floor. No one else was in the room.”

“You are looking for a mundane explanation for what happened. But there is none. It happened just as you described

it. Hetepaten's death was spiritual. Do not doubt the signs of Aten."

"I think you are right," said Mutnedjmet, "my thoughts lead nowhere. I should now carry out my duties as mortuary priestess and prepare Hetepaten's way to the kingdom of Osiris."

"This will please the gods," Amunsetep agreed.

He was already on his way out when Mutnedjmet asked, "What do you know of the Papyrus?"

"The one on which Hetepaten wrote down the last will of Aten."

"Exactly that. Where is it located?"

"I don't know exactly."

Mutnedjmet looked at him in disbelief.

"It's in custody, in safe keeping."

"I want to see it."

"I don't know if that's possible right now. I'll ask and try to locate it."

"I must insist. Go ahead and get your acceptance."

Amunsetep left the chamber. Immediately he leaned against the Sarkophagus. The torches had already burned down a little. The light became gloomy.

On the one hand, the king demanded a thorough investigation of the events. As a reward, she was promised marriage to Horemhab. On the other side was Ptahmose and the priesthood. They strove for as little change as possible. But where was Mutnedjmet. She had to decide. But could not a decision be made in the interest of all involved? A compromise? Was it really so important to chase after the truth when it was obvious? As Amunsetep had said: Do not doubt the signs of Aten.

Chapter Five

The next morning Mutnedjmet stomped along the sandy path in the south of Thebes. Past the sparse dwellings of the lower officials. Their destination: the mummy master's workplace. This was the first station of their mortuary priesthood. She had to accompany all important rituals on the way of Hetepaten to the kingdom of the god Osiris, the ruler at the judgment of the dead in the hereafter. First there was the mummification of his mortal remains. Until now Mutnedjmet had only heard about this process. For few were allowed to witness the embalming. The place of work of Imuit, the mummy master, was located outside of the city. Isolated, like another world, in contrast to the pulsating life of Thebes.

A somewhat uncomfortable feeling lay in the pit of Mutnedjmet's stomach as she walked the lonely path in this deserted area. Normally the queen's sister was rarely left alone, outside of the city she would have been accompanied by an army of guards. But her new mission required her to remain incognito. How else would she get people to talk to her about confidential matters.

When Imuit's refuge came into view, Mutnedjmet began to suspect why his workplace was outside the city. Loud squeaking and howling could be heard. Obviously of animal origin. *Hopefully*, Mutnedjmet thought. High, thick wooden fences could be seen around the unusually placed, approximately twenty-five cabin-like buildings. Behind them, Mutnedjmet was able to spot hyenas. A slightly sweetish musty smell could be detected as Mutnedjmet walked through the open gate towards the main barracks. Did the animals stink, or was it the embalmed bodies? The young woman did not even want to think about it. She entered the ground-floor house.

Some men and women were working in it. They cut linen sheets, stirred liquids, sharpened unusual looking metal blades.

“I am the mortuary priestess of the venerable high priest Hetepaten,” said Mutnedjmet. She was briefly noticed, then an older man stepped in front of her.

“Let’s go,” he said, “we have no time to lose. My name is Imuit. I am the boss here.”

Without noticing Mutnedjmet, he walked past her towards one of the barracks. Mutnedjmet followed him. The hut-like shelters had only curtains on the doors, and so the young woman, every time she passed an entrance, passed through a resinous, musty-smelling wall of scent. But even before she could think about it or get sick, Imuit said, “Should it be a super-express treatment, eh?”

“I don’t quite understand,” Mutnedjmet replied somewhat distracted.

“Mummification in ten days. That’s only possible with Imuit,” he said.

“Look, you must understand, this is my first ritual as a mortuary priestess. I hardly know anything about it yet. Also concerning my exact tasks. But I thought you might be able to help me a little.”

Imuit stopped, “why didn’t you say that right away?” His eyes began to shine. “You’ve never been to a mummification site?”

Mutnedjmet denied.

“Care for a tour?”

“Yes,” said Mutnedjmet and did not really know whether she should be happy about it or not.

“Well,” said Imuit, who suddenly blossomed with pride, “you are in one of the most exquisite mummification places in Thebes. Not that my competitors didn’t also do an excellent job. No, they do excellent work. But here with me, we almost

exclusively treat the deceased from the priesthood and royalty. Amun, Aten and so on. You understand. There is a reason for that. We do our best work, and have done so for generations. My grandfather had already embalmed Pharaoh Thutmose IV, he should live forever in the kingdom of Osiris.”

Mutnedjmet tried to look particularly impressed.

“We understand our guild,” Imuit continued. “So, the deceased are delivered and then immediately treated in the main building.”

He pointed to one of the ground-floor houses, “but you’ll see for yourself in a moment. Then the bodies are laid out here. If you will follow me, please.”

Imuit pulled aside the curtain of the entrance of one of the shelters and Mutnedjmet followed him into the building. An almost unbearable mixture of extreme heat and stench came towards her, almost threatening to kill her. Dozens of bodies, apparently wrapped in linen sacks, were piled on wooden planks, one on top of the other, left and right. Some of the sacks were wet, from some liquid dripped down into one of the many wooden containers that stood around everywhere.

“The bodies are then stored here in natron,” Imuit continued, “that draws liquid from the mortal remains. Otherwise they would *rot*,” a smile fluttered across his lips - obviously a mummy-master joke.

But Mutnedjmet was in no joking mood, her face was bleached out. Of course, Imuit had not missed this and he continued with his explanations eagerly.

“So and this,” Imuit walked through another curtain, “is our drying room.”

Dozens of corpses, this time not wrapped in sacks, were laid out on wooden grates. The skin dried out, discoloured pale, the chest opened by an incision. Mutnedjmet tried not to look.

An aura emanated from the bodies, which seemed to crush the young woman. Imuit was in his element.

“Here, the bodies are dried out, it happens very quickly in *this* heat. Drying usually takes about forty days. Then the deceased still have to be prepared.”

The two went on through a small atrium, where it was a little cooler and Mutnedjmet wiped the sweat from her forehead. The relaxation lasted only a short time, because immediately afterwards they entered the dissection room.

“This is the heart of our business,” Imuit said.

A number of employees were busy filling bodies with sand and resin-soaked linen rags.

“This is where we make sure that the deceased are given a tidy appearance for their afterlife. The bodies are filled, anointed and wrapped in linen bandages. Nothing is precious enough for us. We have the best resin and the most fragrant myrrh brought in from far away.”

Some mortuary priests attended the mummifications and watched with Argus eyes over the fact that the precious amulets and jewellery, which were given to the dead into the life beyond, were really included in the wrappings of the linen bandages. Imuit and Mutnedjmet passed them by and it was clear to Mutnedjmet that the mummy master’s guidance had taken a lot out of her and that even the most fragrant oils were not able to improve their emotional state.

“We have a new priestess in our team,” Imuit explained, “she does this for the *first time* today!”

A restrained grin was noticeable in some of those present.

“All right, now let’s get down to business: Hetepaten.” Imuit continued.

They walked around the drying areas, back to the station house. All around, fences with caged hyenas.

“And the hyenas, what’s their job?” asked Mutnedjmet.

“Just a sideline,” replied Imuit, “we supply the city with the best hyena meat in Thebes. My breeding is known far down the Nile.”

Hyena meat was considered a delicacy in Egypt, although Mutnedjmet had never tempted it before. She didn't know that the animals were kept in whole farms.

They came into the mortuary. There he lay on a simple wooden frame: *Hetepaten*.

The dead high priest had been at the height of his power. For many years he had tried to rise within the hierarchies of the Amun priesthood, but the influential Thebes lobby had ensured that priests close to the king did not get far. So Hetepaten had to settle for the mediocre position of a “god the Father Priest”. By a clever political move this had changed. Hetepaten and his confidants had managed to persuade the young, somewhat hot-headed Pharaoh to build his own temple. And Hetepaten, as a close advisor to the Pharaoh, had been appointed the new high priest.

His dream had come true. Hetepaten had risen to become one of the most important priests at the head of Egypt and thus one of the most influential men in the world. But now he was dead.

Immediately the body was slowly approaching. His eyes were closed, his mouth slightly open, he still wore an apron, and there was a wide gash on his chest. Next to it lay a sickle sword about an arm long.

“Is this the sword?” asked Mutnedjmet.

“Yes,” Imuit said, “no one wanted it, so we took it right away.”

“You picked up the dead man?”

“Part of our job.”

“Was anything else changed in him?”

“No, we brought him here as he was.”

A servant came with several bags of natron and salts, filled the silvery substances into a large wooden vessel and began to stir them.

“My special mixture. A secret formula,” Imuit explained, “because of the express treatment.”

Mutnedjmet did not understand.

“The royal house seems to be in a particular hurry with Hetepaten,” Imuit said, “the funeral is to take place in ten days already. I must shorten the forty days’ drying to ten days. A technique that only we have mastered.”

“This is supposed to work?”

“A special bicarbonate of soda mixture. My father wrote the recipe. *Secret*. You understand.”

“Of course,” said Mutnedjmet.

“Good, then we will begin.”

Imuit took a small hammer and a chisel. The servant knelt to the head of Hetepaten. He held Hetepaten’s head with his hands. Then Imuit pushed the iron into Hetepaten’s nose and punched a hole into the inside of his skull. A short cracking sound.

The feeling of nausea crept back into Mutnedjmet’s maw pit. “What do I have to do?” the sentence was more of an escape than a question.

“Nothing at all,” said Imuit, “the task of the mortuary priest is to supervise the mummification. He looked at Mutnedjmet,” so, best sit down.”

Mutnedjmet sat down on one of the wooden chairs. Then Imuit pushed a long iron hook through the dead man’s nose deep into the back of his head.

“We have to get the brain out first,” he said, “because that’s where decay sets in first.”

He started to turn the hook slowly, then faster and faster to whisk the brain into a mass. In between he pulled the hook

out, poured an oily liquid from a thin long bottle through the nose into the back of the head and continued whisking.

“Beautiful, wonderful meat,” Imuit said. “My hyenas are really of the highest quality. We supply them all. The high priest of Amun himself. It all comes with the feeding. And the exercise. They can run around our place. Not an ounce of fat. Guaranteed.”

Mutnedjmet was speechless. Now Imuit and his assistant turned Hetepaten’s body around, pushed his head a little over the edge of the table. Under it a vessel. Slowly the brain mass, which had almost liquefied by the addition of the oil, began to drip from the nose into the vessel. To speed it up, the servant helped with a long thin wooden stick.

“Hyena tastes best roasted, that’s my opinion,” Imuit said, “fresh and crispy on a skewer. If you add a few pieces of pomegranates and marinate the meat in sweet date paste beforehand, the taste is unsurpassable.”

Mutnedjmet tried to smile friendly, but - she did not succeed.

“What I don’t like at all is boiled hyena meat,” said Imuit, “perhaps cut into small pieces or even stirred into a pomegranate soup. Although. Given the quality of our animals, even this would be extremely tasty.”

Hetepaten’s body was turned upwards again. Imuit took a sharp knife in his hand, his assistant came with a large wooden trough and sat down next to it.

The mummy master cut open the chest of the corpse. A skilful, long, quick cut. Then he reached into the body with both hands and began to remove the organs. Stomach, liver, lungs, were the first thing Imuit operated from the chest and put into an extra vessel. The heart was next.

Mutnedjmet felt that she could use a little distraction now. “They also mummified Sechimi, I was told.”

“Yes,” Imuit replied, “Sechimi and his wife. Only recently. A hippo had flattened them. Really bad luck.”

“Did you personally place his mummy in the sarcophagus?”

“I did. Of course! Sechimi was one of Hetepaten’s best friends.”

“And immediately afterwards the coffin was taken to the mortuary of the Gempaaten?”

“No, the sarcophagus was already there. We just put Sechimi in and put the lid on. Like we always do.”

“Of course. There were four guards outside the mortuary chamber. Is that right?”

“Yes. It’s common practice. But only with higher personalities. The guards ensure the dead man is undisturbed to prepare for goddess Maat. But why do you care?”

“Because Sechimi was a best friend of Hetepaten. To best guide his way into the kingdom of Osiris, I want to prepare myself well.”

“I have told you that the care of all temples is exclusively in our hands.”

The intestines were the last thing Imuit removed. An assistant immediately began to empty the bowels of their contents.

“You like your work,” said Mutnedjmet.

“As mortuary priestess you should get used to it. Watching this is part of your daily job. You just have to see it from a professional point of view. I even mummified my own father. It’s simply a matter of doing your job as well as you can.”

“After all, you contribute a lot to the survival of the dead in the hereafter,” Mutnedjmet wanted to encourage Imuit.

“You believe in that? I have seen some graves that have been reopened after decades or centuries. No one has ever risen from the sarcophagus after his death. But they were perfectly mummified, at least when done by professionals.”

Imuit began to fill the chest with the special mixture of sodium bicarbonate.

“So you don’t believe in eternal survival?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Of course I believe in it,” Imuit replied, “after all, I work for the priesthood. But I also believe that everyone can see the truth if he wants to. What do you think the truth looks like?”

“I say to myself, if the gods know the truth, why search for it?”

“Exactly.” said Imuit. “Let’s not search, let’s just do a good job,” and kept on stuffing the baking soda into the body.

Chapter Six

It was a thick bank of fog that Thebes buried that night. A quiet night. At first sight. Because in the temple of Amun there was a lot of activity. A quickly convened ritual, which was to change the inner balance of this young woman, who had recently started her unpleasant, for some threatening investigations, for a long time.

The next day there was no trace of the meaningful night. When Mutnedjmet awoke, she was surprised at her excellent sleep. After her experiences of the previous day, she had already expected something else. It had become a little chilly that morning. As the young woman walked to the window, she saw some dark storm clouds which slowly moved over the mountains. Immediately she strolled into the neighbouring antechamber, where the servants had already prepared fresh fruit and egg drinks for her, as they did every day at this time. She sat down. When she saw the pomegranates, she inevitably thought of crispy hyena meat. She would never touch this delicacy again. She nibbled listlessly at some sycamore figs and sipped some date juice.

“It looks like a thunderstorm,” said a voice behind Mutnedjmet. She turned around and recognized Nefertiti. Mutnedjmet rose immediately and ran to the queen and embraced her.

“What an honor it is to have the almighty queen visit me in my apartments.”

There were also certain hierarchies between the siblings in the upper classes of Egypt, and so it was rather unusual for the older sister to find her way to the younger one and not vice versa.

Nefertiti was everything Mutnedjmet could wish for. She was married, had two delightful children. The queen was a very

beautiful woman. She was of slender, delicate figure, dark eyes, wavy black hair, which she often shaved off since she wore the high royal crown. Mutnedjmet felt herself to be the exact opposite, much too childlike, the “baby fat,” as everyone called it, on her thighs and hips, did not want to disappear. Even her sister’s breasts were larger and more well-formed than her own, but thanks to Aten, Horemhab didn’t care for big breasts.

The relationship with Nefertiti was a hearty one, but also cool, because Mutnedjmet always saw in her a great example. Her sister enjoyed this and always made Mutnedjmet feel that she herself was a little better, especially since she was queen.

“How are you,” said Mutnedjmet, “Sit down.”

Nefertiti sat down, but her face was serious.

“What’s on your mind,” Mutnedjmet asked, “you look so different from usual.”

“You may not know it yet, but last night there was an important event. The Amun priesthood called the Oracle. The Oracle was consulted on the death of the high priest of the Gempaaten.”

“I’m a mortuary priestess, working for the venerable Hetepaten.”

“I know.”

“What did the Oracle say?”

“You must know, the Oracle doesn’t say much. Rather, it answers the questions it is asked. It was particularly willing to answer the questions of the Amun priesthood.”

Mutnedjmet did not quite understand, but she was getting concerned.

“The Oracle concluded that it was a great achievement of Hetepaten to work for the building of the new temple of Aten. However, by taking his own life, Hetepaten had incurred great guilt. Cowardice is what the Oracle called it. So the Oracle had questioned Maat, the goddess of truth. She tests

the dead in the afterlife. The heart of the deceased is weighed against Maat. Only then is he granted entrance into the kingdom of the dead. Or not.”

Mutnedjmet still did not understand what Nefertiti was getting at.

Nefertiti continued: “Maat would refuse him admission because of his cowardice, the Oracle said. Hetepaten would be damned forever and could not live on after his death. But there is a way out: If a good friend would intercede for him. And the Oracle determined that Ay must be that good friend.”

“But that’s wonderful.” said Mutnedjmet. “I’m sure Ay will do it.”

“Well, you know the dead man doesn’t consult the maat’s scale until he’s in the sealed burial chamber. And a closed grave must never be opened again.”

Mutnedjmet did not understand or did not want to understand. Nefertiti looked deep into her eyes. “Ay our father will be walled up in the burial chamber with Hetepaten. And he will die there.”

“What? Why? I don’t understand. Why?” Mutnedjmet was completely confused.

“Officially, this is a very great honour for Ay. To help a high priest on his way to the afterlife. Assisting a dear friend.”

“And unofficially.”

“Well, as I said before, the Oracle always answers the questions of the Amun priesthood especially willingly. There is some opinion that Ay’s idea of entrusting you with the investigation of Hetepaten’s death may have led to the Oracle’s decision.”

“I will complete my research immediately. I am resigning the priesthood of the dead. Anyway, I couldn’t find anything unusual about Hetepaten’s death. It looks like, he must have

jammed the sickle sword into his own chest. There's no reason to doubt it."

"I think you still don't understand, dear sister. The Oracle saying is a clever tactical move to get rid of a political opponent. Ay has sided with the Pharaoh, he is a danger to the power of the priesthood."

"Then the Pharaoh must do something about it. Talk to him. He is all-powerful. He will never tolerate our father's death."

"As I told you before, this is a very clever maneuver. The Pharaoh is not above Aten, the almighty god. Aten spoke when Hetepaten passed away and Amenhotep acknowledged this as the truth when he consecrated you as the mortuary priestess. Ay must absolutely follow the Oracle's saying and Amenhotep must not do anything against it, otherwise he would stand against Aten."

"I don't understand, something must be done!"

"The only hope is you."

"Me?"

"If it could be proved that Hetepaten died a profane death, that is, without the intervention of Aten, the Pharaoh could annul the Oracle's sentence."

"If Hetepaten had been killed, Ay would have been saved?"

"It's all up to you now, dear sister. In ten days Hetepaten will be buried near the great place in the rocky valley and Ay will accompany him. So it has been decided. Our only hope is you."

"But how can I do that?"

"I can only trust your keen mind. You've always were a clever and smart girl. Weren't you the one who found out we were adopted when we were young?"

"But I have already investigated the case. There is nothing to indicate that it was murdered."

“Even in our childhood, you always took your eyes off things when things got difficult for you. But why had our birth mother given us away? For me this question was secondary, we grew up in a good home, were loved by our new parents. But I know that question has always bothered you, and I wondered why you never wanted to find the truth.”

“For the same reason you did. One need not always seek the truth.”

“Not always, that’s true, but sometimes you have to find the truth. You have to make a decision now. Don’t run away to your family, as you often do when it gets too dangerous. Because it’s your family now. You have to face reality.”

“But how?” asked Mutnedjmet desperately, “four guards, a chamber with no exit, Hetepaten *must* have rammed the sword into his own chest!”

“Hetepaten built a temple to Aten. Why would Aten turn against him?”

“It’s not logical.”

Nefertiti looked her sister in the eyes, “I have never been accepted in Egypt. We come from the Kingdom of Mitanni. To the priesthood, I am a stranger unworthy of my position. You are the only one who accepts Ptahmose. You have a certain trust among the Amun priests. Re-examine the case. There must be inconsistencies, or our father will die. It is all up to you. You have ten days.”

“That’s too short. The first thing we need to do is extend the funeral arrangements to the usual 40 days, better longer than that.”

“Too late. The Amun priesthood has already been informed. The Oracle said ten days and no more.”

Nefertiti got up, walked to the door and turned around once more, “we count on you. You’re our only chance.” Then she left the room.

Mutnedjmet sat more lonely and deserted than ever before in front of the jug of sweet date juice. But it was suddenly impossible for her to take even a sip of the tasty drink.

With a big, threatening step, the assurance entered her consciousness that there were only ten days left until the burial of Hetepaten. Her mind had already grasped it logically, but emotionally it was still incomprehensible to her. Her over-all beloved adoptive father was to be sacrificed? It was difficult for her to realize this. They wanted to bury Ay alive in a grave? And it would be *her* responsibility to prevent this? No, that couldn't be true, the family would make up for it, as they had always done in Mutnedjmet's previous life. Or not? Was it her fault? Because of her office? Was everything in her hands? Now suddenly?

The brief twitch of a bright flash briefly lit up the room. The thunderstorm had now completely covered Thebes. Dark and threatening. A storm raged through the streets and whirled up dense dust that stood like a haze over the city.

Chapter Seven

Mutnedjmet threw on a cape. She left the royal palace. The house of Ay was her destination. The sandstorm made her progress extremely difficult, but for the young woman that was only a minor matter. More steadfast than ever before, she fought the biting wind.

Ay's house was located near the royal palace. The closer one lived to the royal palace, the higher one stood in the hierarchy of Egypt. In former times, when Mutnedjmet and Nefertiti were still children, the family lived a little outside the city.

Ay always attached importance to a well-kept home and privileges. So for years it annoyed him that his house was at the end of the morning tour of the water carrier, the water was only delivered around noon and was already lukewarm. Such problems no longer existed.

When Nefertiti became queen, Ay moved into a spacious and very centrally located estate. Many works of art and antiques from the ancient times of Egypt were on display in the rooms, underlining his status. Those who had influence also showed this.

Mutnedjmet kept her cape close to her body to avoid being completely penetrated by sand. She arrived at the house of Ay and knocked at the gate. After knocking again one of the servants opened. She walked through the living rooms and in one of the columned rooms she met Ay's wife Tey who was arranging some antique clay jugs on a chest of drawers.

"Mother." greeted Mutnedjmet Tey and the two of them embraced. Tey's glance revealed to Mutnedjmet that she too had already been informed about the tragedy.

"I'm terribly sorry about what happened," said Mutnedjmet, "but we'll do something about it."

“god Aten has brought us no happiness. I had the right feeling from the beginning. Who deals too much with the gods will reap misfortune.”

“Maybe you’re right, Mother.”

“I don’t know what to do without him,” Tey said, while she began to arrange the clay pots further. Apparently she needed this routine work to distract herself. “We were finally a happy family now, after all these years many of our wishes have come true. And now this.”

Tey was a kind woman. She had always cared for the family and the welfare of the others. Politics was not one of her interests and so it hit her all the more as politics was now to destroy her whole life. It was also Tey who pushed for the adoption of Nefertiti and Mutnedjmet when it became certain that Tey and Ay could not have children of their own. Tey himself was also an orphan and had been adopted by a noble family.

So it always filled her with great pride that her two adopted children were doing so well. People around her who needed her love this is what Tey needed just like the air she breathed. But now all this was to be destroyed just with one strike.

“Things will work out for the best,” Mutnedjmet tried to encourage her mother a little. But she didn’t know if she really wanted to believe her own words. And she felt even more strongly than before the responsibility on her shoulders.

Then Ay entered the room, Mutnedjmet ran to him to embrace him.

“Is everything my fault?” she asked.

“Nothing is your fault, my child. Nothing at all. If anything, it’s my fault, but I think we’re just victims of circumstances.”

“Sit down,” Tey said, “I’ll get you some drinks.”

Tey disappeared. She needed distraction.

“I have taken all the trouble and examined the case more closely,” Mutnedjmet immediately went on the offensive, “but so far I have not been able to discover anything despite the greatest care.”

“I’m sure you did. Don’t blame yourself. It’s the last thing you need to do.”

“But am *I* not the reason...”

“The reason is that the priesthood has long felt threatened in its power by me,” Ay interrupted his adopted daughter. “I do not come from a noble family. People like me have never been wanted in influential positions. People say I have no right to it. It’s only a matter of getting me out of the way and thus diminishing the power of the Pharaoh. What have you found out so far, tell me?”

“I spoke to Ptahmose, I spoke to Amunsetep, I spoke to the mummy master. No new aspect has arisen. It was only confirmed that Hetepaten must have judged himself. I’m not sure how to proceed further. Perhaps you have some advice?”

“That *how* something happened is very often clarified by the question *why* something happened. Even I have no answer, but there are some who have suffered a great loss of power.”

“The Amun Priesthood. Does it influence the decisions of the Oracle?”

“The Oracle’s decision-making process is a very complicated one. Many forces are at work, influencing its predictions.”

“What powers, for example?”

“For example, Vizier Meriptah. He was the advisor to the father of our present Pharaoh. Meriptah suffered greatly at my hands. He is always ready when there is something to be gained for him.”

Tey came back with some drinks. Mutnedjmet sipped the cup only briefly. "I will be on my way in a moment. We have no time to lose. Ten days are left, no more."

"Don't worry too much," Tey said.

"Worrying too much confuses the mind," Ay said, "and you need a clear head now. And a lot of stubbornness. But she has always been persistent, our daughter."

"Yes," that's right, Tey said.

"Do you remember when she was a little girl, always insisted on reading her every sentence of every gravestone. "And no matter how boring it was. A visit to the big place in the rocky valley could take almost forever." Ay said.

Mutnedjmet had to smile.

"I can remember it well," Tey said, "the writing became your hobby. Until today."

The situation had become a little sentimental. Each of the three tried to push away the dark future by taking refuge in good old times of the past.

Mutnedjmet said goodbye to them. "I will not disappoint you."

"You can't disappoint us at all," Ay called after her.

It seemed as if Ay had already accepted his faith. Slowly it became more and more a terrible certainty for Mutnedjmet. What sounded like a cruel nightmare had turned out to be reality. A death sentence had been passed on Ay. In a few days it should become reality. The loss of Ay would be an earthquake to the young woman's soul. A tragedy that could never be made up for and that would make her being sink just like a landslide into a yawning depth. She had to slowly accept to look a catastrophe in the eye.

When Mutnedjmet left the house of her adoptive parents and entered the sand-storm-flooded streets, her will had fallen into conflict. Had she made a contribution, was she even the

trigger for this catastrophe, even if not consciously? She had been given a responsibility which she had not the slightest idea whether she could live up to. She wanted to give everything. She was not to be spared to start her investigations all over again.

Chapter Eight

Still troubled inside, Mutnedjmet entered the Gempaaten. Again straight to the mortuary chamber. Had she missed something? She must have missed some detail. When she arrived at the gate of the mortuary chamber, some guards tried to get in her way, but they recognised from her sash that she was the mortuary priestess and let her pass.

“Get Amunsetep,” she said to one of the guards, who was quite surprised to hear such a harsh commanding tone from a young woman.

“The second high priest?” he asked, “who shall be reported to him?”

“The mortuary priestess of Hetepaten. Go ahead!”

Mutnedjmet took two of the available torches, lit them and illuminated the room. She took a closer look at the construction. They were limestone walls. The walls were still very bright, the temple was only recently built, this was clearly visible. Only the ceiling was already slightly sooty, due to the torches, which, however, were rarely enough ignited here. The walls were composed of individual limestone blocks, the spaces between them were so close together that not even a piece of the finest papyrus would have found room in between. Hardly any traces of mortar, in the tradition of the old architecture. The windowless room was about ten steps wide and thirty steps deep. It had only one entrance, which rather resembled a tunnel, about six steps long. The ceiling of the laying room was not very high, but Mutnedjmet could not reach it with her hands, even on tiptoes.

Unlike the entrance tunnel. So how could someone have entered this room unnoticed, send Hetepaten to the afterlife and then disappear again without a trace.

Mutnedjmet ran through the entrance tunnel back to the guards.

“Where is Amunsetep? Did they call him?”

“Very well. He has been informed.”

“Give me your club.”

Egyptian soldiers and security forces were traditionally equipped with wooden clubs. They consisted of a hard wooden stick about two arms long, with an oval ball about the size of a honeydew melon attached to the end. This was an extremely inexpensive but nevertheless very effective instrument. With a lot of momentum this stick turned into a deadly hammer that could easily crush any skull. To leave it to a young woman was by no means a matter of course for an Egyptian guard. He hesitated a little at first.

“I am by the Pharaoh, he shall live forever, personally commissioned,” said Mutnedjmet convincingly, grabbed the club, “I will give it right back to you,” and left the three baffled guards standing in front of the entrance.

When she entered the mortuary chamber again, Mutnedjmet immediately began to tap the wall to her left with the wooden club. A muffled sound of knocking. Apparently a massive, dense stone wall. Then she continued with the front wall and the right side wall, but always the same noise.

“What are you doing here?” suddenly a voice shouted from the entrance.

It was Amunsetep, the second priest of the Gempaaten, followed by Bakamun, the third high priest. The presence of both suggested that Mutnedjmet’s second visit had caused some unrest among the priests. A dangerous young woman had set to work, who, with a large wooden club in her hand, seemed even more threatening.

“I’ll try something,” Mutnedjmet said briefly and kept knocking.

“A secret passage?,” Amunsetep asked, “You’re looking for a secret entrance to the chamber?”

Thereupon Amunsetep and Bakamun also began to tap the walls with their fists.

“But I would be surprised if there was a secret entrance,” said Amunsetep, “for I should know about it.”

“It’s just a matter of eliminating all contingencies,” said Mutnedjmet, “I want to do my job in the best possible way.”

“Is knocking down walls part of the job of a mortuary priestess?” Amunsetep asked.

“In this case it is,” said Mutnedjmet.

When she had examined the walls without any result, Mutnedjmet looked up at the ceiling. Then she took the club and also began to tap the ceiling of the chamber step by step.

“Where have you been when Hetepaten passed away?” asked Mutnedjmet.

“Why me?” Amunsetep asked.

“Venerable Amunsetep,” said Mutnedjmet, “I have been given the task by the Pharaoh to fulfill my office as priestess to the best of my ability. I do not wish to offend you with this question, but in the fulfillment of my responsibility I have no choice but to ask you. I will put this question to everyone.”

“At a meeting,” Amunsetep said.

“You’d be a great help to me if you could tell me a little more about it. Where did this meeting take place and with whom?”

“It took place at the great Amun priest residence in the Amun district. Let me see... eight people attended the meeting. Among them Hetepaten and his son Junatonef. It was about everyday administrative matters within the Gempaaten. I will gladly call witnesses to confirm this.”

“Hetepaten was there too?,” Mutnedjmet asked. “What happened then?”

“The venerable Hetepaten left the meeting a little earlier, he wanted to pay his last respects to his friend Sechimi in the Gempaaten.”

“When did Junatonef, the son of Hetepaten, leave the meeting?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Soon after. There was another important piece of information for the next day when the Amun board of trustees met. Junatonef left the meeting and shortly after he found his dead father. Horrible!”

“What was your relationship to Hetepaten?”

“We got along exceptionally well. I owed Hetepaten a lot. We all owed him a lot,” Amunsetep Bakamun turned to him.

“That’s right,” he said, “Hetepaten was an example to us all. He had erected the temple, which not only gives us bread, but also spiritual nourishment. He will live on forever and we will think of him forever and know we are in his debt.”

The search on the ceiling of the room had also been with no result. Mutnedjmet looked down at the sandstone tiled floor. The same procedure as on the ceiling followed there as well. Poching and evenly muffled knocking noises. The two watched with interest the young woman’s somewhat mysterious investigations.

“And where were you?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Who - me?” asked Bakamun.

“Yes, you, where were you during the time Hetepaten passed away?”

“I wasn’t even here at that time.”

“Were you at that meeting of priests?”

“No, I meant I was out of town.”

“You were not in Thebes? Can anyone attest to that?”

“Yes. About a hundred people. That evening I was until late at night at a funeral ceremony at the great place in the rocky valley.”

“Who was buried?”

“A family member of venerable Chu. The high priest of Amun presided over the ceremony.”

“Ptahmose, the venerable high priest?”

“Yes. I’m sure he can confirm my presence if you don’t believe me.”

“My questions are in no way aimed at not believing them. I have only the duty to perform my office to the best of my ability. I hope you will not hold this against me.”

“No, of course not,” said Amunsetep, “we understand your motives very well.”

Mutnedjmet had now tapped the entire floor of the mortuary chamber. Without result.

“No secret passage,” said Amunsetep, “but it would have been a surprise to me.”

“May I ask you one last question before I finally finish the investigations in this room?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Go ahead,” said Amunsetep.

“Are the same soldiers always used to guard this room?”

“I’m afraid I can’t tell you that. For the temple guards the caretaker Herinebisut is responsible. Bakamun will be happy to escort you to him, where you can ask Herinebisut all your questions.”

“It’s an honor,” Bakamun said.

“Do you think you are one step closer to the truth now?” Amunsetep asked.

“I always wait until the truth approaches me,” Mutnedjmet replied, “this is my tactic.”

“Interesting.”

“Let’s go.”

The three of them left the place, where the light of the last torch slowly went out.

Mutnedjmet walked with Bakamun, the third priest of Aten, slowly through the Gempaaten. Amunsetep had already gone back to his business.

“Since when do you belong to the temple?” asked Mutnedjmet.

“The Gempaaten,” you mean?

“Yes.”

“Since his building. Already at the groundbreaking ceremony we were ordained by Amenhotep.”

“And before that?”

“Like everyone else, I was previously employed by Amun. I was there as a mortuary priest.”

Mutnedjmet was pleased, „then perhaps I can get some advice on my work from you.”

“At your service. ”

“And how am I doing?”

“I can’t say much yet, but for a mortuary priestess you act, well... *unusual*, is perhaps the best word.”

Bakamun was a nice guy. For years in the null position of a mortuary priest in the Amun Temple, his people had apparently now elevated him to a high position.

„So you are an Amun priest?” asked Mutnedjmet.

„No, since I made my promise on Aten and the Pharaoh, I have been faithfully at his service. I am proud to belong to the high priesthood of the king. I will always follow the way the gods show me. But I believe I have now found my true destiny.”

„When they introduce me to Herinebisut, just tell him I am a mortuary priestess commissioned by the Pharaoh. Nothing else about my background.”

„As you wish.”

The two of them came to the entrance of the administrative offices of Herinebisut. The position of the caretaker of a temple was a very influential one. He was responsible for all personnel matters in the servant and guard area. He managed large budget positions and was mostly a confidant of the high priest.

Bakamun announced Mutnedjmet to the servants and Herinebisut immediately invited them to his audience room.

„May I introduce to you,” said Bakamun, „the mortuary priestess of Hetepaten. She was directly entrusted with this office by Amenhotep, forever shall he live.

„It is a great pleasure to meet you,” Herinebisut bowed briefly, Mutnedjmet returned the bow immediately.

„Hetepaten was a long time companion of mine and it is very difficult for all of us here to bear the grief of his loss,” said Herinebisut.

„In order to fulfil her task in the best possible way, venerable Mutnedjmet has a few questions for you,” explained Bakamun, “I ask you to answer them comprehensively and to help her in every matter.” Then he looked at Mutnedjmet, urging her to begin the questioning.

Mutnedjmet paused briefly, then said, “Thank you, venerable Bakamun for your help. I do not wish to take up any more of your precious time.”

Bakamun stopped a little confused.

“Thank you, you can go back to your work now,” Mutnedjmet said more clearly.

„Then I won’t disturb you any further,” said Bakamun, „if you need anything, you know you can always come to me.”

In Herinebisut’s face there was a barely recognizable smile. When Bakamun had left the caretaker’s quarters, Mutnedjmet turned to Herinebisut.

“How can I help you?,” Herinebisut asked.

“You already told me about your relationship with Hetepaten. How did you meet?” she tried a harmless introductory question.

“Many years ago. At that time I was in charge of the administration of the clerical accommodations in the south of the city, Hetepaten a simple lector priest. “But I knew from the beginning that there was more to him than that. “His loss is terrible for all of us.”

“What was Hetepaten’s relationship with his two deputies?”

“Well, I don’t know if I’m the right person to ask. And I’m not allowed to answer that question.”

“You have heard what the third high priest of Aten said, you are to help me in every matter.”

“Yes, the good Bakamun,” said Herinebisut, „Hetepatens deputies were deeply indebted to him, he had enabled them to take the step into their offices. They had worked for the Amun Temple before.”

“Amunsetep and Bakamun were probably used as second and third high priests to calm *Amun* down a bit.”

“You are a perceptive young woman. But in their old jobs they had carried far less influence than they do here.”

“So you had to be grateful to Hetepaten. What was Hetepaten like as a person, were there conflicts between him and the priesthood?”

“Hetepaten was very balanced. Whoever was on his side had nothing to fear. He was very pleasant as a person.”

“Did you and Hetepaten have any conflicts?”

“No, not once in all these many years. We always have been proud of that.”

“I have a quick question about the placement of the guards inside the temple. Is that entirely your responsibility?”

“Yes, that’s right.”

“Is the mortuary always guarded by four temple guards.”

“Only if there’s a mummy inside. This is part of the ceremony. It is supposed to give the dead person the necessary peace to prepare for the entrance into the life beyond. Of course, he must be an important person to justify such an effort.”

“There are always four guards?”

“Yes, it is prescribed.”

“Is it always the same four guards guarding the mortuary?”

“No. We have several such halls within the Gempaaten. The guards are assigned as needed. Usually there are different guards every day. Mostly for organizational reasons.”

“I would like to approach you with an unusual request. Would it be possible to have a short talk with the guards who were on duty in front of the viewing room on the day when Hetepaten passed away?”

“This is indeed an unusual request for a mortuary. But of course it is possible. “I, too, immediately questioned all four guards about the incident.”

“And what was your answer?”

“The room was empty, Hetepaten entered it, shortly after Junatonef, who discovered his dead father.”

Herinebisut entered the anteroom. “Get the four guards who were with me!” he shouted to a servant.

“Two is enough,” said Mutnedjmet.

“Two!” Herinebisut gave the order.

The servant set off immediately.

“Many people feel a little offended by the important role Aten plays for the new Pharaoh. What do you think about it?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“The Pharaoh has been chosen. It has been so for thousands of years. When he receives the instructions of Aten, the people should pray to him directly. Neither high priests nor other gods shall exist between them. See, I come

from a not very wealthy family, also the family of Hetepaten was not recognized by some people for a long time. Aten is the new god of Egypt and that's right.”

A short time later the guards had come. They bowed humbly.

“This young woman is the mortuary priestess of the venerable Hetepaten, he shall live forever,” said Herinebisut, „she will ask you some questions, which you must all answer.

“At your service, great Herinebisut,” the two guards replied.

“I suppose you want to question them alone?” Herinebisut said to Mutnedjmet.

Mutnedjmet made an affirmative gesture.

“You can use my audience room, I have work to do anyway,” said Herinebisut. “I may wish you much success in your office. May you successfully guide Hetepaten on his way to eternal life beyond ours.” Then he left.

Mutnedjmet was now alone with the two guard officers. It was most unusual for them to be questioned by a priestess. They stared uncertainly at the ground.

“You were on duty at the mortuary when the tragedy happened, is that correct?”

The two could not decide immediately who should answer first.

“Please, look at me,” said Mutnedjmet, and as the guards raised their heads, she fixed one of the two. “Tell me.”

“Junatonef the son of almighty Hetepaten entered the room,” said one of the guards, “began to shout and Hetepaten was dead.

“When Junatonef entered the room, what was he carrying?”

“Nothing,” replied the same.

“What kind of clothes was he wearing?”

“A loincloth, a richly ornamented one“

“A short loincloth?”

“Yes.”

“He didn’t carry anything else, are you both sure he didn’t have a sickle sword with him?” She fixed the other one.

“Absolutely sure,” said the other one.

“The chamber was empty before, nobody was in it?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“No.”

“Had you personally convinced yourselves?”

“Yes,” said the first one, “I had lit some flares, as is customary, and put them in the holders.”

“The sickle sword was not in the room before Junatonef entered?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“I would certainly have noticed that.”

“After being alerted, did you search the mortuary chamber?”

“Yes, of course, that was the first thing we did, but there was nobody there.”

“Nobody but Hetepaten, Junatonef and yourself?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“That’s right.”

“When will the guard duty take place?” Mutnedjmet asked the second one again, “When will you know where you are on duty?”

“In the early evening. Night duties are scheduled for the early evening.”

“Mutnedjmet paced the room thoughtfully. “Thank you, you may go.”

The two were relieved, when they were allowed to leave the room. Mutnedjmet’s head rumbled, just like a thundercloud of lightning. But still she hadn’t come the slightest step closer to the solution. Either there was no explanation at all for a problem that didn’t exist, or the truth was so perfectly obscured by a dense veil of mist that Mutnedjmet was almost blindly groping around, hoping for a lucky break.

Mutnedjmet was on her way to the royal palace. From a distance she could see a team of horses in front of it. Standing in it, someone who looked familiar to her. Was it Horemhab? As she approached, it became a certainty. Her lover was waiting outside the palace. For whom? This question was resolved before Mutnedjmet could answer it, Horemhab had discovered her, waving excitedly from a distance. Mutnedjmet came closer. Horemhab jumped from the wagon, ran to her and embraced her.

“Oh, Mutnedjmet,” he said, “it struck me deeply to hear what Ay is to happen.”

On the one hand, a hug from her lover was exactly what Mutnedjmet needed now, on the other hand, it was strange that Horemhab had suddenly found *sympathy* for Ay, his constant adversary.

“I thank you for your sympathy,” said Mutnedjmet.

“I am a selfish man. I tried to give up the love between the two of us, only because I thought that the pain would be too much for me if it failed. I wasn’t thinking about you. I didn’t think about how it would make you feel. Night after night, I lie awake, thinking of you. You enrich all my dreams with your face. You must forgive me.”

“It really wasn’t easy for me. *I* would have stood by you forever.”

“I will always *also* stand by you. Especially now in these difficult times. Although my relationship with Ay is ambivalent, the decision of the Oracle is inhumane. I want to support you. If I can help you, tell me how. I don’t care if we can ever form an official marriage. Even if we are forbidden to do so. You’ll always be the lotus flower of my life.”

Although, as always, drippingly kitschy, it was like balm on her soul what Horemhab was saying. For a few moments, Mutnedjmet could forget the dreariness of her situation.

“Things are not so bad with a formal marriage,” she said, “I hadn’t really intended to tell you yet. So as not to give you and probably me false hope. But I had an audience with the Pharaoh. He asked me to take over the office of the mortuary priest for the late high priest Hetepaten.”

“I was wondering about your sash,” Horemhab said, “a priest’s sash, that is.”

“Yes,” said Mutnedjmet. “Should I perform my office with extraordinary success, Amenhotep has promised to agree to our union. Against all objections.”

Horemhab couldn’t believe it. “That’s wonderful, that’s one of the best news I’ve received in a long time. What a wonderful day!”

Then he faltered for a moment. “I’m sorry. I’d forgotten about Ay. It must be a terrible time for you. And my soul is also shrouded in gloom when I think about you.”

“Don’t burden yourself with it, let my worries be my worries,” said Mutnedjmet.

“No, I will share everything with you in good times and bad.”

Several more times Horemhab assured her of his loyalty and assistance before he said goodbye. Mutnedjmet’s feelings were clear. But were Horemhab’s feelings clear, and above all, were they clear without hidden agendas? It was *a wonderful day* for him. His adversary Ay was in distress, the Pharaoh was considering to agree to his marriage. Did Horemhab already see his victory before him? But Mutnedjmet did not want to think about that any further. He was good for her soul and she had other worries.

Chapter Nine

The sandstorm over Thebes had calmed down again. There were only seven days left until Hetepatens funeral. It seemed as if the time, which otherwise passed so leisurely, suddenly began to race at an incredible speed towards its terrible goal. As Mutnedjmet approached the Thutmose workshop, she could hear the bright knocking sounds of the stone chisels.

The sarcophagus Hetepatens had already taken shape. Slowly its final shape became more and more apparent, although it could only be guessed at until now.

Thutmose was sitting nearby at a large table, reading a papyrus, sipping a cup of clear lemonade. These were the sketches of the hieroglyphics which would later decorate the coffin.

“Work is progressing.” said Mutnedjmet.

Thutmose's expression seemed depressed when he saw the young woman. “Mutnedjmet. How are you. I heard what happened. A veritable catastrophe. I can imagine how you feel,” Thutmose said sadly.

“I still don't want to believe it, it seems like a bad nightmare.”

“I can imagine. I don't know what to say. But unfortunately it's bitter reality.”

“A reality I cannot understand. The background is not clear to me.”

“You still have too little experience with the things here in Thebes.”

“I can't understand what's behind it. What are the reasons for such a horrible decision by the Oracle? You must tell me more, about the context.”

“It's very dangerous to talk too much in this town right now.”

But who else can I turn to but my teacher?"

"A lot of dust has been stirred up lately. Recently, even Ptahmose wanted to talk with me. And that really only happens every few years. He asked me about you."

"He told me about it. What exactly did he want?"

"I was coming to see you to tell you. He asked what kind of person you were and how you were doing as a co-worker of the Amun Temple. "I've told him only the very best about you."

"It's my fault."

"For what?"

"I knew it! The reason for the Oracles decision is mine. Because of my office as mortuary priest, my research, Ay will die."

"This is complete nonsense."

"You're just saying this to make me feel better."

"Here in Thebes, for centuries it's all about interests. Egypt is a land of great contrasts and claims to power. Power and influence are decisive. Your priesthood carries very little weight."

"Then tell me about the different interests. Without understanding them, I have no chance of doing anything for Ay. I'll keep your words to myself."

Thutmose look was evasive. Mutnedjmet sat down beside her teacher. Her eyes fixed him.

A brief gust of wind attempted to blow the large papyrus off the table, but Thutmose held it in time.

"Very well," he said, „ask me your questions. I will answer them as best I can. Although that is not good."

Mutnedjmet's expression became soft again.

"Why is there this great divide between the Pharaoh and the priesthood," she asked, "why has the king built a new temple? It is hard for me to understand."

Thutmose poured Mutnedjmet a cup of lemonade.

“For centuries there have been conflicts in this country,” he said, moving a little closer to Mutnedjmet, no one else should hear, what he was going to say. “There has always been an age-old antagonism that divides our country in two. Here in Upper Egypt, the power of the land resides. The Theban Amun cult has long been the ultimate authority in Egypt. The Amun Temple is their main power center.”

“Ptahmose!”

“So it is. For some time, however, the country has been threatened by groups from the Hittite empire, bordering Lower Egypt. In order to send armies against this threat, the priesthood has always had to give its consent. But the priesthood was in a great dilemma. Because: an army in the hands of the Pharaoh and in the hands of Upper Egyptian cities could also pose a threat to their own power. On the other hand: If you do not prevent the penetration of foreign groups, you do not prevent the penetration of foreign ideas. Especially foreign religions.”

“New religions mean a loss of power of the thebetani clergy,” Mutnedjmet combined and eagerly took a sip of the clear lemonade.

“Clever head,” whispered Thutmose, proud of his pupil, “for this reason the priesthood allowed the Pharaohs to conduct campaigns and conquests in the countries beyond Lower Egypt, but in return the royal house had to deliver a large part of the booty from these campaigns to Clerus.

“The priesthood has always known how to make money.”

“Through the passing on of the priesthood, powerful family foundations have been established here in Thebes. The clergy became a great economic power. But there is also a great opposition to the traditional Thebes. On the one hand foreign allies and on the other hand high military.”

“Dudu, he’s from the provinces beyond the Kingdom of Mitanni, and Ay, he owes his career to the armed forces.”

Thutmose nodded in agreement. „And today, both are among the closest advisors to the Pharaoh. The army in particular has always been seen as a threat by the priesthood, which is why it has long enjoyed a low status.”

“And now Aten is the new god.”

“So far, Amun has been one of the most powerful gods in Egypt. Each city has its own gods and each city has an Oracle, god speaks through the Oracle. But Amun is the most important one.”

“What is the Oracle? I have heard about it and never seen it.”

“Well, how shall I describe it to you. Preferably very simply. It’s an picture of god carried around the temple on a barge on the shoulders of the high priest.”

“And how does the Oracle speak?”

“When a king is appointed, the high priest, with the Oracle on his shoulder, walks through the temple and before whomever he comes to stand, that person is the new Pharaoh.”

“In other words, he who controls the Oracle controls Egypt.”

“Who controls the Oracle of Thebes, more precisely.”

“And the Oracle of Thebes rules Amun.”

“Not quite, as we know. Already the father of the present Pharaoh tried to pay homage to another god, Amun-Re. Amun-Re no longer gave his will through the Oracle, but through a dream of the Pharaoh.”

“Now I’m beginning to understand more - the dream of the Pharaoh.”

“But no one had ever dared to do what Amenhotep IV had dared to do. After the Oracle failed to appoint the priest of his

choice as high priest, he built his own temple for his own god, Aten.”

“The Gempaaten building.”

“Right. Aten, the sun god now speaks directly through the Pharaoh, there is no Oracle of Aten, Aten stands as a god above all others, says the Pharaoh.”

“Then why did the Amun Oracle make the decision about Ay?”

“Well, the Pharaoh has his own god, but few have followed him. The city and the whole of Upper Egypt is under the centuries-old tradition of Amun. Priests, security forces, important families and town elders continue to rely on Amun.”

“The priesthood of Amun rules gold and silver.”

“And who controls this, has influence. No one can defy the Oracle of Amun. Not even the new Pharaoh with his new ideas.”

Mutnedjmet looked attentively at Thutmose. “Thank you, perhaps this knowledge will bring me a little closer to solving my problem.”

“Try not to let it affect you too much. Solutions often lie in completely different areas. Many people have different interests.”

“What do you know about vizier Meriptah. Is he affiliated with the Amun Priesthood?”

“Meriptah was long an advisor to the old Pharaoh and he was the prophet of Amun.”

“Ay has ousted him from office?”

“Many see it that way.”

“I’ll talk to him.”

“I hope you’re doing all your homework before you knock on the top door.”

Mutnedjmet got a little thoughtful, drank the cup of lemonade.

“Don’t trust your feelings so much if you want to find the truth,” Thutmose said. “Gather facts.”

“You’re absolutely right. If you let your emotions take over, you’ll go blind.”

“The gods created the world. To unravel it is our task. But the gods are tricky. They have veiled reality to protect it. The only way to get close to them is to test the world by the method of success and failure. “and keep a cool head.”

“You’re right, I must do my homework first and stay calm. Anything else will lead to nothing.”

Mutnedjmet suddenly looked Thutmose strangely in the eye: “May I ask you a question, and I beg you to answer it with the greatest honesty, without defending myself.

“I’m always honest with you, just ask.”

“What about Horemhab, what are his interests?”

Thutmose thought about it a little and then said: “It is very difficult to say what interests he has. But people say about him that he knows exactly what he wants. He has always been very clear about his goals, but he has been very good at concealing them. Perhaps the only thing that can be clearly said is the side he always stood on: it was his own side.”

Mutnedjmet did not know exactly whether she should rate this answer good or bad. But the conversation with her teacher was, as so often, a help for her. To give up Ay and thus banish her heart to an endless gloomy dungeon was not acceptable to the young woman. If she wanted to find a solution, she could not rely on her feelings, but had to trust her spirit. Collect solid facts and draw conclusions from them. This was the right way to decipher any mystery. Then everything would happen by itself.

Chapter Ten

It was a magnificent mud-brick building in the immediate vicinity of the Gempaaten. The house of the deceased Hetepaten. Mutnedjmet remembered to do her homework first. This meant that all persons who were directly connected with a possible crime had to be questioned.

Junatonef, the son of Hetepaten was perhaps a key figure. Furthermore, the high priest's family might have the greatest interest in the complete clarification of the events.

Mutnedjmet registered with the servants and was taken to a waiting room. Mighty columns decorated with hieroglyphics underlined the status of the householder. On elaborately decorated sculptures, writings told of the close relationship between Hetepaten and Anemophis IV. It was customary in Egypt to establish the hierarchies in the upper social classes at the close relationship to the Pharaoh. The high priest of Gempaaten had obviously attached great importance to this.

“Hello, I was told you were my husband's mortuary priestess,” said a somewhat muffled voice.

Mutnedjmet turned around and a woman stood before her. She was attractive, conspicuously wore her gold jewellery. The woman faltered a little as she looked at Mutnedjmet.

“I know you,” she said, „are you not the sister of the venerable queen, forever she shall live.”

“Then you are the wife of the venerable Hetepaten.”

“Queniset is my name,” she bowed a little.

“The king ordered me to supervise the death ritual „He chose me because Hetepaten was one of his dearest friends. „Let me offer you my sincere condolences on your husband's passing.”

“Thank you, it hit us all like a big blow. A truly terrible event that deeply shocked us,” Queniset said sadly, „It is a great

honor for our family that you are taking over the mortuary priesthood. Let's sit down."

The two sat down on two of the low, artistically carved wooden benches.

"A drink," shouted Queniset, and a servant in the entrance area made his way „I have heard of the most inhuman of judgments the Oracle has made concerning your father. Our family condemns this deeply. We are on the side of the Pharaoh. And on that of Aten. The Amun Oracle should not make any more decisions.

"I thank you for your sympathy."

"If our family can be of any help to you or the royal house, let us know."

"I will turn to you in this case. Actually, I wanted to talk to your son Junatonef, but it's a pleasure to meet you too."

"Junatonef will be here soon. He has already been told. You must know that Junatonef is like a son to me, but not my biological child. He's from Hetepatens' first marriage."

"I didn't know that. Please tell me if I seem pushy, but I want to fulfill my priesthood as much as possible. That's why it helps me to interview people about Hetepaten who were in close contact with him."

"Just ask. I love talking about my husband."

"What kind of a man was your husband. Especially spiritually. Has Aten always been the highest god to him."

"No," said Queniset a little bitter, "we used to pray for Amun like everyone else."

"Your marriage must have been happy."

"Yes, she was. He used to say to me, „You are the most important thing to me on earth, you are my only woman."

"Hetepaten had no second wives?"

"No."

"Did you have children with him?"

“No, Hetepaten brought four sons from his first marriage into our union, the gods left it this way.”

“A wife must be very proud when her husband holds such high office.”

“We were very pleased with this late recognition of his achievements. You see, my husband came from a middle-class family. It was not easy for him to find a suitable professional position. This was only possible under the venerable Amenhotep, may he live forever. I myself have a very good family background and it was sometimes not easy for me.”

“And your son Junatonef, what was his relationship with his father. Some say it was a little tense.”

“As it is with father and son. He loved his father very much, but I felt that sometimes he had to suffer from his father’s strength.”

That’s when Junatonef entered the room.

Queniset stood up, „Junatonef, we have a visitor from the queen’s sister. Amenhotep has done us the honor, that she is taking over the mortuary priesthood for our father.”

“It’s very nice to meet you, it’s a great honor,” said Junatonef and bowed, not too deeply, because when he saw Mutnedjmet he immediately took a somewhat proud posture.

“I have already told the queen’s sister that our family condemns the Oracle’s decision regarding her father,” said Queniset. „If we can help, we are always available.”

“Yes, I too am deeply dismayed,” said Junatonef, "I appreciate Ay as a great thinker and statesman. I have already assured him of my support. We are at your disposal.”

“Thank you,” said Mutnedjmet.

“I’ll leave you alone now,” said Queniset.

“I am very pleased that we have met,” said Mutnedjmet, “I will do my best to make your husband’s way into the afterlife as good as possible for him.”

“I’m sure of it,” Queniset replied. “If you always seek the good yourself, you will do right. You are a great asset to us all. Thank you for taking care of us.”

Queniset left the hall.

“I, too, am very pleased that the Pharaoh has appointed you,” said Junatonef.

In the meantime, the servants had placed a bowl of fresh figs and refreshing drinks on the table.

“Take,” said Junatonef.

To strengthen Junatonef’s confidence in her, Mutnedjmet drank a few sips of the fruit juice.

“I want to be especially faithful to your father’s spiritual path, and for this reason I have some questions about your relationship with him. How would you describe it?”

“I would describe it as excellent. I admired him very much, he was my great inspiration.”

“Was there sometimes tension between them?”

“Not that I know of, but our relationship was marked by harmony.”

“This is very good, because a harmonious spirit within the family contributes to the transition to eternal life. Do you already know if you will succeed your father?”

“If the great Pharaoh, who shall live forever, wants to appoint me as his high priest, I am always ready. Venerable sister of the queen, I assure you that I shall perform this office with great honour and in the best interests of the royal family. The royal family could rely on me as well as on my father. He has instructed me excellently in all aspects of the temple. I am entirely at your service and would always be on your side. I am not of the priesthood of Amun, as my father’s deputies Amunsetep and Bakamun were.”

“What do you think your chances are of following your father?”

“Normally this is in the hands of the priesthood faculties. And in the hands of the Oracle. But with the new Pharaoh, it is different. He will decide.”

“There are also your brothers.”

Junatonef’s gaze became a little fixed. „My brothers have no interest in following in my father’s footsteps. That was the reason my father summoned me to his temple.

“I understand. I wanted to ask you one more question, but I don’t know if you are ready to answer it yet. That soon after your father’s death.”

“Just ask.”

“Could you tell me again how exactly you found your father. Where had you been before you entered the Gempaaten?”

“There was a meeting at one of the priest’s residences in town.”

“Who participated? Also your father?”

“Yes, my father, Amunsetep, and some others of the priesthood of Gempaaten. Important administration issues were discussed.”

“Why did your father leave the meeting?”

“He wanted to pay another visit to his friend Sechimi, who had died in an accident. Besides, there was nothing important left to discuss. I think it was a welcome opportunity for him to leave.”

“Of course. Then why did you follow him?”

“An important appointment was made after he left. Amunsetep asked me to tell my father.”

“Then what happened?”

“I followed him into the temple, and there,” Junatonef swallowed, “I found him.”

“Did he say anything else?”

“No. I couldn’t really see him at first, it was dark.”

“Are you absolutely sure there was no one else in the room?”

“Yes, the guards searched the chamber immediately. It was terrible.”

“I can understand your feelings. How many guards were outside the chamber?”

“Four, I think there were four.”

“There was a papyrus. Where was it lying?”

“Right next to my father.”

“Any writing materials?”

“Not that I know of.”

“Thank you very much for your frankness. And once again, I apologize for intruding at this difficult hour with such questions.”

“It doesn’t matter. I am pleased to serve the queen’s sister. May I once again express my displeasure at the Oracle of the Amun Temple. If I can be of any assistance in this matter, count on me at all times.”

“I believe I recognize in you a faithful servant of the royal house. You have my support at all times.”

“I am deeply honored. I can only truly hope that the enlightenment of the Pharaoh to see in Aten the great god of Egypt will continue to be valid”.

The intentions of Junatonef and his mother were clear to Mutnedjmet. They were already campaigning for the high priesthood to remain in the family, as was common practice in Egypt. But they also knew that Hetepaten’s death could bring the Gempaaten Project to a complete standstill. But even after this conversation a solution for Mutnedjmet could not be found.

Chapter Eleven

The estate of the vizier Meriptah was very spacious. But it seemed a little deserted when Mutnedjmet entered it and was accompanied through the rooms by a young maid.

As a vizier under the last Pharaoh, he was once the highest official in the state, he controlled the administration, was the supreme judge. He had also been the first prophet of Amun. The house reflected the power that Meriptah must have had, but the silence clearly showed his diminished influence.

They stepped into the garden where Meriptah stood in front of a small pond surrounded by a thick wooden fence. He was slightly tilted over the fence and threw pieces of meat into it. The maid showed Mutnedjmet the way and disappeared.

“Vizier Meriptah,” Mutnedjmet said cautiously.

“Come closer,” said Meriptah.

Mutnedjmet stepped closer and could now see what Meriptah was feeding. There were some young Nile crocodiles crammed into the fence. They grabbed greedily for the bites that Meriptah seemed to distribute fairly.

“My name is Mutnedjmet, I am the mortuary priestess of Hetepaten.”

“I know *who* you are.”

Mutnedjmet paused briefly, Meriptah paid no attention to her and calmly fed his reptiles.

“It is my task to prepare the way of the venerable high priest into the kingdom of Osiris,” said Mutnedjmet, “to fulfill this well, I will speak to all who have accompanied his way.

“I know also *why* you have come,” Meriptah turned, his glance fell on the young woman’s face.

“The *queen’s sister*, very beautiful, very beautiful. What an honor,” and Mutnedjmet was able to detect a dull cynical undertone in Meriptah’s voice.

“How do you know?”

“Word gets around, even to me,” Meriptah turned away again and continued feeding his little animals. “Come, won’t you throw them a little bite too?”

Mutnedjmet stepped a little closer to the fence.

“No one likes these critters,” said Meriptah, “but it’s impossible to get them out of this country. They lurk in all the shoals of the Nile, only to snap at the right moment. But they are not so bad. Throw a few tidbits at them and they will soon be satisfied. “You, too, should learn how to deal with hungry animals.”

“I think I know that,” said Mutnedjmet, rejecting the piece of meat that Meriptah held out to her.

“You think so?” said Meriptah. “So did your father. To be wiser than the Amun Priesthood. Runs in the family, apparently. Oh, apologies, I forgot. You’re not his natural daughter, *are you?*”

Mutnedjmet’s stare could not hide the fact that she had been deeply affected by Meriptah’s cynical remark.

“I’m just trying to sound out interests,” she said, “who has an interest in Hetepaten’s death, who has an interest in sending Ay to his death?”

“Aten and the Oracle, they say.”

“So they say.”

“You think *I* have an interest in this?”

Mutnedjmet was a little irritated by the direct nature of Meriptah’s.

“I didn’t say that.”

“Well, my dear child. The whole world is always about interests. Nobody cares what’s really behind things.

“I care about the truth.”

Meriptah smiled, stopped feeding the crocodiles and turned to Mutnedjmet, “The truth? For a young woman such as

yourselves, it is about the truth? Then you should ask yourselves how your dear adoptive father managed to persuade your biological mother to give him her two beautiful daughters. Have you ever wondered about this truth?"

Mutnedjmet's and Meriptah's pupils fixed each other like two hostile hyenas about to jump into battle.

"Where were you when Hetepaten passed away?" Mutnedjmet asked.

"I don't know," said Meriptah calmly and astonished. "I think I had gone to bed early."

"You go to sleep very early"

"I am an old man."

"How was your relationship with Hetepaten?"

"Hetepaten? A colorless person. You forgive. His place in the kingdom of Osiris should be secure anyway. As former vizier of the last Pharaoh, I had little to do with him. It was through Amenhotep, he will live forever, our divine ruler, that he made his career. As far as I know Hetepaten was a middle-class man, not easy for such a man to rise so high."

"As it was for Ay."

"Dear Ay."

"Isn't he responsible that you are no longer the King's Vizier today?"

"The venerable Ptahmose has already warned me about you. A shrewd young woman, he said."

"Let's stick to the point," Mutnedjmet didn't want to be buttered up, "Ay has always been your opponent."

"I consider him an exceptionally good strategist. But now he might have taken a wrong step. But I have nothing to do with that. He has only himself to blame. But I am not happy about it. It will not change my current situation. So much about interests. Of course, I don't expect you to believe me. But in any case, it doesn't change anything."

“You are a consultant to Ptahmose. Your influence will grow.”

“Oh young lady - it’s as refreshing as you think, but I can assure you that the High Priest of Amun will certainly not choose me as his advisor.”

“You cleverly try to give the impression that you are an old man who has given up his influence and is now seeking rest.”

“The Pharaoh now has the decisive word. And that, of course, is a good thing. For he was chosen for it directly by god Aten. And he is treading a new path for Egypt. This he has shown and so it shall be. I am a man of the old school and it is hard for me to follow the new one. Therefore, it is best that I retire.”

“I have now gained an impression of you. Many have described you to me, but it was important to get to know you personally.”

“They have been described me? I hope to live up to the descriptions. By the way. Before you go. The venerable Ptahmose told me during his visit that the brave *Horemhab* is said to have met Hetepaten’ son shortly before his father’s death.”

Mutnedjmet tried not to let on, but tension suddenly surged through her.

“An interesting visit, that of Ptahmose, very rare for the high priest to show himself to me personally. Actually the first time, if I remember correctly. “*Very interesting*, don’t you think?”

“And what did this Horemhab have to say to Junatonef?”

“*This* Horemhab, a high officer, by the way, I only say this because it seems as if you hardly know him,” said Meriptah, and a little translucent smile flashed over his lips, “what this Horemhab had to discuss, no one knows except Horemhab - and of course Junatonef. Now the initial question of interests

arises again. What interests does Horemhab have and what interests does Junatonef have, and how does this all relate to Hetepaten and the venerable Ay? But I am sure you will find out. I must ask you now to leave me alone. I am an old man. I'm only good for feeding my crocodiles. It's the only thing I'm good at anymore.”

Meriptah turned to the reptile cage and began to throw his lizards a few bites into their throats with well-aimed pitches, while Mutnedjmet quietly left the house. But deep down inside she now felt a deep anger. A great anger that Ay should be sacrificed because of low interests. But who hates always finds only the wrong ways. She did not want to make the same mistakes as her opponents. And she only had five days left.

Chapter Twelve

Mutnedjmet seemed a little lost as she walked through the narrow streets of the city. Horemhab had met with Junatonef? Was this true? Then why didn't he tell her this? The more she investigated Hetepatens' death, the more inconsistencies arose. Inconsistencies that suddenly affected the innermost self of the young woman.

The house of Horemhab was a little on the outskirts of the city. Mutnedjmet was drawn there like a magnet. She had to get things straightened out. Or perhaps not? To know the full truth might destroy her whole life, and destroy all illusions. Why hadn't everything stayed the same as a few days ago? She was not happy then either, but now Mutnedjmet felt as if she was standing before a great abyss. A deep, uncertain, yawning void.

Horemhab lived in a small villa surrounded by sandy fields. No one around for miles. The front gate locked. Mutnedjmet walked through the garden behind the house.

Suddenly she stopped. The bleating of an animal could be heard. Mutnedjmet crept around the corner and saw: Horemhab, the great, brave commander, was kneeling on the ground, stroking one of the sheep that was running around in his backyard. He clawed the animal behind the ears, which was happy to let this happen to it. The young woman watched the scene for a while. Her impression had obviously not deceived her after all: her lover had a very sensitive side. He was not only the hard fighter, the strategic thinker, but also a sensitive sheep stroker. This man would not disappoint her if she suddenly felt more secure than ever before.

"You take really good care of your cattle," said Mutnedjmet as she turned the corner.

Horemhab was startled. He was a little embarrassed, he lacked the words. He got up, gave the sheep a little slap, which hurried away.

“Who takes good care of his animals will reap good meat,” he said.

“I understand, sir.”

The two embraced. Mutnedjmet felt comfortable in his arms, she wanted to forget everything around her.

“How is your new task progressing,” Horemhab asked, tearing Mutnedjmet from her imagination.

“It’s going on, it’s not easy, not easy at all.”

“What about Ay? I often think about his fate. I wouldn’t wish such a fate on anyone. It’s a terrible thing.”

“Please don’t talk about it now. It gnaws at my soul day and night anyway. Let’s think about something else.”

Horemhab saw the worry lines on the young woman’s face.

“I have new plans, he tried to distract her.”

“Yeah?”

“I want to enlarge my house. I want it to be our common palace.”

“I like your house the way it is.”

“No. You shall live here like a queen. For me, you are the true queen of my life.”

Mutnedjmet was flattered.

“Back here,” Horemhab pointed to a barren field of sand, “I want to have an audience chamber built, ceilings, walls, floors panelled in light white limestone, a high portico. It will be connected to the main house by a long corridor.

“Very nice.”

“Over here,” Horemhab pointed to a thorny grove, “shall our sleeping chambers be built. Twenty rooms at least. Each of our children shall have one of their own, large and spacious.”

“How many kids are you planning?”

“As many as possible.”

“They shall become statesmen, viziers, sculptors and poets. Our family shall be spoken of throughout the land.”

“Statesmen, viziers. So you don’t want any daughters?”

“I want many daughters. Just as many as boys. I want them to be doctors, judges and priestesses.”

“Priestesses?” I don’t know if I should advise my daughters to take up that profession. Believe me. Experience.”

“Then writers.”

“That’s better.”

“And you, you will be my queen, you will be honored as a goddess for hundreds of years.”

“We already have a queen.”

“In my heart, you are the true ruler. The great sun that rises every morning and gives light to my soul.”

Mutnedjmet was at a loss for words.

“And here come the servant’s quarters,” Horemhab pointed in one direction. “I want guards and servants close by. That is the only way to build mutual trust. Your rooms should be well-equipped. After all, they too represent our family. I want to employ mainly people from my own association. People I can trust.”

“Yes,” said Mutnedjmet, “trust is the most important thing.”

“You got that right.”

“You make big plans.”

“Yes, but the very best is yet to come. I want to run my own canal from the Nile to here. Fresh, cool Nile water shall always be our delight.”

“You’re almost planning your own palace.”

“Nothing shall be too bad for the queen’s sister. You shall enjoy every hour here. In the midst of our family.”

Mutnedjmet almost forgot the purpose of why she had come in the first place. Horemhab painted her future in the rosiest colors and Mutnedjmet almost wanted to lie down and swim in this soft bath of thoughts. But unfortunately it was necessary to look reality in the face.

“I wanted to ask your advice,” she said.

“Gladly, how can I help you.”

“Tell me, what kind of man do you think vizier Meriptah is? How much influence does he have?”

“Meriptah was once a mighty man. Under the old Pharaoh. He still maintains his contacts. Yet his influence should not be exaggerated.”

“Do you think he has connections with the high priest of Amun.”

“If so, very thin contacts. The high priesthood is only interested in those with influence.”

“What do you know about Junatonef?”

“The son of Hetepaten?”

“Exactly.”

“Not much. In fact, just a better temple servant under his father’s yoke, nothing more.”

“Do you think he’ll succeed his father?”

“Very unlikely. Now that the entire Gempaaten project seems to be in jeopardy.”

“Does he think he will follow his father?”

“I think he’s smart enough to get the background right.”

“Do you think the Gempaaten’ project will fail.”

“My sunshine. You must always try to side with the strongest. In the long run, this is how you will be seen to achieve your goals most easily. But one thing you can be sure of. I will always be on your side. We are meant for each other. It is the will of the gods.

The decision whether Mutnedjmet should prove her lover was made. Why should she ask unpleasant questions? He was on her side. He was her future. Why would she destroy that future. Through an office she never wanted. She would wait and see, side with the strongest, achieve her goals. Everything else was in the hands of the gods. Man could only influence his fate to a certain degree.

“You must come and visit me more often,” Horemhab said.

“When my task is completed, I will do so, be assured.”

“You will soon leave the royal palace. It’s like a cage for you. Here in my house you will shine as you please.”

“I am happy that our paths met.”

“The doors to this house are always open to you.”

“Thank you.”

When Mutnedjmet left Horemhab’s villa, she knew that this was the place where she would find her peace and happiness. And she realized that she had made the right decision with this man. This feeling was all the more pleasant, when it was in great contrast to her powerlessness, which became more and more a certainty for her. She did everything to save Ay, but she would not succeed. An evil, subconscious premonition, which she did not want to and could not accept.

Chapter Thirteen

With an iron will Mutnedjmet walked through the Gempaaten. Why had the papyrus with the words of Hetepaten been withheld from her for so long? She was determined not to let Amunsetep fob her off with any excuses this time.

“Mutnedjmet!” it suddenly sounded behind her.

Mutnedjmet turned around and could see a young man who was wearing a mortuary Priest sash just like her.

“Rempineb!” cried Mutnedjmet joyfully, “what are you doing here?”

Both hugged each other briefly.

“I thought you had moved to one of the towns in Lower Egypt” she said.

“And returned again,” he replied, “I hear Nefertiti has become queen and you...,” Rempineb looked at her a little incredulous, and recognized by her sash, “a mortuary priestess?”

“Apparently, so do you,” said Mutnedjmet.

Mutnedjmet and Rempineb knew each other from their early youth. He was the eighth son of a small civil servant who lived right next door to Ay’s house. In their childhood Rempineb, Nefertiti and Mutnedjmet had often played together, and for a short time they were an inseparable couple. The faded memories of their childhood suddenly came out of their subconscious with a colourful intensity. Rempineb had grown up in a happy familiar atmosphere of security, just like she had. Ay had always done everything to keep negative things away from her. Perhaps this had been wrong, because now the cruel reality, which she had only known from hearsay, hit her heart like a granite sarcophagus weighing tons.

Renpineb then soon took up service within the Amun priesthood. Renpineb had always been a very bright and adventurous boy, and soon he was drawn to faraway places. When the offer came to go to one of the provinces, he immediately accepted it and set off on a journey of discovery. From then on, Mutnedjmet had never heard from him again, but had often thought of him.

“What brought you back to Thebes?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“I’m only here for a few months,” said Renpineb and then I’ll return. I am waiting for the consecration by almighty Amenhotep, forever shall he live. A consecration by the Pharaoh has a high value even in Lower Egypt. But you, a *mortuary priestess*, the queen’s sister, how is that?”

“Only for a short time. I am preparing the way of the venerable Hetepaten to the kingdom of Osiris. A truly challenging task.

“I’ve heard of it. The whole thing has created quite a stir here at the Gempaaten.”

“What’s the word?”

“They say Hetepaten fell out of favour with Aten. Many who have chosen the Gempaaten and go to the Amun temple are now afraid.”

“And you?”

“I’m glad I’ll be leaving town soon and returning to my new home.”

“Are you happy there.”

“Yes, I have a wife, she’s about your age. She is already expecting her second child. How about you? Haven’t you always longed for a family?”

“Well, as the queen’s sister, as far as this subject is concerned, I’m sitting on a waiting bench.”

“I’m sorry about that.”

Renpineb became aware that he had touched a sore spot of his young girlfriend. For a short time neither of them knew what to say.

“Lately many strange things have been happening within the temple walls of Gempaaten,” Renpineb tried to find another subject.

“Oh, why?”

“A wondrous goddess recently floated through the palace.”

“Tell me more.”

“I wouldn’t take it too seriously, it’s more the story of an old lunatic.”

“Everything concerning the Gempaaten interests me. Even the confused and especially when it concerns floating goddesses.”

“Nebmaat, an old, aged priest with a dark past, recently told us at the morning ablution that he had encountered a goddess hovering near the mortuaries.”

“Near the mortuaries? When was that?”

“I don’t know, you’d better ask him yourself.”

“What’s the old man’s name?”

“*Nebmaat*, he’s already retired.”

“And what a *dark past* he has.”

“Nobody really knows, that’s why its dark.”

“Thank you very much for your enlightening information. But I have to go now. Time is short. It was very nice to see you again.”

“Maybe we can meet before I leave.”

“We absolutely must.”

“I wish you all the best with your mission to look after the way of the venerable Hetepaten. A very honourable task. May happiness accompany you on your way as well as before.

The two said goodbye to each other and Mutnedjmet hurriedly made her way to the offices of Amunsetep. A *goddess*

hovering near the mortuary chambers? This was a most interesting incident.

Mutnedjmet entered the antechamber of Amunsetep, an office servant immediately went to get his master.

Amunsetep came to the door of his office, waved Mutnedjmet down, “I am pleased that the sister of our most honored queen has again honored me with her visit. Has there been any news? How may I be of service?”

“I want to see what you’ve been cleverly hiding from me for days.”

“I can’t imagine what this is.”

“Didn’t the reverend Hetepaten write a note before he passed away in such a terrible way?”

“Very well, he did.”

“I want to see that message.”

“I can inform you of their contents.”

“I know the contents, I want to see the papyrus. Ascribe it to my passion as a writer, or my persistence, but I must insist.”

“I’m sorry, but the Pharaoh has instructed extreme discretion in these matters.”

“I am commissioned by the Pharaoh. I am happy to go to him and ask his permission with the simultaneous hint that I cannot get rid of the feeling that you do not support me in my tasks. After all, time is of the essence. The funeral of Hetepaten is in a few days. As sister of the queen, the King will be informed of my concerns very soon.”

Amunsetep hesitated a little longer. Then he stepped back and opened a larger chest, which stood inconspicuously in the corner. He took a wooden box from it and approached the table.

“Here,” he said.

Mutnedjmet knelt down at the table and slowly opened the box. Inside was a papyrus rolled up and tied with a piece of

string. She stripped off the string and spread the sheet on the table. A few rays of sunlight fell through the window, so that the paper seemed to glow like a bright stone plate.

“So this is it.”

“Just as it lies there, we found it.”

“A precise noncursive hieroglyphic writing.”

“He was a good writer, our high priest.”

“I have recognized the reality and swear from the Aten... *Because who does maat is free from injustice,*” Mutnedjmet read softly. “Very interesting.”

“Oh, how horrible.” Amunsetep remembered.

“Every single letter as if carved in stone. A very interesting document. Thank you so much for letting me see it. I think I learned a lot from it.”

“You don’t want to make a big deal out of it? I’m usually known for my discretion.”

“Don’t worry. I think we’re getting closer to the truth.”

“I hear you paid a visit to vizier Meriptah?”

“Where did you get this information?”

“Every move of you is getting around fast, as personal representatives of the Pharaoh. You should ask Meriptah where he was upon the night of the misfortune that befell the esteemed Hetepaten.”

“It seems to me that you already know the answer to that question.”

Amunsetep glanced around furtively, then bent over to Mutnedjmet. “Meriptah was seen near the Gempaaten that very night.”

“By whom?”

“I am not authorized to give the name of anyone. Their identity will not pass my lips.”

“Why not?”

“This has its reasons. Meriptah is yet a man of power. Did you know, by the way, that the son of Hetepatens was eager to inherit his father’s office?”

“Did he say that?”

“This is well known. But it is also known that Hetepaten never dreamed of leaving his post to Junatonef. The poor son suffered greatly under his father’s yoke.”

“This is very important news that you have for me. First such secrecy and then such familiarity. You confuse me.”

“Well, I’m getting more and more the impression that the choice to appoint you as priestess of the dead was very good. I want to be of service to you always.”

“Is it possible that you are personally considering the succession as high priest?”

“What do you mean?”

“I guess that’s as close as I can get to expressing myself.”

“Someone who has served the Amun priesthood for so long probably has little chance with such an occupation. Don’t you think?”

“Who knows? Maybe it’s the only way to keep the Gempaaten Project going by having an Amun priesthood trusted man enter the Aten temple.”

“Me - a confidant? Someone who has switched over to the side of the Pharaoh, hardly anyone in the old guard will trust him anymore. My own career ambitions are of very little consequence. Believe me.”

“I understand. So you hold it with the old saying: *It is the king who improves the position, who advances a man’s place*. I think it was the famous philosopher and vizier Kagemi who said this?”

“In deep reverence I bow to the proverbs of the great Kagemi, but I assure you I am content and do not seek to improve my position”.

Outside the offices of Amunsetep, noise was heard. Excited voices shouted in confusion.

A servant rushed in, “a messenger for the sister of the queen. Something’s happened.”

“Bring him in,” said Amunsetep.

The messenger, a lector priest of the Amun Temple, rushed into the room. He immediately bowed down in front of Amunsetep and Mutnedjmet.

“Speak,” said Amunsetep, “what news have you to bring us.”

“Something terrible has happened,” said the messenger excitedly, “I don’t know how to say it.”

“Speak up, what a messenger you are,” shouted Amunsetep impatiently.

“Ptahmose, the high priest of Amun. An assassination was made on his life.”

“An assassination. Who? How? How is he doing? Tell me more about it,” said Amunsetep.

“I’m afraid that’s all I know,” said the messenger, “he asks for you.”

“Who?” Amunsetep asked.

“Ptahmose!” replied the messenger.

“For me?” Amunsetep asked.

“No, not you,” said the messenger, “Ptahmose the high priest of Amun asks for Mutnedjmet, sister of the queen.”

“Me?” Mutnedjmet asked in surprise, “why?”

“I don’t know, come on.”

“Now, right now?”

“Immediately, of course. The high priest of Thebes is asking for you! So, let us go,” the messenger left the room and waved frantically to Mutnedjmet, who followed him immediately.

* * *

Mutnedjmet and the messenger ran from Gempaaten into the city towards the Amun temple complex. Mutnedjmet had to take a short breather.

“Don’t we know anything more?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“No. They spoke of a sickle sword.”

“A sickle sword, are you sure?”

“No. But Ptahmose is waiting for you, come.”

They hurried on to the main entrance of the large, mighty Amun Temple.

Guards and soldiers were everywhere, hermetically sealing the building. Thanks to the messenger, Mutnedjmet was quickly allowed to go forward and was escorted by several priests into the main hall. The place was crawling with alarmed security guards. Mutnedjmet was led into a small, strictly guarded room.

When they were seen coming, the guards gave up their view: Ptahmose, the high priest of Amun. He lay covered with blood on some cushions that had been scattered on the floor.

“The queen’s sister.” exclaimed Ptahmose when he saw Mutnedjmet, “Thanks to Amun that you could come so quickly.”

“What happened, how are you?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Come here,” Ptahmose waved Mutnedjmet down to him. She knelt down on the floor with him.

“Someone is after me, someone tried to kill me.”

A doctor rushed over with bandages. A servant, who pressed a large piece of sheet on Ptahmose’s arm, pulled it away. A large, gaping flesh wound on the high priest’s upper arm.

“But he didn’t really get me,” Ptahmose whispered to Mutnedjmet with shining eyes.

The doctor cleaned the wound with an ointment of fresh herbs and then bandaged it with clean strips of cloth.

“You were very lucky, it was very close,” said the doctor, “but not too bad. I am sure the wound will heal well, you can go back to your business in a few days.

“Who did the crime?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“We don’t know, the perpetrator got away,” said one of the priests in the crowd. “I think *you* should find out who did this? Allow me, my name is Anen, I am the second priest of Amun.”

Mutnedjmet took a humble bow, and Ptahmose intervened, “so, what have you found out about the death of Hetepatens?”

“Unfortunately, I can’t give you any news yet,” said Mutnedjmet, “I’m trying to do my job as best as I can.

“What was it that Hetepaten had stabbed himself with?” Ptahmose asked.

“It was a - sickle sword,” said Mutnedjmet.

“Something like that,” Anen held a bloodstained sickle sword in the air.”

Mutnedjmet froze. Adrenaline shot into her blood. “But then...tell me, how did it happen?” she asked Ptahmose.

“I...,” Ptahmose was somewhat distracted by the guards and doctors in the small room. “Get out! Out” he shouted, “I have a conversation to have here.”

The room slowly began to empty, only Anen and Mutnedjmet remained.

Ptahmose turned to Mutnedjmet. “Like every day, I wanted to offer the sacrifice to Amun. I opened the shrine, and suddenly I saw a man rushing toward me. In his hand was a flashing sword. In one intuitive movement, I swerved. Amun must have guided me. He stabbed me and ran away.”

“What did the man look like?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“He was not Egyptian. I always knew it. Foreign powers are coming to take over our land. ...and our faith. They have no

respect, not even for our deepest values. Not even the shrine of Amun.”

“Is it possible to get a glimpse inside the shrine?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“That is absolutely impossible.” said Anen. “No one but the high priest himself may look into the face of god. Amun would never tolerate this. This is a tradition thousands of years old.”

“I apologize for that question,” Mutnedjmet replied, “it was just a thought that this might help catch the criminal. After all, he committed the monstrosity of climbing into the shrine. If one wants to get to the bottom of the truth, one must look at things with great accuracy.”

“I’m sorry, to let a mortuary priestess look into the face of Amun is completely impossible,” repeated Anen.

“My dear Anen,” said Ptahmose, “you are absolutely right. It is exclusively my right to show Amun the reverence of our people from face to face. For thousands of years it has been so. And nothing is going to change that. Even though someone tried to take me to the kingdom of Osiris before my time.”

Ptahmose slowly rose. “Come on, help me up on Mutnedjmet.”

“Venerable Ptahmose, you must not move,” Anen said, “I am sure this is not what the doctors want.”

“Come on, help me Mutnedjmet” said Ptahmose.

Mutnedjmet helped the injured, still somewhat weak high priest to his feet. He seemed to be a little dizzy, the high blood loss was noticeable.

“god Amun has saved my life,” Ptahmose said, “I will not be ashamed to thank him personally. Come, accompany me to his shrine.”

“As you wish,” said Anen.

So Mutnedjmet and Anen had no choice but to support Ptahmose and accompany her to the great ceremonial hall.

“Out, out!” Ptahmose called out to all the guards, doctors and priests who stood there. “I must pay homage to Amun for his generosity.”

The crowd left the hall. Ptahmose, supported by Mutnedjmet and his deputy Anen, headed for the shrine of Amun.

The shrine was a big wooden box, the front was covered with a curtain. There were many such shrines in the temples. In each of these shrines lived a certain god. So everyone knew exactly where to pay homage to this god. But this splendidly gilded shrine was a very special one. In it lived Amun, the most powerful god of Egypt so far. The glow spread an oppressive aura simply by knowing what was inside.

The room was now deserted. The three were only a few steps away from the Amun shrine.

“Thank you Anen, thank you for your help. You can go,” Ptahmose said.

Anen did not quite understand.

“You can go, Anen, Mutnedjmet will support me,” said Ptahmose.

Anen turned around and slowly stepped out of the room.

Ptahmose turned to Mutnedjmet. “You know that for centuries only the high priest of Amun has been allowed to look into this shrine. Not even the Pharaoh is allowed. But today the situation is a little different. I’m injured. I can barely stand on my feet. Would you please push aside the curtain of the shrine so that I can see the face of Amun and pay homage to him.”

Mutnedjmet could not believe that the high priest of Amun would break all rules to give her a view into the divine shrine.

“Go ahead,” said Ptahmose, “but you must promise me to maintain silence.”

“I promise,” said Mutnedjmet, and Ptahmose directed her to do a little faster with a gesture of his hand.

Just like the hammering of a heavy steel chisel on the hard quartz granite of a statue of the gods, Mutnedjmet could feel her heart pounding as she stood very close to the shrine. Her hand almost trembled a little as she reached for the curtain and pulled it aside. She looked inside. It was dark. In the middle stood a simple old wooden tablet with the image of Amun and some hieroglyphic signs. Otherwise the shrine was empty. Mutnedjmet was surprised, she would have expected at least an artistic statue or something similar. She looked at the floor of the wooden box and then with her finger she drew a trail through the dense dust that must have accumulated there over hundreds of years. She backed away again and drew the curtain.

“I thank you for your courtesy. I will do everything to find the truth behind the circumstances of the mysterious deeds here in Thebes.”

“Don’t thank me,” said Ptahmose, “thank Amun, he guides our destinies.”

Mutnedjmet bowed humbly before the shrine, then turned back to Ptahmose. “Where did the perpetrator go after he jumped out of the shrine?”

“In that direction,” Ptahmose tried to point in the direction, but the pain made it impossible for him.

“Please clap your hands loudly,” he said to Mutnedjmet.

She didn’t quite understand first, but then clapped.

Immediately Anen and some other priests came rushing by.

“I am entrusting Mutnedjmet to investigate the background of this crime,” Ptahmose said, “Anen, lead the young woman in the direction in which the monster disappeared.”

“I thank you for the honor that you give me,” said Mutnedjmet, bowing to Ptahmose.

“And keep me informed. *Follow your heart as long as you live but do not do more than you are told.* You have done a good job so far,” said Ptahmose.

Mutnedjmet walked with Anen by her side in the direction where the perpetrator had escaped.

“We have hermetically sealed the palace and searched every room,” Anen said.

“That is good. Isn’t the Amun shrine under constant guard?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Of course, day and night, guards are posted outside all gates.

“And yet the perpetrator managed to get in undetected and then vanished into thin air. Wouldn’t be the first time something like this happened in recent days.”

The two of them came into an empty side yard, from which only one exit led.

“Where do you go through that gate?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“To the priests’ quarters of the high priesthood,” Anen replied.

“Have you already had them searched?”

“Of course, but we found no one.”

“Someone desecrates Amun’s shrine and then disappears, as if dissolved into nothing, into the lodgings of the high priesthood. I think Ptahmose is really lucky to be alive.”

“Or the benevolence of Amun.”

“You got that right. Amun is definitely on his side.”

“If something comes up, will you inform me?” Anen asked.

“Of course.”

“I can count on that?”

“You can.”

“The temple of Amun is counting on you.”

So slow and ponderous Mutnedjmet strolled through the temple towards the exit, so eagerly the thoughts moved through her head. Restlessness had come to Thebes. Someone had panicked. And whoever panics, makes mistakes.

Chapter Fourteen

There were completely new aspects which had been opened up by the events of the last hours. Was there really a murderer who had it in for the high priests? Many thoughts shot through Mutnedjmet's head. Small details were the ones that did not quite fit together. But they were the ones who could solve the mystery, Mutnedjmet was sure of that. Had Horemhab actually met Junatonef, the young woman thought. Why? And why was it so difficult for her to confront her lover with this? She couldn't get it out of her mind.

But now she was determined to get to the bottom of it. If a sickle sword murderer could be found, then perhaps a connection with Hetepaten's death could be made. And with it, the salvation of Ay. She could no longer neglect any details. The assassination attempt on the high priest had changed things. But Mutnedjmet was still faced with the question: is it about achieving goals or was it about uncovering truths? The second could become very painful.

Mutnedjmet quickly stomped to Horemhab's house on the outskirts of the city. At the sight of his villa, she always felt the same: Like a sun, this building brought light to her soul.

The main gate was locked. ...as usual. Mutnedjmet crept through the sandy garden to the back entrance. The sheep stood around, nibbling at the much too dry grass, which was ready for them in several bowls. Mutnedjmet entered her lover's villa through the back entrance. They were bright rooms, a little barely furnished. Horemhab placed little importance on displaying wealth. He did not care for precious statues. Only a few clay vases stood around - with or without dried flowers in them. The doors to the individual rooms were replaced by curtains. Was her lover perhaps not in?

A faint noise emanated from one of the rooms. She almost called his name, but now Mutnedjmet decided to sneak up quietly and surprise him lovingly. Then he could certainly resent her less for the unpleasant questions.

A recurring muffled noise penetrated the curtain in front of which Mutnedjmet stood. As if someone had stamped a mortar to grind some kind of powder. Slowly Mutnedjmet pulled the curtain aside. She looked - and her breath faltered.

A young woman lay naked on a bench. Bent over her - Horemhab, who was obviously giving her and himself great pleasure with rhythmic thrusts. Her body, beautiful, in ecstasy. Her breasts, huge, like two ripe melions, bouncing joyfully with every jerk.

A mighty knot formed in Mutnedjmet's stomach, which made her mind plunge like a rock into the depths. For seconds she hoped for a bad nightmare, but the violent breath of the two lovebirds brought her straight back to reality. She couldn't stand the sight any longer, skipped the curtain and stepped back.

Only away from here, she thought to herself, she could not cope with being noticed. But too late.

A loud cracking noise, which she would have prevented with all her strength, if this would have been possible. It was one of those stupid, nonsensical clay vases which Mutnedjmet had knocked over backwards and which almost burst into pieces with a bang on the floor.

She ran to the back exit and out of the house. A sheep she saw coming bleated. How grotesque. But hadn't she decided to get to the bottom of things? Why would *she* flee?. To get away from the unpleasantness. Looking away? She hadn't done anything wrong. She had to make up a decision. To escape through the middle, or to face it.

Mutnedjmet hesitated for a few seconds, the indifferent look of the sheep was no help. Then she turned on her heel and went back into the house.

There he stood, Horemhab, tying his apron around his loins, in front of the pile of broken pieces.

“I thought I’d drop in,” said Mutnedjmet.

“I’m very glad,” Horemhab replied somewhat indecisively, “I was busy at the moment.”

“You were busy, I saw that.”

“It’s not what you think.”

“A particularly interesting answer. You’ll have to explain it to me now.”

“Then let me introduce you to someone. Come out, Renpi, show yourself.”

Shyly, the young naked woman crossed the curtain.

“That’s Renpi,” Horemhab said to Mutnedjmet. “She is a slave, she is to be my second wife. Renpi, this is Mutnedjmet, the queen’s sister. She will be the chief wife.”

Renpi immediately threw herself humbly to the ground in front of Mutnedjmet. Mutnedjmet didn’t expect that now.

“I’m glad you’ve met,” Horemhab said.

“You can’t be serious,” said Mutnedjmet, “while you’re asking for my hand, you’re having fun with second wives at the same time.”

“But she is only a slave,” Horemhab no longer understood the world, “she will never be able to hold a candle to you.”

“You tell *me* I’m your sunshine that lights up your heart every day. And who is *she*?”

“She is... she is...,” Horemhab stammered, he was not prepared for this question.

“Lotus blossom...,” Renpi helped, still kneeling on the floor, shyly.

“Aha!” said Mutnedjmet.

She turned and went out into the garden. The whole thing seemed to get a bit embarrassing in front of the young slave. Horemhab followed her.

“I don’t understand you,” he said, “the Pharaoh also has second wives. Every high priest has a second wife. Why shouldn’t I have one?”

“You told *her* she was your lotus blossom and in the same way you told *me* I was your lotus blossom. Don’t you understand that something can’t come together?”

“They’re just words. I’m just clumsy when it comes to expressing my feelings. You are and always will be the most important woman in my life. She’s there to serve you and me... well...”

“For your pleasure!”

“Exactly,” Horemhab said happily about Mutnedjmet’s rhetorical help, “you will always have the greatest value in my heart. That I promise. That’s just the way traditions are.”

“And anyway, what were you and Junatonef talking about?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Junatonef? What’s Junatonef got to do with this now?”

“Trust is what Junatonef is all about. I have put all my faith in you. And I don’t know if I made a big mistake.”

“You can trust me. I was always honest with you.”

“Then why didn’t you tell me you met Junatonef. On the very night his father died. And don’t try to deny it! You were seen.”

“I understand. *Anen*. Nothing happened. I was walking through the Amun Temple complex that evening when I ran into Junatonef. He was in a big hurry. He had to go to some meeting.”

“Into the Gempaaten?”

“Not into the Gempaaten. He was headed for any of the priest residences.”

“That means you met him before he went into the Gempaaten.”

“I know nothing of Gempaaten. I only know that I met Junatonef that night in the city. We exchanged a few words and he hurried on. That was it. Hardly worth mentioning.”

“What did he say?”

“Nothing important.”

“Please let me judge what is important and what is not. So what did he say?”

“He just said that he is doing very well with his new job in the Temple of Aten and he is happy to have moved there. Then he has moved on.”

“Anen, second high priest of Amun, saw you?”

“Yeah, he’s just about to pass, said friendly greetings,” said Horemhab. “So what about Renpi now?”

“What about her?”

“She is also *your* slave.”

“*My* slave?!”

“If you don’t agree with her, I’ll take another one.”

“*Another* one?”

“All right. None whatsoever. That would be completely out of keeping with tradition. However, if you make it a condition. Please. It’s your choice. It’s hard for any wife to accept second wives in the beginning. My father told me that was the case. Though I don’t understand it.”

“How would it be if I took a *second man*? What would you say to that?”

“It would be against tradition.”

“I’m the queen’s sister, I’m just changing traditions.”

“I would lose face if you had another man beside me. As a woman, you don’t lose face.”

“Oh, so this is about saving face. To show what a great man you are with multiple women. *Prestige* in other words. And what about the feelings, especially *my* feelings.”

“My father also had two second wives. At first my mother was skeptical, like you. But in time, a great friendship developed between the women. I think my mother got along with them almost better than with my father. You just can’t understand this because Ay has only one wife. But consider: Renpi would not only be your servant, she could also become your best friend. You’ll be glad in the long run to have someone to keep you company when I’m away on long journeys. And you’d never have to fear coming second. So it’s very important that you get on well with her. She’s an extremely nice person.”

Mutnedjmet did not answer, but looked into space.

“Promise me that you will think it over,” Horemhab said. “If you won’t, we’ll send her away.”

The mores of Thebes had caught up with Mutnedjmet once more. To the horrible future that lay ahead for her stepfather came *this*. Was the decline still not at its lowest point? Did it have to get worse, more unbearable? She was getting tired of being the victim of the obligatory. That a man in Egypt kept one or more second wives was common in the higher social classes. He was showing the wealth of his family. But Mutnedjmet would never have thought that Horemhab also wanted a second wife. Until now, it was clear to her that she would be enough for him. But she was missing. A big-breasted young thing! Was Horemhab like other men? Had she misjudged him completely? What was his true character like? She never thought she would ever have to share him. And never would she have thought he could have caused her such pain without the slightest spark of a guilty conscience. This were the traditions of Egypt.vbsghdfgfg

Chapter Fifteen

Only three days left till Hetepaten's funeral. In the workshop of Thutmose the workers were already busy polishing the stone sarcophagus of the high priest. It had inexorably taken on its final shape. Nothing could stop its predetermined path. Mutnedjmet mind a little disturbed by the events. She had always been able to find herself in her teacher's factory park. It was clear, simple and transparent what was happening there. It was honestly hammered, cut, scratched. And at the end of each day, each of the many stonemason's assistants knew what they had created.

Mutnedjmet remembered the quiet hours at the scribe school. But a return was unthinkable. She had inwardly already crossed a line that made this impossible. The future had changed drastically for the young woman. It was now a matter of facing the future.

Thutmose came along, with a few scrolls under his arm. Apparently, he had landed another lucrative commission. Not only he was a true master of his art, he was also an excellent businessman and negotiator. An institution. A role model.

"Did everything go well for you?" Mutnedjmet asked.

"It is a pleasure to see you once again in my humble house."

"I'd love to come, you know that."

"Let's go to the kitchen. Hetep prepared some very marked delicacies for me there yesterday. A little refreshment will be good for you."

They went into the kitchen. Thutmose was digging around in a pantry. He pulled out some small parcels wrapped in dried grass mats and came to the table.

"Smoked latos fish," he said, "a delicacy."

Mutnedjmet made a face. Many Egyptians detested fish. From time to time, there were even bans on the eating of sea

animals. Fish was considered slippery, unclean, just plain disgusting.

“You really must try it. It tastes best smoked. “Most Egyptians don’t know what they’re missing.”

He pushed one of the latos fish to Mutnedjmet, who mistrustfully eyed him.

“I don’t even eat hyenas,” she said.

“I understand that. Hyena is fat and tough. Just the opposite of this one. A wonderfully salty taste. One must dare to win. Opening yourself to new things is the only way to learn more about them.”

Mutnedjmet stared into the empty eye of the smoked lato.

“How are you?” Thutmose asked, “How is your task going?”

“New things happen to me every day, but they don’t bring me closer to my goal.”

“I hear of an attack on the Amun high priest. It didn’t get you anywhere?”

“It’s all very confusing. The individual pieces cannot be put together to form a whole. Somehow I get the feeling that nobody wants to tell me the truth.”

“No wonder, you are the queen’s sister. Telling you the truth can be dangerous for many.”

“I think rather everyone is tempted to protect their interests. What danger could the royal house pose to vizier Meriptah? He is very powerful. Yet he does not speak the truth.”

“You spoke to him?”

“He told me he went to bed early the night Hetepaten died. But he was seen on the streets of Thebes at that time.”

“Meriptah has always been inconsistent in his claims. Therefore he always managed to remain obscure.”

“He blames others again. Pretends to have good relations with the high priesthood. Why is he doing this?”

“To intimidate you?”

“But it makes him suspicious. Junatonef is said to have met with Horemhab that night.”

“Horemhab?”

“Junatonef is becoming more and more a key to the whole thing.”

“Maybe you’re on the wrong track.”

“The family?”

“Maybe. In families, things are often possible that no sane human mind could conceive of. Conflicts that build up over years, decades, suddenly unfold.”

“But it’s very difficult to figure it out as an outsider.”

“You just have to ask the right questions.”

“You think so? Tell me, Thutmose, you live with several women. What’s it like, do you love them all?”

“Of course.”

“How does it work?”

“Well, it’s a great responsibility for a man to have second wives. “You have to take care of them, make their wishes come true. Desires to have children, for example. Desires for a well-groomed home. That costs a lot of good silver.”

“But surely there’s prestige involved. Showing what you’ve got.”

“Sure, I guess you’re right. But in a small part.”

“What would you say if one of your wives suddenly declared you as her second man. And please don’t bring up traditions now.”

Thutmose seemed strangely disgruntled. After a while of silence, he replied, "It would probably hurt me very much.”

“Then why should a woman feel differently. You taught us that to unravel the truth is our job. But do you always face the truth.”

Thutmose, the otherwise wise teacher, was suddenly without words. An uncomfortably long silence between them.

“Forgive me,” said Mutnedjmet, “the experiences of the past few days have made me an unfeeling person.”

“No, quite the opposite, it seems to me.”

It was a little unpleasant for Mutnedjmet to have her revered teacher trapped. But there was no way around it. To give him a little consolation, she now took the roasted, seemingly disgusting sea creature between her fingers. She smelled it: Not disgusting. Slowly she bit into the crispy flesh.

“Beware of bones,” Thutmose warned.

Slowly, almost gingerly, Mutnedjmet chewed the bitten piece. A brand new, not unpleasant, salty aroma spread across her tongue.

“Not at all... slippery,” she said.

“One should always make up one’s own mind.”

Mutnedjmet kept on eating, “my biggest problem is still the chamber.”

“The chamber”?

“Hetepatens mortuary chamber.”

“There was only one entrance, nobody was in it but Hetepaten. Junatonef entered the room without a weapon, the guards who stood in front of it say unanimously.”

“Maybe the weapon was in there before.”

“The guards can exclude this for sure.”

“Maybe there’s a secret passage to the chamber.”

“I checked. Negative.”

“The guards might be involved.”

“Unlikely, I don’t think.”

“So it all fits together perfectly. Then it must have been for Aten’s will.”

“Some things don’t work together.”

“Which one?”

“The papyrus.”

“What papyrus?”

“Next to the dead Hetepaten they had found a papyrus, on which was written that he abjured the Aten.”

Thutmose was interested. “What’s wrong with it?”

“Well, when would he have written it?”

“Just before he judged himself. I suppose.”

“You see. That’s where I have a problem. There was no ink or a writing brush found in the chamber. So he couldn’t have written it there.”

“He brought the papyrus.”

“Before that, Hetepaten had calmly attended a temple meeting about boring administrative stuff. Then he should have walked into the Gempaaten to ram a sickle sword into his chest? That would mean that he must have written the papyrus long before that. Somehow I can’t believe that.”

“You mean someone else left the paper there.”

“When the guards rushed in, it was already there.”

“Junatonef?”

“The document effectively means his disempowerment. And that was hardly in his interest.”

“But something’s not quite right. Also the assassination attempt on Ptahmose.”

“Someone is after the chief priests. That was the first thing I thought, too.”

“A circumstantial fact. Do you think it’s conclusive enough to save Ay from death?”

“I don’t know? That’s why I’m here. I wanted to ask you for your advice,” Mutnedjmet said.

“Circumstantial evidence is not enough to undo an Oracle saying. Ptahmose would lose face. The only way is a confession or a witness.”

“But ptahmose can’t just turn a blind eye when it comes to finding out somebody crazy. He must undo the Oracle’s words.”

“It’s not in his interest. You’re gonna have to do more research.”

“But there are only a few days left. I don’t know where else to start. It’s not about truths anymore, it’s all about politics. The matter is a few numbers too big for me. I’ve done what can be done.”

“Mutnedjmet. You’re my best student. But you’re trying to avoid the bad stuff, as you so often do. You’re looking for the truth when it doesn’t hurt. You will still have no choice but to choose. Either you close your eyes to real problems and wait until they disappear on their own, or you make them your own. Only by grasping the unpleasantness by the horns will you learn more about your being.”

Mutnedjmet had already eaten almost all the Latos fish. Then Hetep, one of Thutmose’s second wives, came into the kitchen. Hetep was a slave, like most of the second wives in Egypt. "Oh, the good Latos fish, I hope you enjoyed it."

“Excellent,” Mutnedjmet said, not quite convinced yet.

“Excellent,” said Thutmose. "Hetep knows all the delicacies, we wouldn’t know what to do without her."

“But I only bought the fish at the market,” said Hetep flattered.

“You have to have a special eye for that,” said Thutmosis.

“But no,” Hetep said and wanted to make her way again.

“Hetep.” said Thutmose, "tell me, are you happy here with us. With Nefer, Tepi and me." Tepi was Thutmose’s main wife, Nefer his second wife.

“Yes, I am very happy. Especially if you like my fish,” Hetep said.

“And Hetep,” Thutmose asked, "tell me... do you love me?"

“I am always at your service. And I’m very happy to live here with you,” Hetep said and left the room with a friendly smile.

Thoughtfully, Thutmose sat there, watching Mutnedjmet, who nibbled the last remnant of the smoked meat from the bones. Mutnedjmet tried to look at Thutmose expressionlessly and reproachfully, but her look was worth a thousand words.

Chapter Sixteen

Mutnedjmet hurriedly ran through the royal palace. She felt it wasn't fair to feel the whole burden of responsibility on her own shoulders. Didn't Nefertiti have a much greater influence than she did. What could a little mortuary priestess do, who just happened to be the queen's sister. Alone against all the swamps and shallows of the obscure power interests. One had to pull together. Mutnedjmet felt she had already done everything there was to do. The best thing would be to put the facts on the table and demand the initiative of the other family members. To share the responsibility a bit, the young woman's soul was thirsty for this.

She turned the corner and ran through a long portico into the private rooms of Nefertiti and Amenhotep. A young woman came towards her, whom she did not recognize at first.

"Mutnedjmet," cried the woman delightedly as she passed her by.

It was Kiya, one of the second wives of the Pharaoh.

"Kiya," greeted Mutnedjmet, "we haven't seen us for a long time, how are you?"

Kiya was about the same age as Mutnedjmet. She was a sympathetic young woman and had been assigned to Amenhotep a week after his marriage to Nefertiti. Mutnedjmet and Kiya had hardly seen each other at that time, but from the beginning they felt as though they were on the same wavelength.

"I'm fine," Kiya looked at Mutnedjmet's sash. "A priestess? You're a priestess now?"

"Part-time," said Mutnedjmet, "for a few months."

"This is very interesting. They talk here about you being an unusual woman, with unusual needs. So it's true. I really find

that very interesting. As a priestess, what do you do all day long?”

“I am the mortuary priestess of the venerable high priest Hetepaten. It is my task to prepare his way into the kingdom of Osiris.”

“That sounds very exciting. I was one of the first to hear about this terrible thing back then. Here in the palace they talk about it a lot. There are rumours that Ay is supposed to accompany Hetepaten to his grave and that there was an assassination attempt in the Amun Temple. Do you know anything more about it?”

Kiya obviously not only always had an open ear for all kinds of rumours, she was certainly not uninvolved in the creation of a lot of rumour. And that wasn't in Mutnedjmet's best interests at all.

“It's a complicated story about Ay,” said Mutnedjmet, “but tell me, how did you find out about this terrible event?”

“I was on my way to the audience chambers of Amenhotep, when an excited messenger came from the Gempaaten. He wanted to go to the Pharaoh, but he was not there.”

“And that's when he gave *you* the message?” Mutnedjmet said something incredulous.

“No, actually I only learned of it later, but the messenger spoke of the great importance of his message, so we immediately set out to find the king.”

“So?”

“Unfortunately, he was nowhere to be found. Not in the audience chambers, not in his private chambers. I looked for him myself.”

“When did you find him?”

2I then gave up the search. It's not my job, after all. But it was weird.

“What was strange about that?”

“I saw the son of Ameni walking with a gift towards the audience chambers of the Pharaoh.”

“What kind of gift?”

“A big silver plate.”

“What was strange about that?”

“Well, he must have had an appointment with the Pharaoh. Ameni is very influential. That’s why I assumed that Amenhotep was there, so I went to see him.”

“And the son of Ameni?”

“He has waited. Probably in vain. The Pharaoh had vanished from the face of the earth. As did Nefertiti. No one was to be found that night.”

“Where was Nefertiti?”

“I don’t know. I went to see her to ask where the King was, but she was not in her apartments.”

“You didn’t see Dudu and Ay?”

“No.”

“Not in the audience chambers or anywhere else in the royal palace?”

“Certainly not.”

Mutnedjmet was a little confused. Hadn’t Ay told her that he, Dudu and the King had had a conversation during the time Hetepaten was passing away. A member of the influential Ameni family just at that time with the Pharaoh? And where was Nefertiti? Mutnedjmet was confused.

“I wouldn’t worry, they must have been somewhere,” said Mutnedjmet, trying to prevent Kiya from turning her thoughts into a palace rumor.

“I am very sorry about Hetepaten,” said Kiya. “I think he was a good man. He will surely be admitted to the kingdom of Osiris.”

“I’m sure you do. Did you know Hetepaten?”

“Yes. Personally, not very good. ...but he was very often visiting Nefertiti.

“Visiting Nefertiti?”

“They had many conversations.”

“How many times?”

“Probably twice a week. But not for about a month.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know,” Kiya said, whispering privately, “they say she was instrumental in his promotion to high priest.

“Is this what they say?”

“But Hetepaten hasn’t been here for a month. Even at the dedication ceremony for the queen’s new prayer shrine he wasn’t there.”

“Why?”

“Supposedly sick.”

“I see,” Mutnedjmet became thoughtful, “well, he was an older gentleman. She looked at the young Kiya, who seemed fresh and poised.”

“Are you actually happy living here at the palace?”

Kiya didn’t quite understand, “yes, very happy.”

“I mean, as a second wife of the Pharaoh, are you happy with *it*?”

“It is a great honor for me to be the second wife of the Pharaoh.”

“I mean, do you *love* him?”

“There is no one I love more.”

“And - does he love you?”

“You’ll have to question the Pharaoh.”

“Who do you think Amenhotep loves more. You or the queen?”

“The queen, of course. I would never presume to level with the queen. We all pay homage to the queen. We kneel to her. She is our way to Aten.”

A diplomatic answer. But Mutnedjmet wouldn't buy it as the truth.

"How close is your relationship with the Pharaoh?"

"He often takes care of me."

"How often does he *take care* of you?"

"At least once a week, sometimes three times."

"Three times."

Kiya proud, flattered, "Yes, he likes me very much."

"And how often does he *care* for Nefertiti?"

"I can't say. You have to ask her yourself. Anenophis has great respect for his queen. She means everything to him."

Mutnedjmet was in a reflective mood. "It was very nice to meet you again. I am happy that you are doing so well here at the palace."

"It was nice to meet you again. I wish you continued success in your new office. How are things going? I mean, marriage-wise. Here in the palace they talk about Haramhab being your chosen one. Is that true?"

Now this was a topic that Mutnedjmet did not want to touch on at all. The whirlwind of rumours in the palace was unbearable for her anyway. "There is nothing definite about me yet in this regard. Aten had planned that I would first have to devote myself to my spiritual duties. The gods. That's how they are."

"The will of the gods must always be ours."

Mutnedjmet quickly said goodbye to Kiya and took quick steps into the queen's chambers.

* * *

When Mutnedjmet was let into the queen's private room, she was just about to try on some new wigs.

“Mutnedjmet” Nefertiti greeted her sister with joy. “How do you like this one. She put on a dark wig with many short plaits.”

“Pretty,” said Mutnedjmet, “but somehow.. not fit for a queen.”

Nefertiti looked at her face in a mirror of silver. “You are right.”

She took off the wig and reached for the next one. “I thought about shaving my head again. What do you think?”

“But no, you have such beautiful dark hair. I’ve always admired that about you.”

“But it’s much more comfortable without hair. You can’t see it under the royal crown anyway.”

In Egypt it was common practice for adults to shave off all body hair. Due to the hot climate, insects and parasites were a constant plague, which liked to settle in the hair. By shaving carefully you could escaped the unpleasant bloodsuckers. Wigs were an important fashion accessory especially for women. They existed in many different forms. With plaits, without plaits, in different shades of dark. A particularly beautiful wig was perceived by men as very sexy, which is why the woman paid much attention to it.

Mutnedjmet herself had not shaved off her hair and wore a long side-curl, as is usually the case with young girls.

“Besides,” said Nefertiti, “a queen is not expected to walk around like a young girl. Perhaps then some would have more respect.”

“As you think, my venerable sister.”

“How’s your job? We only have a few days left. Are there any new facts?”

“Ptahmose was assassinated. With a sickle sword, like Hetepaten.”

“We’ve already heard.”

“There may be a mad high priest killer on the loose.”

“The Pharaoh has already tried to make this suspicion public. But he has fallen on deaf ears with the Amun priesthood. The Oracle’s verdict still stands.”

“But the logic points in another direction.”

“To the priesthood, logic can never be above the will of the Oracle. Just an evidence. Irrefutable evidence might change the Oracle’s mind, otherwise it risks losing its credibility.

“Unfortunately, I cannot serve with such irrefutable evidence. I think the only way to save our father will be in politics. And in that, the Pharaoh and his advisor knows much better than I do.”

“And also the Amun priesthood. Our only way to save Ay is to prove that Hetepaten didn’t execute himself. You know that. We place all our hopes in you.”

Time was moving fast, Mutnedjmet knew, it made no sense to think any more about the fate of Ay or the dark destiny that would soon befall her soul. She had to look ahead without martyring herself with dark thoughts.

“Perhaps you can help me a little,” said Mutnedjmet.

“I’d be happy to, if you tell me how.”

“Did you perhaps make any observations during the time Hetepaten passed away? Unusual observations?”

“Not that I know of.”

“You were not at the royal palace at the time?”

“Yes, I went to see my mother-in-law, the venerable Tiye. You know she’s a woman who wants to know everything that happens around the Pharaoh. So I have the honor to visit her here and there and ask her questions. A not unexhausting thing.”

“How was your relationship with Hetepaten?”

“Good.”

“They say that you’ve been seeing each other many times.”

“Hetepaten was a very influential man. It was very important to keep good contact with him.”

“Was he a nice man?”

“Quite. As far as I can tell from our professional collaboration.”

“For some time now, he has stayed away from the palace. Do you know why?”

“His somewhat frail health. Hetepaten was no longer the youngest.”

Nefertiti had put on one of the wigs again and straightened it. “What do you think of these?”

“Surely the Pharaoh will like it.”

“You think?”

“Yes. Tell me... what’s it like being a married woman who has to share her husband with second wives? I only ask that... well, Horemhab has already chosen a second wife.”

Nefertiti became aware. “A first wife need not *share* a husband. She is and always will be his first woman.”

“Yes, but how does it make you feel?”

“In time, it will become quite normal. That’s just the way traditions are. Having to accept a second wife is the price you pay if you want to live with a successful man.”

“But is this then true love or shared love?”

“You’ll figure it out for yourself.”

“But I don’t want to find out for myself, so I’m asking for your advice.”

“Well. The truth is not always pleasant, dear sister. But everyone feels differently. So each must have his own experience.”

“No. If I don’t make a decision up front, it’ll be too late afterwards.”

“You go against the traditions of Egypt. These are traditions that are defended by society. No one would want to

be deprived of a privilege. As so often in life, we have to compromise.”

“I’m a very compromising person. But in the right thing at the right time.”

“How often does the Pharaoh take care of you?”

“All day. He’s very concerned about my well-being.”

“I meant the night. How often does he *take care* of you in your bedchamber?”

“Now, dear sis, this may remain my secret, which I cannot reveal even to you.”

“Knowing you, I guess - once a month,” Mutnedjmet remarked a little bit sweet.

“Once a *month*,” Nefertiti was a little cornered, “I would say more like once a *week*.”

“Once a week,” Mutnedjmet repeated with a thoughtful look.

“The Pharaoh is a very loving and sincere man. I am the center of his existence, he says, I am second only to Aten.”

“I thank you for helping me make my decision. By the way, *this* wig is quite sexy,” said Mutnedjmet and pointed to a hairpiece.

“You think so?” said Nefertiti.

“Yes, I would put it on instead of the royal crown if I were you, when the Pharaoh *takes care* of you again. He will like it very much.”

“Thanks for your advice.”

Mutnedjmet left her sister’s chambers. The burden on her shoulders had not eased, but she had come to a decision. And this was the first good turn of events in a long time.

* * *

Mutnedjmet was on her way to Horemhab’s villa. She didn’t want to waste any time telling him what she was doing. And

she resolved to be swayed in her opinion by nothing and no one.

When she turned the corner in the garden of the house, she suddenly realized that it would not be easy. Renpi, her lover's second wife, was about to pour sheep's milk into jugs. When she saw Mutnedjmet, she immediately stopped working, ran to Mutnedjmet and bowed down before her.

"Oh, almighty sister of the queen... be greeted. I take the liberty of declaring me to your most humble servant. If you have a wish, let me know. I will do my utmost to grant it immediately."

A very uncomfortable situation for Mutnedjmet, she didn't want to let the wind be taken out from her sails. Nothing should affect her conscience.

"Thank you, carry on," said Mutnedjmet.

"I am your most loyal servant. It is very important for me that you know this. Through you I will be closer to Aten."

"Well, well," said Mutnedjmet, "then tell me, is Horemhab there?"

"Yes, he's at home studying."

"Thank you."

Mutnedjmet strode briskly through the garden and into the villa. In his study she found Horemhab bent over the table, studying some maps. Obviously for one of his further campaigns.

"Hello Horemhab," said Mutnedjmet

"Dearest one. The sun awakens in my heart when you enter my house."

"First listen to what I have to tell you."

"Wouldn't you like to sit down first. I'm studying a new map of the Kingdom of Mitanni here. It might interest you, too. It's all drawn much more accurately and in much more detail

than previous maps. The knowledge of this papyrus will bring many benefits to the royal house.”

“How nice. I don’t want to sit down. Thank you.” Mutnedjmet walked up and down a little nervously.

“It’s nice that you have new cards and already plan your strategies for the future. But as you know as a commander, you must always discuss your plans with your partners first.”

“That’s the most important thing, you’re right.”

“You told me to decide about Rini after careful consideration.”

“Renpi,” Horemhab repaired.

“Or Renpi. Either way. I have made a decision after careful consideration.”

When she looked at Horemhab, she could detect a fearful swallowing. She was getting concerned.

“I’m sorry,” said Mutnedjmet, “but I cannot accept a second wife. If you love someone, you cannot share them with anyone else. Rini...”

“Renpi.”

“Renpi is a very nice child, but I’m certainly not going to live in a house with her. I hope you can understand that.”

“But it’s customary. Everyone does. It’s tradition.”

“Dont tell me something about tradition. And dont tell me about *everyone*. I am not *everyone*.”

“But *you* will always be my first wife. The most important in my life.”

“If I am to be your wife, I am to be not only your first wife, but your *only* wife.”

“Nor is there just *one* god. There are *several* gods. I guess I don’t have to tell a priestess that. It’s against the spiritualistic principles.”

“Spiritual principles! Don’t make me laugh! All you care about is your *pleasure*. You care about *prestige*, besides, thanks to

our new Pharaoh, there is only one god. So traditions no longer count.”

“The traditions still hold. Or do you think anyone outside the Gempaaten really takes notice of the new Aten.”

“Well, you can be sure of that.”

“In Thebes, Amun still rules and every town, no matter how small, has its own deity. But no matter. We should not discuss gods, but the future.”

“*You* brought the gods into this.”

“Renpi is an ideal second wife. She admires you. She respects you. What better thing could anyone ask for?”

“I wish her to leave your house. And I want her to leave as soon as possible. You have to make a choice. Either me without second wives. Or you must find someone else.”

“You’re pressuring me.”

“Of course. You must know what you want. Let me know when you decide.”

Mutnedjmet turned around and tried to leave the room. There was Renpi standing in the doorway, frightened, despondent. Mutnedjmet flinched a little. “I’m sorry, but this is my decision,” she said.

“Please, your grace, do not expel me from the house. I will be your most faithful servant.”

“It has nothing to do with you personally. It’s a decision of principle. Look. Neither I nor you would be happy in this situation. It’s the best thing for all of us.

“What’s going to happen to me if you throw me out of the house?”

“You just go back to your family.”

“I have no family. I worked as a maid in the faraway provinces. I cannot return there.”

Renpi threw himself on the floor in front of Mutnedjmet. “Please don’t turn me away. I beg of you.”

Silence in the room.

“Don’t worry,” said Mutnedjmet, “I’ll find a solution for you.”

She turned to Horemhab: “My decision is clear. The final decision is yours.”

Mutnedjmet left the house. On one hand, she had let her anger out. But the relief she expected did not materialize. She would find something for Renpi to do at the palace. Mutnedjmet was far from hard-hearted. But in the end, it was all in the hands of Horemhab. What choice would he make? And how would she evaluate that choice? If he chose Mutnedjmet, the question would still be whether he did so out of love or tactics. If he decided against Mutnedjmet, it would mean that he had never loved her. Mutnedjmet’s soul stood at the narrow edge of a deep abyss.

Chapter Seventeen

Mutnedjmet had no choice but to continue her investigations. Even to explore the most unusual things, like a scout who set out into the endless desert to find a waterhole that did not exist. Because it was the second last day before Hetepatens' funeral.

Wasn't there that old man who claimed to have seen a goddess floating in Gempaaten? Mutnedjmet was determined to follow up on every lead, no matter how small. If only to distract herself from the thoughts of what her lover would decide.

But Horemhab's decision did not weigh anything compared to the fact that in two days her father Ay would spend his last hours in a dark tomb. Her soul became very cold at this thought, which is why she had pushed it far away. She wanted to concentrate on her professional and careful approach.

But the horrible vision of Ay's loss caught up with her more and more, like a merciless crocodile sure of his prey. And also the feeling of having to fail was unbearable. There was not the slightest glimmer of a solution. Yes, quite the contrary.

Mutnedjmet entered the Gempaaten complex. Her destination: the priestly lodgings. Close to the building were the lodgings of the high priesthood. Mud-brick buildings of good architectural quality. Luxurious, with high stone columns. For the clerical personnel of the lower categories it was quite different. They were located quite a while away from the temple complex.

Mutnedjmet started her journey. The dormitories of the lower priesthood had only recently been rebuilt, so they made quite a decent impression. This much Mutnedjmet could see from a distance.

In contrast to the dilapidated dwellings of the lower Amun priesthood. They were decades old, at the sight of them one might think they were already thousands of years old. A patchwork of clay, straw, dust.

The new dwellings of Gempaaten, on the other hand, also radiated the will of Pharaoh to renew.

When Mutnedjmet arrived, she was hardly noticed at first. A simple mortuary priestess received little attention. She entered one of the elongated main houses. The individual bedrooms were lined up in a row like cells. There was no decoration, no large entrance portal, no vestibule or other structural peculiarity. The accommodations had only one purpose to fulfil: To be cheap and to serve as sleeping quarters. Mutnedjmet called out to three priests who were about to leave the building: "I'm looking for Nebmaat."

"Nebmaat?" someone said.

"Nebmaat. An old priest, he shall live here," said Mutnedjmet.

"I don't know," he replied.

Mutnedjmet continued her search. The doors to the single rooms were only covered with curtains. Inside was a flat, plain wooden bedstead with a thin straw mattress on top. Most of the rooms were empty, in some the occupant slept. Day and night shifts were common in the Gempaaten.

As Mutnedjmet peered through a door, she saw a priest who was just about to lie down.

"Excuse me," said Mutnedjmet, "I'm looking for Nebmaat, an old priest."

"Nebmaat, in the third wing, at the far end," she received a brief reply before he tiredly threw himself on the cot.

Mutnedjmet went to the third wing. A musty smell was drifting through the area. The wing was completely empty, but at the far end, in the last corner, the last chamber, an old priest

on a cot. A gloomy cell. But a bright light fell through the small window on the old man. Next to him, barren belongings. A cup of stale beer. Then he seemed to notice the presence of Mutnedjmet.

“Are you Nebmaat?” Mutnedjmet asked.

The old man was a little startled, said in surprise, “Yes, I am a Nebmaat, who wants to know and why?”

“I am a mortuary priestess of Gempaaten, just as you are.”

“Oh, a woman. A young voice. You must excuse my poor eyesight.”

He sat up slowly. “What can I do for you?”

“I’m new and particularly interested in unusual spiritual phenomena.”

“That’s a good young lady. You should be looking for it in this world to be prepared.”

“Prepared for what?”

“Prepared for the passage to the next world.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Not likely. I’m definitely right. Believe an old man like me.”

“I have learned from a friend of mine that you have recently had an apparition. ...at the Gempaaten.”

“What did your friend tell you about this? I hope you’re not making fun of me?”

“Absolutely not.”

“Making fun of spiritual things doesn’t bring happiness.”

“I completely agree with them. I was told that a floating goddess appeared to you.”

“That’s right.”

“Tell me more about it. Which goddess was it?”

“I have no idea.”

“Then how did they know it was a goddess?”

“It was a woman. And who else can float but birds and goddesses?”

“All right. What exactly did she do?”

“Well I was on my way through the Gempaaten that night when this woman floated above the ground in front of me in the corridor. Pale as a dead woman.”

“What did you do?”

“At first, I froze with fear. Then I threw myself on the ground and humbly bowed my head.”

“How did the goddess react to this?”

“I have no idea. When I dared to look up after a while, she was gone.”

“Where in the Gempaaten did this happen exactly?”

“In the back, by the mortuary chambers.”

“Can you perhaps remember when this event occurred?”

“Yes, of course I can.”

“So?”

“It was exactly that night before the great Hetepaten was ordered to the kingdom of Osiris. Mystical things happen in the Gempaaten. Believe me.”

“What do you think is behind this?”

“Aten has taken over the rule of Thebes. All the other gods envy him now.”

“They may be right.”

“Why did you, such a young woman, decide to be a mortuary priestess?”

“I was asked to.”

“As always. It was the same with me. At first I was asked. I’ve stuck to it until today.”

“How long have you held this office?”

“All my life. I thought it would bring me a little closer to the truth.”

“And. Is this possible?”

“Yes, of course.”

“Tell me about the truth.”

“It’s a long way, young child, to discover the secrets of truth. When I attended the seminary many, many years ago, we were strictly forbidden to think about reality. Only what was passed down was allowed. Any new and independent thought was forbidden.”

“This is not good.”

“You got that right. The free thought of man is one of his most important qualities. There were some who thought like me back then and we turned our minds away from the gods. All lore was wrong we thought. Only everything that can be seen directly in nature, by mere experience, is right.”

“Do you still share this view today?”

“Yes and no. Because through experience you cannot see the afterlife. And what sense does this world make then?”

“What’s the solution?”

“The solution, dear child, does not exist. But one thing is clear. The gods created the world and control the afterlife. But the truth in this world can only be found by each individual. So discovering reality is in your hands.”

“And what about luck?”

“The same is true with happiness. It’s in your hands to find happiness. Find it soon, you have little time. Do not wait for the gods or anyone else.

“If the gods do not control this world, is the Pharaoh divine? Can Aten speak through him?”

“I am an old man and I would like to spend a peaceful evening of life. Therefore I do not want to let my thoughts go further into this direction. At my age it is much more important to look at the other world. This world is becoming less important.”

“The years have made you wise.”

“But no. The years just make old. You often find out that you had the right thoughts at a very early age. But they remain on the long road of the routine of our lives.”

“I thank you for your openness and wish you all the best.”

“All the best for your future young lady. That you may know the truth.”

Mutnedjmet left the old priest’s chamber. The rooms suddenly seemed less musty and desolate than they had been at first. If the gods only control the afterlife, how did this fit into the traditions of Egypt? Was the Pharaoh not divine? In the early days of the land on the Nile, the Pharaoh was considered a god in person. All values were based on him. Already in this world one could learn from him what the hereafter would look like for everyone. If that was not true, then who was the Pharaoh? In the end, an ordinary person?

If happiness is in your own hands, where is it to be found, Mutnedjmet thought. You probably only have to open your hand. Was that the solution? Did Mutnedjmet already have the solution in her hand, but she just couldn’t decipher it.

A little confused, Mutnedjmet felt a little more up to her task again.

* * *

Mutnedjmet had to order her thoughts like a librarian orders his tangled archive. Where could this be done best than at the place of the incident. She entered the Gempaaten, went into the corridor in front of the mortuary chambers.

So it was here that the old priest had a goddess apparition. The eyesight of the old man was already somewhat clouded. His mind was perhaps also a little confused. How seriously should Mutnedjmet take his apparition? Did all this have anything to do with Hetepaten’s death? The young woman couldn’t make sense of it.

“Reverend Mutnedjmet,” shouted someone behind her.

Mutnedjmet turned and saw Bakamun, the third priest of Aten. Smiling friendly. Curiosity was written all over his face.

“Is there anything I can do to help you?”

“No, I was just thinking.”

“What is the purpose of your visit?”

“I have to get systematic in my thoughts. The events have been tumbling over each other.”

“You got that right.”

“I have a question for you.”

“Please, go ahead.”

“Amunsetep told me that someone saw vizier Meriptah in the street that night Hetepaten was ordered to the kingdom of Osiris.” Mutnedjmet glanced at Bakamun with a slanted look.

“Yes?” he said.

“This witness was not, *you*?”

“No, venerable sister of the queen. When the terrible event happened, I was at that funeral at the great place in the rocky valley. The high priest of Amun will gladly confirm this.”

“Oh, yes, right. That celebration with the over a hundred applicants. But you know who has seen Meriptah?”

“Please consult Amunsetep, my superior, on this matter.”

“You would be a great help to me.”

“I’m sure Amunsetep will be happy to answer any questions.”

“He says he can’t help me in this matter.”

“Then neither can I.”

“I would be much obliged.”

“Sorry.”

“I could use my influence with the Pharaoh to help you.”

“I would never ignore my superior officer.”

“I could, however, use my influence with the Pharaoh against you. The Pharaoh is very interested in examining all

circumstances. I am to report to him anyone who prevents me from doing so. Do you think that your position as third priest of the Aten will help you? You are a member of the Amun Clan.

“But didn’t you also work for the Amun Temple?”

“Yes, but I am a member of the royal family, don’t forget. An old proverb says, *“A man is in danger who resists his superior, because he lives only as long as he is lenient.* I think it was the old philosopher *Kagemi* who wrote this. And your superior is the Pharaoh.”

“I completely agree with the old philosopher *Kagemi*. I will not disobey any superior.”

“You have a choice, either you answer my questions or I go straight to the king. And you will answer my questions in front of *him*.”

No reaction from Bakamun. Mutnedjmet turned around and was about to leave.

“Wait,” Bakamun said.

Mutnedjmet stopped.

“You must promise me you’ll keep this information to yourself.”

“Of course.”

“Amunsetep would never forgive me. Employees who commit disloyalty won’t get far.”

“So talk. Who was it that saw Meriptah?”

“It was... it was him.”

“Who? Amunsetep?”

“Right.”

“But Amunsetep was in a meeting at the time of Hetepaten’s death. There are several credible witnesses. That can’t be true.”

“Maybe the timing was different then.”

“What timing?”

“The time whens Meriptah was seen.”

“You mean it had to be sooner or later?”

“I don’t know.”

“Or Meriptah was not in the streets at all, and someone is trying to frame him. A false trail.”

“Amunsetep has never lied. Since I’ve known him. I’ll take his word as credible.”

“I need you to do me one more favor.”

“One more favor.” said Bakamun anxiously. “I knew it.”

“The papyrus.”

“What papyrus?”

“The one on which Hetepaten wrote his last words.”

“What about it?”

“Well. It’s owned by Amunsetep. He keeps it in his duty room.”

“I know.”

“I need it.”

“What does that mean?”

“I need it for research purposes.”

“I don’t understand?”

“You’re gonna get it for me.”

“I’ll gladly ask Amunsetep for you.”

“Without consulting Amunsetep.”

“*No way!*”

“Amunsetep would never give it to me.”

“Absolutely not.”

“I really need the papyrus. I will return it in due course. Amunsetep won’t even notice.”

“Never!”

“Then perhaps he will hear that someone has betrayed that he was the wondrous Meriptah witness.”

“This is extortion, a very deceitful extortion.”

“Call it what you want. In a little while, my father’s final hour is come. I can’t be bothered with any more secrets now.”

“This could cost me my head.”

“I will prevent that. I am the queen’s sister. I’m behind you. I have the trust of the Pharaoh. You take no risks.”

“You probably don’t believe in that yourself.”

“So, what now. Or do I have to go.”

Bakamun snorted. But he had no choice. He wished he had put a stop to his curiosity and not even spoken to Mutnedjmet. But it was too late for that now.”

“Let’s go,” he said.

Both sneaked into the audience wing of the priesthood. Bakamun pushed Mutnedjmet behind a column.

“Wait here. I can only do something when Amunsetep is not here.”

He said it and was already scurrying away. Mutnedjmet wondered about herself. Never before had she acted so harshly against others. But time was running out and this was the only way to stop the delaying tactics. The standstill had to start moving again.

Some time passed. Mutnedjmet already believed that Bakamun had fled. But she saw him return with a furtive look. He pushed her right back behind the column.

“I’m risking my neck for you.”

Bakamun pulled a roll of papyrus from his cloak and gave it to Mutnedjmet.

“When will I get it back?”

“Soon.”

She opened the roll. It was actually the original writing. Bakamun was visibly uncomfortable as Mutnedjmet made off with the important document under her sash. A woman who began to go her way. He had not reckoned with this.

Chapter Eighteen

When Mutnedjmet entered the writing school, she felt reminded of old days. The time when her only concern was the writing of a hieroglyphic text. Though she wished that time back, she knew that turning back was impossible.

Thutmose was, as always, in the process of evaluating the latest writings of his students. Much light flooded the rooms, like the fresh sea current in a secluded lagoon. It was a blessing to be here.

“Thutmose,” said Mutnedjmet, “whenever I see you, you’re absorbed in work.”

Thutmose looked up, pleased to see his young pupil. “Work gives our lives meaning.”

“I don’t know if I want to sign this,” Mutnedjmet said. “I would be happy to spend some time in frolic again. I wanted to turn to you for advice.”

Thutmose turned away from the students. “Come along.”

He went into one of the side chambers, Mutnedjmet followed him. Thutmose carefully closed the door behind them.

“How can I help you? How are you getting on?”

“I try to do my best. but I still can’t find a solution.”

“Time is of the essence.”

“I know. I have something here I want to show you. I want to ask your opinion about it. but I must ask you to keep it confidential.”

“Of course.”

“You must swear to me. It is one of the most explosive documents of Thebes.”

“The papyrus! I swear to you, not a word of this will ever pass my lips.”

Mutnedjmet pulled the papyrus from under her sash, unrolled it. She placed it on a small side table.

“What do you think of this? I value your opinion very highly.”

Thutmose read the lines carefully.

“These are words of extreme explosiveness,” he said. “Where did you get it?”

“Borrowed.”

“You must be very careful. One could easily say you stole it. If a member of the royal family steals such an explosive document, it can easily be used against the King.”

“I’ve been paying attention. Don’t worry. No one’s gonna know about this. So. What’s your opinion?”

“Written in noncursive precise print. It took a lot of work.”

“This is the last will and testament of Hetepatens.”

“Unusual.”

“Are you thinking what I’m thinking?”

“No italics.”

“Exactly, that was my first thought, too.”

“He just put in a lot of effort.”

“And the signature?”

“Unusual, very unusual.”

“There was no writing equipment in the chamber.”

“There’s something wrong.”

“You can say that again.”

“But you need proof.”

“No evidence, I know. A witness or a confession. But maybe the circumstantial leads me to one of those.”

“This is your only chance. What else is new?”

“Meriptah. He is a central aspect.”

“The disappointed grand vizier.”

“But something’s wrong. He was supposedly out of the house just before Hetepatens died. Or maybe they’re trying to mislead me.”

“What does Meriptah say of this?”

“I know what he’ll say. Nothing. He’ll talk, but he won’t say anything.”

“The disappointed vizier. But what has he got against Hetepaten?”

“Against the Pharaoh. It was thanks to him, that Ay became the chief advisor. ”

“But how could he get into the mortuary room without being seen?”

“This is still the great mystery that remains to be solved.”

“Other suspects?”

“First there was Junatonef. But Hetepatens son would only harm himself with such a papyrus text. He wanted to become a new high priest, but his chances are slim now. Besides, the question arises how he should have killed his father. Where did the sword come from? He had none in his apron, nor had any been in the chamber before, the guards say.”

“How credible are the guards?”

“There were four. Too many people involved in such a high-risk situation. And they’re all still alive. I was even allowed to talk to them. Had the guards been involved, they would have been eliminated long ago. They are credible witnesses, this is what they should be.

“Ptahmose?”

“The high priest of Amun was at a funeral service during the events at the great place in the rocky valley.”

“He would hardly have gotten his hands dirty. But you’re right. Someone like Ptahmose would probably have the power to clean up the Pharaoh. Besides, they tried to eliminate him too.”

“With a sickle sword, just like Hetepaten.”

“What about Amunsetep?”

“He was at a meeting at the Amun temple complex. There’s a whole bunch of witnesses. And his deputy, Bakamun, was with Ptahmose at that funeral service at the big place in the rock valley. About one hundred witnesses. Besides, the question arises what Hetepatens deputy would have had from his death. They will hardly follow him. They owe their career to Amenhotep.”

“Or maybe the direction is completely wrong. Perhaps Hetepaten’s death has nothing at all to do with the decision about Ay. Maybe the truth lies somewhere else, we automatically suspect the obvious. Perhaps others have counted on it too.”

“I’m afraid I’ve had to consider that as well. The question is, where were the Pharaoh and Dudu at that momentous moment?”

“The Pharaoh?”

“Please forget this again. I just let my restless soul run away with myself.”

Thutmose’s face was superiorly expressive.

“Besides, there was a strange goddess apparition the day before Hetepatens died, just before that mortuary chamber,” said Mutnedjmet. “But it was probably just the rambling fantasies of an old man.”

Both of them suddenly flinched with fright when there was a loud knock on the door.

“I’m looking for Mutnedjmet!” someone shouted.

Thutmose opened.

A guard stood outside.

“I’m looking for a mortuary priestess named Mutnedjmet. Do you know where I can find her?”

“I’m Mutnedjmet,” Mutnedjmet said and came out the door.
“What’s up?”

“Thank Amun, I have finally found you. You shall come quickly. Something’s happened.”

“What happened?”

The guard looked suspiciously at Thutmose, "something that concerns only you.”

“Thutmose is my advisor. Tell me.” said Mutnedjmet

“Someone tried to kill the third High Priest of Aten. He asks for you.”

“Bakamun!”

“Right. He awaits you outside the house of the grand vizier Meriptah.”

“Why there?”

“From the roof of that very house, someone threw a great stone block at him. But luckily he missed.”

“Let’s go.” said Mutnedjmet.

The guard ran ahead. Thutmose held Mutnedjmet for a moment.

“You have little time left. Don’t let anyone confuse you, don’t get involved with the wrong. The sarcophagus for Ay is already finished. Tomorrow morning the mummification of Hetepaten will take place. Tomorrow is the last day. The hours are running out of you.”

“I will do everything in my power. And I will not be sent down the wrong path.”

Mutnedjmet tried not to think about what would happen tomorrow or the day after. She had almost accepted her fate and that of Ay. She would do anything to prevent it, clutching at any semblance, but she had to think pragmatically, there was no way out in sight.

* * *

Mutnedjmet ran with the guard across the Amun temple complex. In front of the house of Meriptah, a gathering of people. Bakamun leaned against a wall at the edge. He was pleased to see Mutnedjmet.

“I am glad you came. You are the current specialist for such events in Thebes.”

“What happened?”

“I walk guilelessly along the path, and suddenly,” Bakamun pointed to a boulder, which had the dimensions of a small table, “this boulder struck beside me. Someone must have thrown it from the roof. From the roof of the vizier Meriptah.”

“What does Meriptah say of this?”

“He’s not a talkative person. He says he had nothing to do with it.”

“Have you inspected the roof?”

“I called the guards, they checked, nobody upstairs.”

“Of course. What are you doing here in the Amun Temple complex?”

“A meeting of the priesthood. It deals with administrative matters. Food rationing and all that sort of thing.”

“You come here often?”

“Twice a week.”

“On the same day?”

“Yes.”

“You always go the same way?”

“Yes, I think so?”

“Do you suspect anyone?”

“No. I don’t see who could do such a thing. Maybe it was just a coincidence.”

“A coincidence.” Mutnedjmet looked at the big boulder. “It was a great coincidence. What’s a colossus like that doing on the roof of a house?”

Mutnedjmet stepped to the stone, half-heartedly pressing her leg against it. "It will take at least two strong men to carry it up there."

"But who would do such a thing. And why?"

"That's what we have to find out. I'll take care of it. I think the most important thing now is a talk with grand vizier Meriptah."

"Thank you very much. If I can help you, let me know."

"You may return to the Gempaaten. I'll be in touch."

* * *

Mutnedjmet, unimpressed by the crowd, walked up to the front gate Meriptahs, knocked.

After a short time the young maid opened. "The honorable gentleman won't see anyone today."

"Tell him I want to talk to him. Mutnedjmet, the mortuary priestess of Hetepaten. I'm sure he has time for me."

The maid disappeared, came back after a short while. "Please come in."

She led Mutnedjmet into the small garden where Meriptah sat on a bench with a small Nile crocodile baby in his hands. The reptile would squawk from time to time, making shrill sounds.

"The queen's sister visits me again. What a joy."

"You haven't told me the truth," Mutnedjmet attacked the vizier. "I humbly apologize for my directness."

"I cannot remember," said Meriptah.

"You told me you didn't leave your house the night Hetepatens died."

"That's right."

"However, there is a witness who says otherwise. They say you were seen in the streets."

"I must have been mistaken. I was here all along."

“Today a man was almost killed by a stone that fell from the roof of your house.”

“This is a shock to me as well. Someone must have been prowling around on my roof. The temple guards checked it out. Unfortunately in vain. I’ll ask for protection, against such uninvited guests. If I am granted it.”

“Coincidentally, it was the very man who was almost killed who knew about the existence of the witness who claims to have seen you on the street. The day Hetepaten died.”

“And now you think I threw a rock at him? Off my roof? Is that how you see me? That’s not how I thought you were.”

“Maybe someone’s trying to pin it on you. Maybe someone’s going to setting up a false trail for me.”

The baby crocodile bit Meriptah’ finger and made a muffled croaking sound.

“Hence the effort of your visit. I did not misjudge you.” He pulled his finger out of the mouth of the mini reptile.

“Who might be after you?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“I think the question is rather: Who is trying to lay a false trail for you. That I was chosen for this is more of a coincidence.”

“Nevertheless, you should be interested in averting suspicion from you.”

“So you’re here to get a little clue. Well, I’ll be careful not to mess with sickle sword and stone-throwing fellows. Taking cover is often the most subtle tactic.”

“Dont you care you may be used in this way. And your reputation may be tarnished.”

The crocodile emitted a tortured screech. Apparently Meriptahs hand had unconsciously cramped itself a little too tightly around the little animal. "Some palace guards inspected my roof.”

“And found nothing, that was obvious,” said Mutnedjmet.

“What do you expect from such people. But you might want to do it a little more thoroughly. You might find some clues there. So. This is all I can tell you.”

Meriptah stood up. “I’m tired and I must rest awhile. All the best, young woman.”

He went into the house and left Mutnedjmet alone.

The young woman looked up at the roof. A clue? Up there? She left the garden, looking for the maid, who was quickly found.

“To the roof. How do I get to the roof?”

The maid didn’t quite understand, but she showed her the way to a narrow room at the end of a long corridor. There in a niche was a very slim wooden ladder. With a creaky step Mutnedjmet climbed up through the air opening onto the roof. It was a flat roof made of palm poles, twigs, straw, and a hard layer of clay on top. From there, Mutnedjmet had a wonderful view of the entire Amun complex. Only the temple overlooked the rest. It had been a difficult and dangerous thing to carry the heavy boulder up to the roof. Every second the risk of breaking through. The wooden stairs. Impossible. Much too narrow for the stone block.

Mutnedjmet continued to climb over the roof, which was heated by the sun.

The houses in Thebes stood close together. Narrow alleys between them. The house of Meriptahs bordered directly on another building. With one step one could climb onto the next roof. It was a feudal complex of buildings. Whose building was this?

Mutnedjmet staggered over the uneven ground and climbed over. She walked along the adjacent roof. Some deep atriums. A very narrow doorway, like Meriptah’s. It should lead to the wooden walkway. Too narrow for the boulders. Mutnedjmet walked on, gazing over the edge of the roof. Two high

balcony-like terraces. Could the stone have been lifted up from there, maybe pulled up with a rope? Whose building complex was this? An old building. There were cracks in the clay roofing.

Mutnedjmet went back and climbed down the wooden ladder again in Meriptah's house.

She left the house in a hurry. Her curiosity was great when she turned the corner. She didn't even have to ask. Big feudal doors, frequented by countless priests. The adjoining building was accommodation for higher priests of the Amun temple. Several hundred priests would live there. In more upscale luxury than the lower clerical servants on the outskirts of the city.

Had the boulder been brought from one of the terraces to the roof and carried from there to that of Meriptah? A little risky not to get unpleasant confidants among the hundreds of priests. Much safer would be a cable-hoist from Meriptah's garden. But that Meriptah himself should throw a stone from his own roof did not quite suit him. Perhaps for that very reason?

Mutnedjmet, as so often, had come closer to the truth, but she was denied a view of the solution. The Amun networks remained inscrutable. But for how much longer?

Chapter Nineteen

A foggy morning. It was the last day. Tomorrow Hetepaten would be buried and with him Ay. Mutnedjmet walked a little muted along the path, out to Imuit's mummification site. In her hand a book of the dead for Hetepaten. Magnificently decorated, a luxury edition.

Just as the waning moon made it appear darker every night, Mutnedjmet's mood had darkened more and more in the last few days. She became more and more aware of the hopelessness of her efforts, many suspicions and inconsistencies had accumulated. It was as clear as stale water from the Nile whose green silt had settled on the ground: Something was wrong. But it became more and more certain that this would not change anything at the end of history. Ay would have to die because she was unsuccessful. An unbearable thought for the young woman.

It was the day of the embalming of Hetepaten's body and it was the holy duty of every mortuary priest to attend this ritual. It was a turning point for Mutnedjmet. As if she was standing in front of a bridge that was sinking in the floods, she became fully aware of the hopelessness of the situation.

The bad smell surrounding the place would probably never leave her mind. Just like the squeaky screams of the hyena breeding. Mutnedjmet entered the main house. "Mutnedjmet. I came to Imuit because of Hetepaten."

Suddenly excitement arose in the servants. One of the servants humbly bowed, "Please follow me, venerable."

A little surprised she followed him through the building into one of the barracks. Hetepaten had been assigned his own pavilion, unlike the many others here. There Imuit was already waiting with some assistants.

“Venerable Mutnedjmet.” Imuit bowed, “It is a great pleasure for me. Why didn’t you tell me who you really are. The sister of the almighty queen, in my lousy halls. I welcome you most heartily.”

“I beg you to pay no attention to my origins. I am here only in my function as the mortuary priestess of Hetepaten.”

“Most venerable of course.”

“The mummification was successful?”

“As planned. As you know - my company stands for reliability and quality.”

Mutnedjmet stepped inside the room. There the body of Hetepatens lay completely desiccated on a raised wooden bench. Next to it stood a helper who carefully filled sand into the body.

“So Hetepaten is ready. Are you sure?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Of course,” Imuit said, “we just have to prepare him and he can start his journey to the next world.

Another assistant stirred resins and myrrh in a tub, enveloping the whole room in a fragrant haze.

“What must I do? Read from the book of the dead?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“That’s best saved for the ceremony,” said Imuit, “just put the book of the dead there, that’s enough.”

Mutnedjmet went to the wooden shelf that Imuit had meant and which stood beside the head of Hetepaten. She put the book down.

The assistant now began to soak linen cloth in the resin mixture and stuff it into Hetepatens’ chest. His movements were graceful and benevolent. A professional. Another pushed thin, resin-soaked linen sheets with a thin wooden stick through his nose into the skull.

“Most venerable sister of the queen,” Imuit said. “It’s a little unpleasant for me, but I would ask you to pay special attention to this.”

He took a small box that stood on a shelf and gave it to Mutnedjmet. She opened it. A whole array of gold pendants and jewelry.

“Burial objects for the mummy,” Imuit said, “I humbly ask you to check the exact use and addition of these pieces. There was a little problem.”

“What problem?”

“A vanished pendant. A *supposedly* disappeared pedant,” Imuit corrected himself.

“What do you mean?”

“The wife of the deceased claims that Hetepaten always wore a golden pendant in the form of an ankh-sign, on the back of which the name of the Pharaoh



was engraved. But when we collected the body from the temple, there was no such pendant.”

“Somebody stole it?”

“I guarantee for each of my employees. This is inexplicable to me. With us, nothing has disappeared yet. That’s not possible. It would damage the reputation of our company. When we picked up the body, I guarantee you there was no jewelry.”

“What time after his death did you pick up Hetepaten?”

“First thing in the morning.”

“Then the pendant must have disappeared in the night?”

“Well, if there was a pendant at all. So far, only the wife claims its existence. I think we’ve been confused with ghouls. But I can guarantee you the most proper procedure.”

“Do not worry, Imuit. No one accuses you. I believe you. I will settle the matter.”

Imuit was relieved.

“We do everything here with absolute correctness. Even the canoptic chests are perfectly equipped. I ask you to make sure of that.”

Imuit stepped back and pointed to four jugs. The stone lids were each modelled on a human head, a baboon’s head, a shawl’s head and a falcon’s head. “Best limestone from the Thutmose workshop.”

“He’s a great artist,” said Mutnedjmet, and, to escape control, turned back to the assistants who were there to anoint the skin of the body with oil.

But Imuit insisted. He lifted the hawk’s lid, “please convince yourself, *the intestines*. All there.”

Mutnedjmet couldn’t help it now and had to take a look to make Imuit happy. In an oily soup Hetepatens guts were swimming.

“Quite excellent. But I trust you completely.”

“And here,” Imuit wanted to open the other jars: “Liver, lungs, stomach.”

“There’s no need to open them,” said Mutnedjmet, “let’s just concentrate on the ritual.”

One of the assistants began to coat Hetepaten’s body with liquid resin.

“Honored sister of the queen,” Imuit continued, “your trust honors me above all else. There is a little something I wanted to talk to you about.”

“Speak.”

“What’s the best way to begin.” Imuit pondered, then it burst out of him: “Crocodiles. I think crocodiles are the future.”

“Excuse me?”

“A crocodile farm. I plan to add a crocodile farm to the hyena farm.”

Mutnedjmet looked at Imuit thoughtfully. “I think... who else, if not you?”

“You’re absolutely right. These dangerous creatures are always threatening somebody as long as they are swimming around in the Nile. I’ll just get them behind secure fences. I can already see it. Crocodile leather, croc meat, even croc hunt. Everything only at Imuit. Don’t you think this is a unique business idea,” Imuit exclaimed enthusiastically.

“Grandiose,” Mutnedjmet contributed.

“I will expand my business to become the largest in Thebes. But no, to the largest in Upper Egypt. Of course, this is only possible due to years of experience in hyena breeding. The thing is - and here I wanted to turn to you. Crocodile meat would be a relatively new product on the market. Such new introductions, mainly from private hands, enliven the economic location of Thebes. But new products sometimes meet with rejection. But if the Royal Family were to become one of my customers, of course with special discount, crocodile meat could soon become a trend. A new culinary experience. And healthy.”

“I will recommend it to the queen. Let us have some samples when the time comes.”

“Oh, you make me the happiest mummy master in Thebes. I knew it. The royal family stands by its merchants.”

Now the mummification assistants slowly began to wrap Hetepaten’s body in linen bandages. At different parts of the body they included the amulets and jewellery in the wrapping. They made sure that Mutnedjmet could see exactly what was wrapped where. After all, nothing else should be lost.

Imuit's enthusiasm about the young mortuary priestess was clearly visible to him. Something was still on the tip of his tongue.

"Something else?" Mutnedjmet asked.

"I don't know how to say it."

"Straight out."

"Hippo meat." it burst out of Imuit. "Wouldn't that be worth considering?"

Mutnedjmet looked at him pleading.

"I know, a little fat. But nutritious. It's been used for centuries against all kinds of diseases. And now on the plates. I will call it, *the meat that makes you healthy*. I'll start with a few specimens. May I add you a few kilos of hippopotamus to your croco delivery?"

"If it's no bother."

"Of course not!"

Imuit's eyes flashed. It was obvious to him that he was already planning details for the enlargement of his barrack complex.

* * *

The wrapping of Hetepaten's body was coming to an end. Imuit's business plans had distracted Mutnedjmet a little from the ritual's murky meaning for her. Now they still had to transport the body into the Gempaaten, which she had to accompany as priestess.

The servants put Hetepaten on a frame which they lifted onto her shoulders. Mutnedjmet took the book of the dead again. She had to lead the convoy.

"Hopefully this time they have emptied their own chamber in the temple, not like they did with Sechimi," Imuit said.

"But he had his own chamber?" Mutnedjmet asks.

“Yes, but only on the day Hetepaten died. Before that, he lay in the room together with his wife’s sarcophagus. Typical temple sloppiness. Hundreds of priests but one doesn’t know what the other one is doing.”

“So two coffins stood together for some time.”

“Exactly,” said Imuit and was already about to give the mummy convoy the order to leave.

“In which chamber and when?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“We mummified Netjeret, Sechimi’s wife, and carried her to a mortuary chamber in the Gempaaten. The next day we came with Sechimi’s mummy. Since no other chamber was free, they had placed his sarcophagus next to his wife’s. There we put his mummy inside.”

“But when Hetepaten died there was only one sarcophagus in the chamber, that of Sechimi, I examined it.”

“Of course. On the day when Hetepaten died, in the kingdom of Osiris may he live forever, his wife’s sarcophagus was safely moved to another chamber. Otherwise the sloppiness would have been revealed. It was clear that Hetepaten would personally pay his last respects to his friend.”

Mutnedjmet got thoughtful.

Imuit clapped his hands. The mummy convoy started to move. Mutnedjmet at the head. Behind them six servants carrying the mummy, behind them Imuit.

“I hope Thutmose has already delivered the sarcophagus to the temple. At least, that’s what he said. The chances are good. He’s a businessman.”

Slowly the group started moving, moving further and further away from the mummification place and heading towards Gempaaten, who was already in sight in some distance. Mutnedjmet felt the moment of truth approaching. Inevitably, the traditions of Thebes went their way.

Hetepatens mummy convoy moved along the walls of the Amun district. A slight cloud of dust was visible above the Amun temple complex, like thin smoke over hot coal embers. Mutnedjmet was engrossed in her gloomy thoughts, Imuit in his business. As they tried to pass a wall gate, they saw a large crowd of people angrily roaming around the sacred pond. A large amount of dust was stirred up.

Mutnedjmet almost wanted to go on, she had too much else in mind, when from a distance she heard words like *death...slain...* That was important after all.

“Can you continue the train alone,” Mutnedjmet said to Imuit, “I have to see what’s going on.

“Oh, it’s probably nothing,” said Imuit, “some unimportant attraction. Go on, we’ll manage the the little way to the Gempaaten.”

The mummy convoy continued its journey. Mutnedjmet walked slowly towards the enraged crowd. She fought her way through the people all the way to the center, where a few guards formed a circle around something that lay at the edge of the dark pond. The air was full of dust and sand and noisy onlookers. At first, what lay there looked like a wet sack, then Mutnedjmet could make out the outline of a person. Foot by foot the young woman fought on until she was with the soldiers.

When she had a clear view, she looked down and froze. The old mortuary priest, dead, wrapped in his wet priestly robe, like a soaking soda sack in the mummy master’s house. The same one who had told her only a short time ago about his appearance of the goddess in the Gempaaten.

“Nebmaat!” shouted Mutnedjmet, “Almighty Aten!”

One of the guards became aware of Mutnedjmet. He could tell from her sash that she, too, was a mortuary priestess.

“Let her pass.” he commanded.

Mutnedjmet came closer, bent over Nebmaat. ...and blood was visible in his hair.

“Do you know the man?” the soldier asked.

“Yes,” said Mutnedjmet sadly, “that’s Nebmaat. He is a mortuary priest of the Gempaaten. I spoke with him a short time ago. How could this have happened?”

“We found him in the pond. Maybe he toppled on the bank and fell in. Or maybe he was beaten to death and thrown in.”

“He lived in the priest’s quarters on the outskirts of town,” Mutnedjmet said.

“Thank you for the information,” said the soldier, “we will contact the temple authorities.”

Mutnedjmet slowly left the crowd again.

Thousands of thoughts rushed through her mind like an army of trotting horses. Nebmaat toppled? No, this was no accident. Was his Goddess apparition in Gempaaten not a figment of his imagination after all? No doubt. This must have had something to do with Hetepatens’ death. But what? Another clue, another piece of the puzzle, but Mutnedjmet could not see the whole picture. She had overlooked something. But what?

Chapter Twenty

Mutnedjmet was lost in thought as she left the sacred district of Amun and headed for Gempaaten.

“Mutnedjmet!” someone shouted at her suddenly and approached her.

She looked up. It was Horemhab. The young woman saw even greater problems rolling toward her.

“I’m glad to see you,” she said unconvincingly.

“I wanted to see you before the Gempaaten. I knew that the funeral ceremony of Hetepatens would begin today. But someone from the funeral procession told me you were still in the Amun district.”

“It could not be avoided. I’m a bad mortuary Priestess. I can’t even keep a mummy company.”

“You’re doing an excellent job. I’ve never met anyone who’s so dedicated to the job as you are.”

“Dedicated to the job? Dissolving in the job would be more appropriate. Can I help you, Horemhab? You’re not here by accident, are you? Or?”

“First, I wanted to assist you in your difficult mission.”

Alone - Mutnedjmet could not quite believe this.

“And then I came,” Horemhab said, “to tell you a decision I have made.”

Mutnedjmet’s attention suddenly rose steeply, like the rugged grade to the summit horn of Qurna.

“I have thought it over,” Horemhab said. But the choice you gave me was quickly made. On the one side you and on the other side the traditions of Thebes. I have already discussed the whole thing with Renpi in several, longer conversations. The decision was crystal clear. I will not have second wives.”

Had Horemhab talked around the bushes longer, Mutnedjmet would probably have burst from tension. But now

she felt a great inner lightness. The only positive aspect in days. Why Horemhab had chosen her, her mind refused to think about at that moment. She was only glad he had done it.

“I know,” Horemhab said, “we are made for each other and will have a long future. We only have to believe and hold on to that belief.”

To prevent her from melting away with romantic words, Mutnedjmet asked: “What’s with Renpi? I think that was her name.”

“I’ll have to think about that. I don’t want to send her away to a foreign land and an uncertain future.”

“Let me worry about that. I’ll find her employment inside the royal palace. She’ll be fine. I guarantee it.”

But most of all, Mutnedjmet thought that she would have better control of this busty, young, attractive thing inside the royal palace than anywhere else. She would also find her a place to live there, so that Renpi would not have to leave this beautiful place at all. So no one would be tempted anymore.

“That would be a great help. I thank you for it,” said Horemhab. “I hope you won’t hold it against me, but I thought at first you wouldn’t mind.”

“Well, I did mind. But let’s just forget the whole thing.”

“Thank you for your indulgence. But perhaps our love needed this trial. It has made her stronger and stronger, I’m sure of it.”

As usual, Horemhab sounded a little bit soapy. His words were unusual for an otherwise cool tactician.

“I’m glad you told me your decision. Let’s talk about it again later. I have to go now,” Mutnedjmet said.

“I will accompany you in this difficult hour,” Horemhab replied.

“Never mind. You may not enter the Gempaaten anyway. You are not a priest. I must walk the path alone.”

Horemhab and Mutnedjmet said goodbye with a big hug. Then Mutnedjmet set off for the Gempaaten.

* * *

Mutnedjmet entered the Gempaaten and headed for the mortuaries. There was a strange kind of movement in the servants of the temple. Everything was different from normal. Mutnedjmet saw Amunsetep, who immediately caused the crowd present to form a corridor, thus allowing the young woman to proceed to the mortuary chamber. With a hint he indicated to her to enter the room.

Mutnedjmet passed through the passage into the chamber, and immediately she was conscious of why movement had come into the priesthood of Gempaaten. Like a dark granite statue the Pharaoh himself stood in front of the large stone sarcophagus. The heavy coffin, made of the finest limestone, with the outline of a human figure, was decorated with countless hieroglyphic signs, which told about the great achievements of Hetepaten, his sacrifices he made for god Aten, the venerability with which he served his Pharaoh. Thutmose had done a great job. The sarcophagus stood on a massive wooden platform on which several heavy wheels were attached to transport it to the great place in the rocky valley. The lid was not yet closed, it had already been moved to the tomb to reduce the weight during transport. In the coffin lay the mummified high priest.

Amenhotep stood there, his eyes fixed on his dead companion. Mutnedjmet wanted to greet him first, but she did not dare to break the reverent silence. She stood aside so that the king could see her in the corner of his eye. He turned to her, without a word.

“I welcome you, almighty Sovereign,” Mutnedjmet greeted him reverently.

But he remained silent at first. Then his eyes wandered briefly through the chamber.

“All but Mutnedjmet leave the room,” he said.

The lector priests, scholars and ritual experts who had crowded around the sarcophagus - the closer to the Pharaoh, the closer to power - hurriedly left the room. Shortly afterwards Mutnedjmet and Amenhotep stood opposite each other.

“Nefertiti has already told me that there is nothing tangible. Has something new come up since then.”

“There are strange things going on in Thebes,” said Mutnedjmet, “things that I think are perhaps connected with the death of Hetepaten, in the kingdom of Osiris may he live forever.”

“Tell me more.”

“Today an old mortuary priest was found lifeless in the great pond of the Amun Temple. Perhaps slain. That’s all we know. “He had shortly before told me about a mysterious goddess creation here at the temple.”

“A goddess apparition?”

“Yes. The day before Hetepatens died. Here before the mortuary chambers.”

Amenhotep became thoughtful.

“And then there was Bakamun, the third high priest of Aten. A stone was thrown at him from the house of the vizier Meriptah, after he told me a secret.”

“And the knife attack on Ptahmose. I have heard of it.”

“Yes, after he assured me of his support to me. Many of those who spoke to me have been tried to get out of the way. At least that’s how you could look at it. Maybe it’s all just coincidence.”

“Above all, it is not conclusive evidence.”

““This is the problem.”

“Conjecture will not help us before the Oracle.”

“Hetepaten’s suicide note is also mysterious. There was no writing brush or paint in the chamber with which he could have written it.”

“Does little help. It has just been written in a spiritual mysterious way.”

“I can’t come up with much more.”

“I have spoken to Ptahmose. ...but he sees no possibility of reversing the Oracle’s decision.

“He’s letting things run their course, even though the same killer may have ambushed him?”

“With such words, beware.” young lady. “It’s so simply most convenient for him.”

“Mysterious things were going on the night Hetepaten passed away. Venerable Pharaoh, I heard you were at the royal palace with Ay and Dudu at that time. Did you notice any of these unusual events?”

“Not that I know of. You might ask Ay. I was going to tell you to go and see him anyway. At this difficult hour. He has decisions to make. Perhaps you can help him.”

Mutnedjmet didn’t dare question the Pharaoh. In any case, there was a statement that he must not have been in the palace at the time of Hetepaten’s death. But it was impossible to contradict him. The Pharaoh enjoyed the privilege of always telling the truth. A truth that could change constantly at his discretion. Besides, all would be lost anyway if the king himself were behind these mysterious things.

“I thank you, venerable Pharaoh, for listening to me. I will go forth to see Ay.”

“Do this.”

“Mutnedjmet left the mortuary chamber with her head tilted. When she came out, the eyes of the many priests looked at her, who would have liked to know the content of

her conversation with the Pharaoh. Dead silence lay in the corridors of Gempaaten as Mutnedjmet made her way to the exit.”

* * *

When she left the temple, she thought she heard a noise.

“Shh!”

“Mutnedjmet looked around. Behind a column of the big building her teacher Thutmose beckoned out. Obviously she should come to him and this as unobtrusively as possible. She sneaked up to Thutmose, who dragged her into a lonely corner where they could speak undisturbed.

“My dear child,” Thutmose said, “I heard this old priest was killed.”

“I know,” Mutnedjmet said.

“Did you talk to him first.”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“In his priest’s quarters.”

“You spoke to him, then he was killed.”

“Maybe he just slipped.”

“But nonsense. Such a coincidence does not exist. What about Bakamun and Ptahmose. You talked to them and someone were tried to kill them.”

“It’s not new.”

“You are in great danger, Mutnedjmet. You have to stop looking into this. They’ll turn the violence against you, too.”

“Maybe I’m a lot closer to the truth than I thought. My opponents might think so.”

“Let the truth be truth. Not everything needs to be uncovered. Think of yourself. You’re just putting yourself at great risk. And you won’t change the decision about Ay.”

“This time I will not avoid the truth, even if it is unpleasant.”

“You’re far too young for this sort of thing. Be wise and realize your enemies are more powerful.”

“They haven’t won yet.”

“Then make sure they won’t either. The truth is too well protected. It’s over.”

“I thank you for your advice Thutmose. I will think about it. But there is still work to be done.”

Mutnedjmet set off again.

“Mark my words,” Thutmose said.

Mutnedjmet remembered his words exactly. But it was too late for her to turn back. Too much had happened. She knew it was dangerous to search for the truth. But this was true at all times. Now, after all this, should she still doubt the facts? She had the choice: between resignation and between continuing on her way. Both ways brought equal parts of recognition and disfavour. Both ways were dangerous. To go further was dangerous for her life, to do nothing for her soul.

* * *

After a short distance Mutnedjmet arrived at the house of Ay. She entered the building, a servant brought her into one of the small back rooms, well shielded. There Ay and Nefertiti were already in a wild discussion. Tey, Ay’s wife, sat quietly beside it.

“Damn it, you must act!” said Nefertiti.

Then they noticed Mutnedjmet, who stepped into the room. She looked at Ay and both fell into each other’s arms.

“My good child,” Ay said, “I’m glad to see you.”

“Mutnedjmet could not say a word. As she looked at Tey, who was sitting in the corner with impassive face, tears slowly came to her eyes.”

“This is unacceptable,” said Nefertiti, walking nervously up and down the room. “I will not accept this.”

“Sometimes you must accept your fate,” said Ay.

“What is it about?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“He must flee. Today is the last chance for that. I cannot and will not accept it, that it is a done deal.”

“If I flee,” Ay said, “that is the end of the power of the Pharaoh. And also the end of his reform course. The Amun priesthood will continue to rule the country and divide it among themselves.”

“Damn it,” Nefertiti said aggressively, “forget Egypt one time. Who’s to stop them from trying to kill you? Who really stood up for you but your family? Nobody. And Amenhotep leaves it entirely up to you how you will decide.”

“It’s all my fault,” Mutnedjmet said.

Ay looked at her dismayed, “What are you to blame for?”

“I have failed,” said Mutnedjmet, “I have failed to expose the intrigue when it is obvious that something is wrong.”

“You’re not to blame at all,” Ay said, “if, then I am to blame. But perhaps it is also the will of Aten. Perhaps it was wrong to try to change the world so quickly. In any case, it is the way it is. There’s nothing to change.”

“Of course something can still be changed,” said Nefertiti. “Get out of Egypt, that’s the most sensible solution.”

“Run away, leave the country forever? Out of the question.”

“What does *forever* mean,” countered Nefertiti, “after a few months the transformation of the country will be complete and you will return as a celebrated hero.”

“If I flee now,” Ay replied, “then Amun will rule for centuries, perhaps millennia. You can be sure of that.”

“And if you stay,” said Nefertiti, “you will not survive the next few days.”

“What do you think?” asked Mutnedjmet Tey, who was sitting there mutely.

It became quiet in the room. Everyone was looking at Ay’s wife.

“All I can say is that I have tried all my life to keep our family together,” Tey said, “I don’t know what I’m going to do. No matter if you run away or worse. I will not bear to stay alone. But maybe we should hear Mutnedjmet’s opinion. Mutnedjmet, what do you think Ay should do?”

Now that Tey, as always, was not willing to express her own opinion on things, it was ultimately up to Mutnedjmet. “I’ve been trying to get to the truth these past few days,” said Mutnedjmet. “And they have succeeded in keeping it concealed. It is difficult for me to live in a country where this is possible without any consequence. I will not stop making sure that people see reality. As a daughter I can only advise you to flee while there is still time. As a citizen of Egypt I say we must face and defeat the enemy. But the final choice of what you will do, is a decision we can not make for you, dear Ay. You will have to make it alone.”

Silence in the room. Everyone looked at Mutnedjmet rigidly, the situation was hopeless, the decision had been made.

Chapter Twentyone

It was an exceptionally cool morning that day in Thebes. The sun shone flat over the city and cast dark, eerie shadows. The rock walls around the large town in the rocky valley looked heavy and threatening, like the gigantic columns of the Amun temple.

In the Gempaaten there was high activity. In the main courtyard the whole crowd of the priesthood had gathered. In a large palanquin the Pharaoh waited. Slowly a dozen slaves pulled the stone sarcophagus, which was on the wooden wagon, into the courtyard. The wheels crunched on the limestone floor. Behind it Mutnedjmet accompanied the convoy, the book of the dead in her hand. The litter of the Pharaoh rose and, flanked by several dozen guards, went to the head of the procession, which thus left the Gempaaten.

In front of the Gempaaten other litters were waiting with Nefertiti and the other high priests of Aten. Also high officials of the Amun temple should join the funeral ceremony. In the middle of the at least one hundred priests who accompanied the array on foot, Ay rode in a horse and cart.

For Mutnedjmet it was one of the most depressing days of her life. Before her the rumbling high sarcophagus, around her all the high dignitaries and priests. She felt threatened, even surrounded. Depressed by the traditions of Egypt, as if by a colossus of stone weighing tons. The truth had been successfully buried in the sand and now the funeral procession flowed like a snake of lies through Thebes.

They had a long and arduous journey ahead of them that would take several hours. At first it went straight through the Amun temple district. The streets were lined with curious onlookers, and Mutnedjmet felt as if every single person who looked at her from the alleys and rooftops knew the wrong,

evil game that had been played in recent days. But it was no good, the long convoy of people was constantly moving towards its goal.

Close to the temple of Luxor they crossed the Nile on wooden transport ships, which took especially long, because the loading of the heavy loads was done very carefully. The conifer planks of the boats creaked and growled under the weight of the heavy sarcophagus. For Mutnedjmet the seriousness of the events of the last days, were unbearable.

Her feelings were shaken again as she gazed over the calm waters of the Nile. Shouldn't she not have tried to refuse the order which she wanted to avoid from the beginning. Would it not have been better not to invest her feelings in a hopeless cause. She had imagined she wanted to find the truth. Was this not an insolence, which now experienced a late punishment by the gods.

And yet there was still that spark of hope in her. But she knew that upon entering the great place in the rocky valley, even this last glow would be extinguished in the sand.

It was a long way from the other bank of the Nile to the west side of Thebes. In the meantime the sun had risen high and burned mercilessly on the pilgrims who were moving through the streets like a long column of ants. god Aten, who symbolized the shining hot sun disk, was anything but merciful to his subjects these days.

The funeral procession turned right in the middle of the temple complexes which lay at the foot of the towering rock massifs. The journey became more difficult as they struggled up the steep, not harmless roads of the mountains. In front of Mutnedjmet the stone sarcophagus still rolled slowly.

The young woman spent some time imagining what would happen if one of the slaves in the front funeral procession stumbled. Perhaps the others would be carried along and the

heavy coffin would start rolling. Straight for Mutnedjmet, who walked just behind it. After a few seconds Hetepaten would have helped the young woman to enter the kingdom of Osiris.

But when Mutnedjmet thought about what would happen to her afterwards in Imuit's mummification workshop, she didn't want to leave life so quickly.

* * *

After a never-ending period of time and great hardships, the funeral procession slowly arrived near the big place in the rocky valley. On the narrow road the many pilgrims crowded together and it was hardly possible for Mutnedjmet to keep an overview. She simply trotted behind the sarcophagus, because if she followed it, she were sure to be on the right track. After a few stops, god knows why, the sarcophagus rolled into a rock tunnel. The tomb. Accustomed to the bright sun, Mutnedjmet suddenly felt like she was in a deep black hole, couldn't see anything anymore, just following the crunch of the wheels in front of her. The passage was considerably long and led into a larger transverse chamber, from which another passage led again into the deep mountain interior. Mutnedjmet's eyes had already become accustomed to the pale torchlight when they arrived the destination.

The burial chamber. It wasn't very big and just now she could see who else had arrived there besides her: The Pharaoh, Nefertiti, Ay, Amunsetep, Junatonef, Hetepatens wife Queniset and two Amun priests who apparently acted as guards. Tey was not there.

The sarcophagus was put in its place and closed with the lid by the slaves. In the chamber there were a number of treasures: Chests, furniture, weapons, jewelry that would accompany the dead into the kingdom of Osiris. Ay took a seat on a chair beside the coffin. A place he would never leave

again. The slaves left the chamber and waited in the long passage in front of it. Now it was Mutnedjmet's turn.

She unfolded the long book of the dead. Something was strangling her throat, trying to make it impossible for her to do the inevitable. But there was no way around it. As mortuary priestess she had to read the book and with it she had to ring in and conclude the death ritual.

Mutnedjmet began to read in a shaky voice: "I read the book in order to perfect the deceased Hetepaten and to let him descend to the solar barge of Ra, with those who are in his retinue. I say the first saying: Greetings, Lord of light, Lord of the mighty house, head of darkness. Greetings, Osiris, great god, I worship you."

As if frozen to stone, those present sat and stood around the sarcophagus. Mutnedjmet's voice echoed through the vault of the rock: "I have come to you, and I am glorified and pure, give me back my heart so that I can feel with it, so that you can guide it in every hour. Give me air to breathe in the water of the kingdom of the dead. Oh, Osiris, give me your freezing breath that is in your nose, it is me who honours you..."

The Pharaoh and Nefertiti listened carefully to the explanations of the book of the dead in which the god of the hereafter, Osiris, was asked to resurrect the dead on the other side and the judgement of the hereafter was attempted with the listing of all the sins of the deceased that had not been committed. Mutnedjmet read over a hundred such sayings. She was highly concentrated not to make a mistake and yet her thoughts were constantly drifting away from what was to come. So the sentences of the book of death became nothing but empty words that faded away in the small rock grotto.

It was a long time before Mutnedjmet had finished. The ritual stipulated that after the book of the dead was finished, no more words could be spoken inside the tomb.

The Pharaoh raised his arms, held crosier and scourge and his wrists crossed. The sign of resurrection. He looked Ay kindly in the eyes, then he left the tomb.

Nefertiti and Mutnedjmet had tears in their eyes when they had to say goodbye to Ay without a word. Nefertiti turned around and quickly left the room. She could not bear it. Mutnedjmet stepped forward to Ay, bent down briefly. He stroked her head tenderly. They both looked into each other's eyes for a brief moment, a moment that would remain in their memory forever, like hieroglyphs carved into a grave stele. At the same time they were aware that it was the last common gaze of their lives. As if in slow motion, it seemed to Mutnedjmet as she moved away from Ay, further and further and further.

She left the chamber. Also the rest of the priesthood, and also Sechimi and Queniset left the room. The slaves immediately began to wall up the entrance to the chamber with the rock that was stored in the first anteroom.

The sound of the dull stones in the background, Mutnedjmet left the tomb through the narrow long passage just behind Nefertiti.

Mutnedjmet whispered, "we'll get him out of there."

Then Nefertiti stopped for a moment, turned around, "Dear sister, the ritual stipulates that this grave must never be opened again. Don't get your hopes up."

When Mutnedjmet came back out, she felt great anger in her belly. The rage of helplessness. Slowly, a sandstorm came up at the big place in the rocky valley, wrapping everything in a thick cloud. The funeral procession had left the place since long ago and the slaves had firmly walled up the entire outer passage of the tomb. Next to some soldiers, who kept guard in front of the tomb entrance, Mutnedjmet sat on a rock and stared into the dark sand cloud, which blocked her view into the valley

like a cloudy window. And she was determined to stay until the cloud cleared.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Ay's house was deserted. As Mutnedjmet walked through the front door, she could only hear final silence. Tey, Ay's wife, had not come to Hetepatens' funeral. Mutnedjmet wanted to visit her in this difficult hour. Mutnedjmet went quietly through the rooms. In front of an archway Tey sat on an old wooden chair and stared out into the atrium. She had already said goodbye to Ay in advance, to come with him to the big place in the rocky valley would have been unbearable for her. When Tey noticed Mutnedjmet, an short implausible smile flashed across her lips.

"Nothing I could say right now would ever line our pain," said Mutnedjmet.

"I am glad you are here, Mutnedjmet. In this difficult hour."

"I will never give up on finding the people who did this to us."

"At some point you must forget it, otherwise the hatred will spread in your soul and throw you into disaster. It is simply fate, against which no one can do anything. It is the will of the gods, to which we humans must bow."

"If it were the will of the gods, I would have a less serious problem. But men have a hand in this. This is different."

"We were a happy family for a long time. Maybe we shouldn't have tried to do more, but rather we should have tried to be more modest. Maybe things would have been different."

"There's no point thinking now about how things might have turned out differently. It is what it is. We have to accept that. But we can work on changing things."

"It almost tears my heart out of my body when I think of Ay now," Tey said with a trembling voice and tears in her eyes. "What torments he suffers. Without any hope. Walled in deep

rock. Only death before his eyes. Sometimes I think it would be more comforting for all of us if he had to give his life in an accident. But this, he just didn't deserve this. To die one of the most horrible deaths of all. I hope for his sake he can end his own life and not wither away like a plant in dry sand from hunger and thirst."

"Hetepaten was also given food and drink in his grave to make use of it in the realm of the dead. Ay will be able to survive for some time with this."

"So much the worse, his agony will be longer."

"I will not give up trying to find a solution. We'll get him out of there," Mutnedjmet said, unable to believe her own words.

"Accept it now," Tey said, "a grave must never be opened again, no matter what the reason. That was always the case and it will always remain so. There is no way to save Ay's life anymore. The sooner we accept it, the easier for all of us."

Tey was probably right. Mutnedjmet was now faced with the choice of either giving up hope and saving her soul or continuing to fight, with the sure prospect of perishing. Tey had already made her choice.

* * *

Tey could give Mutnedjmet little comfort. She had gone her own way to come to terms with the events for herself. Mutnedjmet made her way to the sculptor's workshop at Thutmose. She always found this place to be a place of rest and reflection. And that was exactly what she needed now. In the manufactory there was, as always, constant activity, without hectic rush. When Thutmose saw Mutnedjmet, he immediately approached her.

"Mutnedjmet. I am so sorry," he said.

Mutnedjmet would have wished that Thutmose had taken her into his arms, but that was not his nature. The two of

them strolled a little way and sat down on some stones in the cool shade of a date tree.

“I can well imagine how you feel now,” Thutmose said, “but you will have no choice but to go through there now.”

“I guess you’re right. There’s no other way now. I can’t fool myself. Even if I could clear up the true circumstances of Hetepatens’ death, it would be of no use now. Except to put myself in danger. And that certainly wouldn’t have been in Ay’s interests either.”

“You have done all that could be done,” Thutmose said, “you must now let go once and for all. For your own sake.”

“There would be no sense in it anymore. A grave must never be opened again, even if there was a reason. The gods forbid it.”

By chance, Mutnedjmet looked Thutmose in the eye when she said this. He suddenly had a somewhat staring look. That look was typical of him when any unevenness in his spirit appeared that he could hardly overlook.

“You’re absolutely right,” he said.

Mutnedjmet stared at him for some time in disbelief. This was obviously unpleasant for Thutmose.

“I’m absolutely right?” she asked.

“Yes,” Thutmose said.

“Something in your expression tells me that you just thought something else.”

“Absolutely not.”

“We’ve known each other a long time now. I know exactly when something is wrong. And my gut tells me that that’s exactly what’s happening right now.”

“You’ve chosen the right path now, Mutnedjmet, it’s the best one for you. I don’t want you to stray from it.”

“Thutmose, I regard you above all as a teacher and a friend. But if you are not willing to tell me the truth in this difficult

hour, if you try to pull the wool up on my eyes, then you are no better than all the others. I would never forgive you.”

Thutmose was silent for a while, then he said: “What I am about to tell you, I will probably never forgive myself. So: A grave may never be opened, but there is still a way to open it afterwards. There was a decree of the venerable Pharaoh Ahmose.”

“The one who stood in high esteem to Amun?”

“Yes. I read it in one of the old writings. If it has been forgotten to add an important burial gift, which, if missing, would endanger the dead man’s spiritual journey, the grave may be opened again.”

“What important burial object could this be?”

“The decree spoke of a statue of the dead. It symbolizes a deputy or servant of the deceased, who carries out certain work for the deceased in the afterlife. Formally speaking, Ay is now also fulfilling the task of such a statuette.”

“That is, one could perhaps exchange Ay for such a statuette. For example on the grounds that if he died, he couldn’t fulfil his duties for Hetepaten any more?”

“There’s one big catch, though.”

“Say it.”

“You need not only the consent of the Pharaoh, but also that of the Oracle. Which brings us back to the same starting point as before. Because how will you convince the Oracle?”

“I must try to find a way. So a tomb can be opened again after all. I knew that I must not give up hope.”

“Aten and Amun together will punish me for giving you this information.”

“Thank you, Thutmose, I will not give up hope.”

“And you will put yourself in great danger again. I should rip out my tongue.”

“Thutmose, I have a great favour to ask of you. I want you to make me a statue which can replace Ay in the tomb of Hetepaten. If I need it, I need it fast.”

Thutmose Blick was suspicious.

“Will you do this for me?” Mutnedjmet asked.

“Of course I will. How could I refuse you a wish.”

And before he knew it, Mutnedjmet said goodbye and went her way.

* * *

Depressed, the Pharaoh sat on his throne. He had been shown again how limited was the power of the ruler of Egypt.

“What is so important that you had to see me at once.” said Amenhotep.

In front of him stood in humble pose Mutnedjmet, who had asked for an audience.

“Oh, venerable Pharaoh. My heart is full of deep sorrow for what has happened in the last days. But I have decided not to give up the fight until it is lost. For I am in your service and in that of Aten.”

“I’m afraid it’s too late now.”

“Almighty god, I wish to ask you a question. Should I find evidence of other circumstances that led to Hetepaten’s death, would you be willing to have the grave as well opened to release Ay?”

“Dear Mutnedjmet. You probably don’t know that this is against the traditions of our country. A grave must never be opened again.”

“There is a decree from one of your predecessors: Amosis. He authorized the opening of a tomb with the Oracle’s consent to add an important burial object.”

His ears were wide open. “So we still lack the approval of the Oracle.”

“But if you were willing, if I could find evidence that could convince the Oracle to reopen the tomb.”

“If Amosis did this, I too will be able to do this. god Aten speaks directly through my heart. Without the Oracle’s approval, however, I see little chance. So you have to get the approval of the Amun priesthood, too. Good luck.”

“I thank you, my sovereign.”

Mutnedjmet slowly moved away from Amenhotep in a humble attitude, as was the commandment. Suddenly, something glittered in the corner of your eye. She looked to the side and there was a large silver plate on a wooden top mounted on the wall. A newly shining silver decoration piece. Was it the gift of the Ameni son? She had not seen it on her last visit. Mutnedjmet plucked up all her courage and turned to the Pharaoh once more.

“A beautiful plate,” said Mutnedjmet, “you were given it as a gift.”

Amenhotep was surprised, “yes a gift.”

“Is it a gift from the son of Ameni?”

“As far back as I can remember.”

“Do you happen to know when he handed it to you?”

“I can’t remember.”

“Did he give it to you personally as a gift with big words, or did he just leave it for you with greetings on papyrus.”

“Please. I have things to do. Leave me alone.”

“I beg you humbly. Think,” poked Mutnedjmet, “have you seen the son of Ameni in an audience in the last few weeks.

Amenhotep thought reluctantly. “No, I do not think so. He must have sent the gift.” A short look of the Pharaoh to one of the temple servants.

“It’s from Ameni,” said the temple servant, “he left it for you.”

“I thank you, almighty Pharaoh.”

Mutnedjmet left the audience chamber. Now it was clear to Mutnedjmet. Kiya had told the truth. If the silver plate was not handed over personally, there could only be one reason. The Pharaoh was not in the royal palace at the time Hetepaten died. But why had Ay claimed this? Maybe he wanted to protect Amenhotep. To ask him was no longer possible. Did the king know much more than he was willing to admit? But then all was lost. Something spoke here against logic, like against the direction of the Nile. But what this was, lay still behind a dark veil.

Chapter Twenty-Three

Mutnedjmet strolled through the city. Her mind was spinning like a never-ending carousel. But it would not and would not offer a solution. Time was pressing, but being pressured by it guaranteed no solution at all. At the Pharaoh she did not make any progress, at Nefertiti she did not make any progress, and because of her the old priest had lost his life. The young woman longed for some clue, some trace.

“Mutnedjmet!” it shouted from afar.

It was Junatonef, the son of Hetepaten. He walked along with a sad face.

“I would like to wish you and your family once again my condolences on the death of the venerable Hetepaten,” said Mutnedjmet. “I am sure he will enjoy an honorable life in the kingdom of Osiris.”

“Thank you. But my father’s death is hardly equal to the cruelty the Oracle inflicted on yours. I cannot believe this has happened.”

“Thanks for your sympathy.”

“Let it be known once again that our family deeply rejects the decision of the Oracle. Ay has always been a welcome guest with us. We always keep him in good memory.”

“I’m sure it’s very difficult for your mother, too. Give her my best.”

“It’s very hard for all of us. Both I, my mother, my brothers and Hetepaten’s second wife are in deep mourning. Because of Ay.”

“Hetepaten had a second wife?”

“Yes. Her heart is also broken. Merit, that’s her name, has only been with us for a short time. Queniset is not our birth mother. She entered the kingdom of Osiris a long time ago.”

“Queniset told me about it.”

“Queniset has taken her place in our house very well. As far as this was even possible. However, since my father still had a wish to have children, and Aten unfortunately did not fulfill this wish to Queniset, Hetepaten took Merit. She gave birth to another son. last year.”

“How did the Queniset take it?”

“There were problems, of course, but to speak a word about all this now is wasted effort.”

“I’ll understand. I think I’ll see your mother today, too.”

“I’m sure she’ll be very pleased. Many came to our house today to help us. The first one even at sunrise. Herinebisut. That was typical,” Junatonef even had to smile a little.

Herinebisut, the caretaker of the Aten Temple? Is he a frequent guest at your place?”

“Herinebisut is a good friend of the family. He was always a faithful servant of my father. Although there have been some differences of opinion between them lately. But that’s not important now.”

“What differences of opinion?”

“For unimportant administrative matters. Staff cuts and similar.”

“But I assume this has not clouded the relationship between you or your mother and Herinebisut.”

“Of course not. My mother always made everyone feel welcome.”

The two said goodbye and Mutnedjmet went her way: straight to the Hetepatens house. Hadn’t Queniset told her that Hetepaten had no second wives. That she had been the most important thing on earth for him. Like a drum roll, the pulse beat faster in Mutnedjmet’s chest. She was curious to hear Queniset’s explanation.

* * *

Queniset was in the garden of her house, pruning a shrub when Mutnedjmet arrived. An everyday gardening job that gave her an inner calm.

“Venerable Queniset,” greeted Mutnedjmet, “I just met Junatonef and now I wanted to pay you a visit, too. Let me once again offer you my sincerest condolences.”

“Thank you, Mutnedjmet. But our suffering here is nothing compared to what your heart must feel. After the inhumanity Ay has suffered.”

“Yes, it’s hard for me these days.”

“That I am completely against this decision, I have already expressed. “And so does our entire family.”

“I thank you for that. I have a question I’d like to ask you, and I hope I’m not offending you.”

“No, ask me. Anything you want.”

“The last time we spoke, you told me that you have always been the most important thing on earth for your husband. You’re my only wife, he would have told you, as far as I can remember.”

“That’s right.”

“He had no second wife?”

“No.”

“No?”

Queniset trailed off.

“Isn’t it true your husband recently took a second wife named Merit who recently bore him a son?”

Queniset put her hands in front of her face.

“You couldn’t give Hetepaten a child,” said Mutnedjmet. “So he took a second wife who could. This must have been very painful for you. Believe me, I can sympathize.”

“This is a common practice in Egypt. Socially acceptable.”

“But very painful.”

“Yes, it is.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the second wife?”

“I found it a disgrace. I have the right to remain the chief wife for my husband.”

Mutnedjmet hesitated briefly, “does this mean he wanted to make Merit to his first wife?”

“No, he would never have done that.”

“He was going to cast you out as a first wife and choose some pretty young thing over you?”

Queniset was close to tears. Mutnedjmet had sympathy for the poor woman, but now there was no turning back.

“Herinebisut, the caretaker of the Aten Temple was a good friend of yours.” said Mutnedjmet.

“Yes, he was and is. A friend of the whole family.”

“But recently there were big difficulties between him and Hetepaten. It was about personnel which he wanted to take away from him. It was about power.”

“I don’t know anything about that.”

“And Herinebisut is the one who does the guard duty in Gempaaten. Also in front of the mortuary chamber where Hetepaten died. Don’t you think of anything.”

“I am not understanding?”

“You do not understand. How good was your relationship with Herinebisut?”

“Like I said. We were getting along fine.”

Mutnedjmet faltered a little. She had brought Queniset to a point of deep despair. Had this woman had her husband murdered? Was she to blame for sending Ay to certain death. Mutnedjmet had to know: "Admit it. Together with Herinebisut, you planned and executed your husband’s death.”

“You are crazy.”

“He wanted to leave you. He had a child with another. You couldn’t let that happen to you.”

Queniset was drowned in tears. “Get out!” she shouted, “get out of my house right now. I don’t have to listen to that kind of talk. Not even from a member of the royal family. I would never have harmed my husband. What would I have been without him. What would the family have been without him. I have always held our family together. With all the difficulties. Who do you think you are. Get out of here!”

Mutnedjmet was standing there like rooted to the spot. As if an inner latch of insecurity had snapped, it had knocked the language out of her.

“Go away” Queniset repeated.

Mutnedjmet turned and left the house. All alone, she stood on the street in front of Hetepaten’s villa. She was feeling miserable, like after a rotten fish stew. Again, she had nothing but motives and clues. Herinebisut, the caretaker of Gempaaten, would deny everything just as much. But perhaps it was also a completely false lead. Then what she had just done was unforgivable. Queniset’s motive did not explain the death of Nebmaat and the attacks on Bakamun and Ptahmose.

Mutnedjmet felt that the road before her was a long tunnel of hopelessness. She had to act, do something. Before it was finally too late. But nothing pointed her in the right direction.

* * *

Mutnedjmet sat aimlessly in her spacious room in the king’s palace load. She tried to string together her thoughts, to make connections in the complicated web of events. But the puzzle did not and would not fit together.

Then a servant entered the room. “A certain Horemhab requests your presence.”

“Well, call him in,” said Mutnedjmet, she could use a little distraction.

Horemhab stepped into the room and they fell into each other's arms.

"Excuse me," said Horemhab, "I could not attend the funeral. I had been invited to visit the neighboring Hermonthis. It was impossible for me to cancel. I am inconsolable. I should have been a support to you in your difficult hours, but I was not there."

"It's all right," Mutnedjmet said. "It probably wouldn't have made any difference."

"So all my fears have come true."

"They are."

"The very thought of what's happening to Ay is unbearable."

"How long will he live in the grave? As an officer, you must know about such things."

"It would only make it worse for you to think about it. You must try to forget."

"No." Mutnedjmet said angrily, "I will not and will not forget. I want to know the truth. So. How long will his agony last. There is food and drink that was given to the dead Hetepaten in his grave to the afterlife."

"Food is not so important. The important thing is that he has to drink. Man survives only a few days without water but weeks without food. Bitter experience from long marches across the desert."

"Some amphoras of beer and wine are included. How long will he last?"

"When he rations them. Maybe a week or two."

"This is more than I thought."

"I shouldn't have told you that. It will make your agony unbearable."

"We gotta get him out of there. But how?"

“Don’t get your hopes up. Too many people have too much interest in this not happening.”

“I cannot and will not accept this.”

“We’d better think of our future, put the past behind us.”

“No past, no future. We can’t just repress what happened. It will always catch up with us.”

“Only if we allow it. Look ahead. We will get married.”

“The Pharaoh has not yet given his consent,” Mutnedjmet interrupted him.

“You have given everything. He will have to appreciate that.”

“But I didn’t achieve the goal.”

“Let it be upon us. I will have a spacious villa built for you. Yes, a palace. All your wishes shall come true. You will no longer have to spend your time as a scribe.”

“I don’t *have* to do my time as a writer. I *want* to.”

“But what can you see in these old, dusty scrolls. Or books of the dead with bombastic texts. Or in any inscriptions on steles and coffins, in which the owners praise themselves magnificently, pointing out who they were and what they possessed.”

“In all these inscriptions lies the history of Egypt. If we do not understand our ancestors, we will not understand ourselves. Scripture is like a window to knowledge of the world.”

“As the wife of a commander, you don’t have to worry about knowing the world. What use is that to anyone? I will read every wish from your eyes. We will have children, and you will take care of them.”

“I want to take care of children. This is very important for us, but I don’t want to *just* take care of children. I want to live an interesting life. Do something for my mind.”

“But this is not worthy of a member of the royal house. No one of your status would do such a thing.”

“So you’re all about prestige again. To live according to the traditions of Egypt. Just like you did with your second wife.”

“I thought we were done with this subject.”

“Apparently not.”

“I just want to do what is customary in this town. After all, we live in this society. We cannot completely dissociate ourselves from the customs. Is that so difficult to understand. I’ll even give up a second wife for you! Now you have to accommodate me a little.

“The customs of this society. What do these customs look like? People are stabbed, beaten to death, thrown into water, buried alive! Lies and intrigue! It’s about finding the truth and defending it.”

“We will never find the truth. The truth is with the gods. Only they can see it. We humans shouldn’t waste our thoughts on that. We should just enjoy ourselves.”

“A very simple view of the world you have there.”

“Yes. Right. Why complicated. You are the sister of the queen. There’s nothing easier for you than living a good life. Unlike many others. Be happy about it and enjoy the day. And don’t waste your time on useless things you read about in some old papyrus scroll. That knowledge will only make you unhappy.”

“But there are so many things in this world that are wrong. People who act unfairly for the sake of their own gain and bring misfortune to others.”

“This is so and always will be so. If nothing can be done about it, it must be accepted.”

“So you think that untruth is not a bad thing. To simply get what you want is right as long as you get it. It’s not about justice, but about achieving your goals.”

“Unfortunately, that’s the way the world is,” dear Mutnedjmet. “There is nothing to change.”

Mutnedjmet got thoughtful. She walked up and down the room.

“I think,” Horemhab said, “we should just change the subject.”

“No. No. Maybe you’re right. Let me think. Maybe this is exactly the solution. You say it’s not about the truth, but about achieving your goals. The untruth is not a bad thing. That’s what you believe? Then prove it.”

Horemhab didn’t know what Mutnedjmet meant. But he already knew he wouldn’t like it.

“Free Ay,” Mutnedjmet said.

“Excuse me?” said Horemhab.

“You have authority over soldiers. Gather some trusted men around you, open the tomb and get Ay out. It’s that simple.”

“I can’t do that. It would be against every rule.”

“A moment ago, you tried to make me realize that there are no rules.”

“But breaking this rule would have serious consequences. So - to defraud an Oracle in this way would be... well, it’s absolutely impossible.”

“Why? We simply put a piece of papyrus in which Osiris decided to take Hetepaten into the realm of death without Ay and to release Ay back into freedom.”

If we get caught, we’ll be burned, beheaded at the stake. You, Ay, all the royalty and...me.”

“You’ll do it so cleverly that no one will overpower you.”

“Ay wouldn’t like that.”

“This is secondary now. He’ll have no choice.”

“We would be risking our entire future. It would be a frontal attack on all values, the very foundations of this city. I cannot do that.”

“You’re gonna have to choose. Do you want to save my soul or do you want to see my heart buried in a lifelong deep hole?”

Horemhab was speechless. Already he regretted that he had come.

“I will go now,” said Horemhab, “and return only when you have recovered your senses. You must simply calm yourself again. The last weeks and the events of yesterday’s day touched me deeply. But that is quite understandable. It would have happened to anyone.”

“I’m very serious. Think it over. It’s your choice.”

Horemhab didn’t want to waste any more words. He said good-bye to Mutnedjmet heartily but quickly and hurried away.

It would really be a solution. Though Mutnedjmet shuddered at herself already thinking like her opponents. Perhaps one must bend the truth to save her? The decision was up to Horemhab, so it has already been taken.

Chapter Twenty-four

Mutnedjmet was aware of the hopelessness of the situation. Was no one interested in supporting her? As long as the background remained obscured, there was no answer to this question.

The young woman made her way to the Amun temple district. There she wanted to return to her usual occupation in the writing school, to get a clear head. Perhaps also new courage, new ideas.

When she walked through the wall to the temple complex, she unexpectedly ran into Rempineb, the mortuary priest whom she knew from childhood. The two greeted each other warmly.

“I was present at the funeral ceremony of Hetepaten,” said Rempineb, “you certainly did not notice me among all the many people. I think you have mastered your task brilliantly. It must not have been easy to follow the sarcophagus for hours in the heat.”

“No big deal,” Mutnedjmet said.

“I suppose it was a very extensive book of the dead you had to read after all that trouble.”

“Over a hundred sayings.”

“I thought so. The ritual took a very long time. But no wonder, Hetepaten was high priest.”

“It hasn’t been easy in many ways.”

Obviously Rempineb knew nothing of the dramatic events around Ay and Mutnedjmet did not have the constitution to enlighten him about it.

“It is not, I think, an easy task to read from books of the dead,” Rempineb said, “especially when a high visitor is present. It must be a great honor to speak in the presence of the Pharaoh.”

“Well, if the Pharaoh is your sister’s husband, it’s within limits. But you’re right. There’s a big difference between just writing a book of the dead, reading it, and reciting it out loud. After a while, the words become independent. You no longer see the meaning.”

“Concentration is too much on the correctness of reading, that’s why.”

“You’re probably right.”

“I’ve only ever read smaller works before. I have never been allowed to accompany a high dignitary into the kingdom of Osiris. The ceremony of Hetepaten was my highlight.”

“I feel the same way.”

“Here in Thebes there are many splendid funerals. Not too long ago I visited one at the large place in the rock valley which was led by Ptahmose, the high priest of Amun. As a mortuary priest you can take a lot of knowledge with you. Which is useful in the other cities of Egypt.”

“Yes, I think I know what funeral it was. It was the morning of the day Hetepaten died.”

“I think you’re right.”

“Bakamun told me about it. He said there were a hundred people there.”

“There weren’t quite that many. But a lot. Just Bakamun, I didn’t see him. You mean Bakamun, the third high priest of Aten.”

“Yes. Maybe you didn’t see him because of the crowd.”

“It’s easily possible. Although. I’m pretty sure. One day after the funeral, he came back from Hermonthis.”

“What was he doing in Hermonthis? It is a long march to this town.”

“He told us proudly that he had bought a priest’s sash of fine panther skin. This was worthy of a third high priest.”

“I’ll understand. But such fur is very expensive.”

“Yes, but surely the wish of every high priest. Such wishes will hardly come true.”

“You just have to wait. You’ve always been a very talented person. You’ll go very far.”

“I think of you often when I am far away. It was a good time many years ago. I still wear the pendant Ay gave me as a farewell gift.”

Renpineb pulled the pendant he wore around his neck out from under the overhang. A smoothly polished stone in the shape of an ankh-sign.



The symbol for life. The jewel flashed in the sun, like a bright spark. Mutnedjmet’s gaze became fixed.

“What is it?” asked Renpineb.

“I’m sorry Renpineb, but I have something important to do,” said Mutnedjmet, “let me see you before you leave.”

Before Renpineb could say goodbye properly, Mutnedjmet dashed away.

* * *

Mutnedjmets heart was pounding. She ran and ran. Slowly, Horemhab’s house appeared in view. The wheels in Mutnedjmet’s head were suddenly locked in place. In the right place.

Breathless, the young woman arrived at Horemhab’s house. He was sitting in front of some maps, not concentrating. Mutnedjmet’s harshness was obviously still bothering him. When he saw her enter the room, he had the feeling he was facing enemy troops that would crush him. His look was a little frightened.

“You must help me,” she said.

“I can’t change my position on this. It simply won’t work.”

“No, it’s not about that. You need you to do something for me without asking too many questions.”

His gaze was suspicious.

“Send some of your soldiers to Hermonthis. Have them ask every jeweller, every goldsmith there for a pendant. "A pendant in the shape of an ankh-sign. Engraved with the hieroglyphic marks of our Pharaoh Amenhotep. And you must send them quickly. Every day, every hour is precious.”

“But why? What is the purpose of this?”

“I told you not to ask. Is it possible that you could do me these favors?”

“Of course it’s possible.”

“You have chosen not to release Ay. You chose not to rebel. But to seek a piece of jewelry, that’s probably not against the traditions of Thebes. You must do this for me.”

Horemhab saw Mutnedjmet’s tension. He’d never experienced it like that before. It would have been pointless to argue with her any further. “All right. I’ll send a unit. It seems I have no choice.”

A joyful sigh of relief could be felt in Mutnedjmet’s face. Horemhab didn’t know how to interpret this, but he had never seen the young woman like this before.

* * *

The next day the sun rose quickly above Thebes, like a glittering star. It seemed as if it shone down on the city much brighter than usual.

In the Amun Temple there was a lot of activity, like every day. Mutnedjmet had requested an audience with Ptahmose, the high priest of Amun. When she entered his audience room, she didn’t feel as gloomy as she had felt before.

Ptahmose rose immediately and approached the young woman.

“Oh Mutnedjmet, you must be very sad about the fate that has befallen your father. But this is only superficial. He and the venerable Hetepaten will lead a great and fulfilled life in the kingdom of Osiris. You have done the gods a great service by your sensitive work as mortuary priestess.

“You are right,” said Mutnedjmet, “my heart is full of sorrow and gloom. Although, of course, I know the Oracle made the right decision. In view of the situation. I hope your injury is better by now.”

“Recovery is progressing. Thank you.”

Ptahmose trustfully put his hand on Mutnedjmet’s shoulder. “Great and important tasks will come to you in this land. I ask you to give the priests of Aten the honor of placing you in the service of our great god.”

“It is a great honour for me, great ruler, that you have placed your trust in me. But I also come to you with a great request.”

“Speak, I’ll do everything in my power.”

“In the exercise of my ministry as mortuary priestess a great number of irregularities have come to light. And I do not know to whom I can confide them. It would have to be someone with great influence. Such as you are. It could be that I too must ask for protection afterwards. After all, even you were recently visited by that lowly assassin.”

“I am at your complete disposal, speak.”

“That’s not possible here. For the purpose of understanding, a demonstration is needed in the very same mortuary chamber of the Gempaatens in which Hetepaten died. I know that you are the high priest of Amun and that you normally keep away from the temple of Aten. But I beg you most urgently. Go there tonight. That is all I can tell you.

And in no case tell the Pharaoh or any member of the royal family.”

“It sounds like a thing where there’s entanglements and connections. Perhaps with royalty?”

“That is precisely why I must ask you to be extremely discreet. Come there tonight. You’ll learn things you don’t want to miss.”

Mutnedjmet had gained the interest of Ptahmose. What was it that the queen’s sister had so important to tell him in the mortuary chamber? In view of the events, he had to find out.

“I have one more quick question,” said Mutnedjmet.

“Just ask.”

“The day Hetepaten died, you were at a funeral at the great place in the rocky valley.”

“Yes, as far as I can remember.”

“How many people were there?”

“There were many, as usual.”

“There must have been over a hundred, or so Bakamun says.”

“Yes, Bakamun, the third priest of Aten, I think he was there too. If he estimates a hundred people in attendance, I agree with him.”

“Thank you. I will keep it to myself that you will attend the meeting tonight.”

“I am grateful to you. It would bring meaningless gossip, if my coming got around.”

“I thought so. I thank you devotedly for your trust and your great help.” Mutnedjmet politely said goodbye and left the Amun Temple.

* * *

Shortly afterwards she entered the Gempaaten. She went straight into Amunsetep's studyroom. He was pleased to see her.

"The queen's sister. I am honored by your visit."

"The honor is all mine. Thank you for taking time out of your busy schedule for me."

"You have done extremely well for the Gempaaten in a difficult hour. You have fulfilled the office of mortuary priestess with the greatest bravery. I pray daily for the selfless Ay. His service to the cause will be glorified for centuries.

"I thank you for your appreciation," said Mutnedjmet. "I appreciate it."

"A number of obscure things have been going on recently within the temple. But I have followed the trail of mystery and found the solution. I think so. I ask you to come to the mortuary chamber tonight, where the venerable Hetepaten passed away."

"Tell me about it. What is the solution to your mystery?"

"You must be patient a little longer."

"You worry me. Unfathomable things. Decoded. Give me a clue."

"You will receive all instructions on the spot. And one more thing I must ask of you."

"Yes?"

"Keep this information in the strictest confidence. Tell no one of our evening gathering. I will personally notify all those who need to know."

"But...this all sounds very mysterious."

"Will you fulfill me my wish?"

"Good."

Obviously Amunsetep was worried. What mysterious events would the young woman tell him about? Who else would be

involved? And all of this in *his* temple. Mutnedjmet said goodbye and disappeared.

* * *

It was a friendly afternoon that ended in Egypt. The sun was slowly descending in the firmament, at the same time the full moon was already visible on the horizon. No sandstorm, no fog, no haze. It would be the brightest and clearest night for a long time that was to come for Thebes.

Chapter Twenty-Five

The mortuary in the Gempaaten was brightly lit with fresh torches, like a pathetic ritual. Almost festive. Three wooden sarcophagi stood at the back wall.

Amunsetep and Bakamun were already waiting when shortly afterwards Ptahmose, the high priest of Amun, entered the room. Under a cape, quasi incognito, which he threw off. Amunsetep and Bakamun bowed deeply and reverently before the most powerful of all the high priests of Egypt.

“I have been summoned here by a young woman, but I can see her nowhere.”

That was when Mutnedjmet entered the chamber. Noone could see it, but her legs were shaking a little. She had a lot on her mind. She wasn't sure if she was up to it.

Mutnedjmet prostrated herself before Ptahmose. "O Almighty high priest. I must thank you infinitely for accepting my invitation. Surely you have more important things to do."

“Well, let's get down to business,” said Ptahmose, “what is so important that we are all gathered here?”

“I humbly ask the deceased's forgiveness for letting me move their coffins against the wall, said Mutnedjmet with a quick glance at the three sarcophagi, but my remarks require a little space.”

A valuable looking wooden chair stood in the corner. Bakamun brought it out and asked Ptahmose, "Won't you sit down, Almighty?"

Ptahmose sat down.

Mutnedjmet walked slowly up and down.

“Look. There's a reason why I called the three of you here. In the course of my duties as the mortuary Priestess of Hetepaten I was able to see many things. His environment, his friends, his enemies. And the circumstances of his death.

Hetepaten was found stabbed to death in this chamber with only one exit. Which was guarded. We found a papyrus on which was written: "He renounced the new god Aten and therefore took his own life."

"What we already know, dear Mutnedjmet," said Ptahmose.

"Then I will come straight to the point. I do not share the opinion that Hetepaten judged himself on behalf of the Aten. It is my opinion that Hetepaten was murdered."

Dead silence in the room. Ptahmose, Amunsetep and Bakamun held their breath.

"His murder was planned long and to the last detail. The murderer's craftsmanship was truly perfect. Almost perfect."

"Is there any evidence?" Amunsetep asked.

Ptahmose rejected him with a gesture of his hand. "I follow your explanations attentively," he said, "continue."

"Yes. I can prove it."

"Let us first begin with the crucial inconsistency: the papyrus with the supposed last words of Hetepatens."

Mutnedjmet pulled out the papyrus from under her sash.

"Where did you get this?" Amunsetep asked in surprise.

Bakamun's heart was beating up to his neck, it seemed.

"It doesn't matter now," said Mutnedjmet.

This could not calm Bakamun down either.

"The central question was: When had Hetepaten written the papyrus?" Mutnedjmet asked. "In the chamber? That was hardly possible. Neither the writing pad nor any other writing utensils were found. So Hetepaten must have written it before. Before he attended the administrative meeting. He is said to have sat there calmly, then marched into the Gempaaten to dagger himself there. And here we already have the second problem. The sickle sword. How did this large and conspicuous object get into the chamber?"

Mutnedjmet went into a corner, took an object wrapped in a cloth from the table and unrolled it. It was the sickle sword. "The guards had inspected the room before. There was no such sickle sword in the chamber before. Nor did Hetepaten bring it with him. Maybe the sickle sword was in the sarcophagus of poor Sechimi who was standing here in the middle of the room at that time. No. That's not possible either. Still in the afternoon mummy master Imuit brought the body of Sechimi here into the chamber, put it into the sarcophagus under the eyes of the guards and locked it. No sickle sword was inside. I will tell you what happened: Hetepaten entered the room, his murderer rammed the sickle sword into his chest and deposited the papyrus. But how did the murderer enter the chamber and how did he vanish into thin air afterwards?"

"A secret passage," said Ptahmose.

"It doesn't exist," replied Amunsetep.

"No, he didn't come through a secret passage," said Mutnedjmet. "But before I try to solve the mystery, I think it is important to think about *why* Hetepaten was murdered. He certainly had enemies, but what were the reasons for his murder? Maybe completely different ones than the obvious. Over the past few days I have suspected several people who might have had an advantage from Hetepaten's death. First of all, vizier Meriptah. He was the most powerful advisor in the last Pharaoh. Through Hetepaten and Ay, he was disempowered and now lives a retired life. Both Hetepaten and Ay are eliminated. Meriptah must have harbored a deep hatred against them and the new Pharaoh. He breeds crocodiles today, did you know that?"

"Crocodiles?" said Ptahmose, "he's always been extravagant."

"Or was the killer Hetepaten's son Junatonef?" Mutnedjmet said. "He was oppressed by his father. He wanted to inherit as

high priest as soon as possible. He was afraid one of his younger brothers might beat him to it.”

Mutnedjmet paused for a moment, then she went on. “Or maybe it was Hetepaten’s wife, Queniset. Their marriage had remained childless and Hetepaten had taken a second wife. She was young and attractive and bore him a son. Maybe Hetepaten wanted to break up with Queniset and *she* planned the murder? But how could they have done that? Possibly with the help of Herinebisut, the caretaker of the Gempaaten. He had an argument with Hetepaten about staff cuts. He was often at Hetepaten’s house and had close contact with Queniset. *How* close this was, we don’t know, what we do know is that Herinebisut is in charge of the guard, hiring and training the guard staff. Had the guards murdered Hetepaten?

“That’s the solution,” Bakamun said.

“Not so hasty. It’s about to get a few more nuances interesting: Horemhab could be the murderer. His marriage to me was thwarted by Ay, his rival. With the death of Hetepaten, Ay also disappeared in succession. My lover would have a motive. Hetepaten was also a welcome guest in the royal palace. There were weekly talks between him and Nefertiti. Which ended abruptly a few weeks ago. Why? Was his relationship with Nefertiti of an *intimate nature*? Had he tried to pressure her and had Nefertiti have him murdered in her husband’s new temple?”

Dead silence in the room. Ptahmose, Amunsetep and Bakamun listen spellbound to Mutnedjmet’s explanations. It became more and more interesting, she continued: “Or was it the Pharaoh himself?”

“The Pharaoh!” repeated Amunsetep shocked.

“Hetepaten hadn’t appeared for important rituals for some time. Maybe Hetepaten wanted too much power. Maybe Amenhotep, Ay and Dudu had to get rid of him. The thing

with Ay and the Oracle was just unforeseeable bad luck. At least none of the three has an alibi for the night of the murder.”

“So who was it?” Ptahmose asked impatiently.

“I’ll get to that in a minute. First, I want to clarify how the crime took place. How the killer could appear and disappear invisibly. Imuit the mummy master told me that when he delivered the body of Sechimi, there was another sarcophagus in this room. The one with the mummy of Sechimi’s wife, which Imuit had delivered the day before. Imuit thought of a sloppiness, but: this was exactly planned. Sechimi’s wife has not yet been granted the honor of guarding. The night before Hetepatens was murdered, the murderer had moved the mummy of Sechimi’s wife from the sarcophagus to another room. The old mortuary priest, Nebmaat, had watched him do so and thought that a goddess had appeared to him. The mummy, rolled in light-colored linen, looked as if it was floating when the murderer carried it. Well, Nebmaat had to pay with his life for that observation. Then the murderer came back and laid himself in the sarcophagus of Sechimi’s wife. So when the guards were set up the next day, he was already in the room. Then Thutmose delivered Sechimi’s sarcophagus into the same chamber and Imuit bedded Sechimi’s body in it. When everyone had left the room, the murderer got out of the coffin of Sechimi’s wife, lifted Sechimi’s mummy out of his sarcophagus and bedded her in his wife’s. Then the murderer climbed into Sechimi’s coffin and closed it. Sechimi’s mummy was now lying in his wife’s coffin, the murderer in Sechimi’s coffin. A little later the coffin of Sechimi’s wife was taken to a separate cell, which allegedly only now became free. Final result: The murderer lay in Sechimi’s sarcophagus in the guarded chamber. With the sickle sword, of course. Understand everything?”

The three listeners sat there stunned.

“The rest was easy,” Mutnedjmet continued. “When Hetepaten came, his murderer stabbed him, deposited the prefabricated papyrus and climbed back into the sarcophagus. When Junatonef found Hetepaten, the guards didn’t look in the sarcophagus, of course, since they had seen that Mummie-Master Imuit had put a corpse in there shortly before, and the chamber had been guarded by them all the time. Probably the following night the murderer put the right mummies into the right coffins again and made off. When I examined the sarcophagus the day after next, of course, it already contained Sechimi’s mummy.

“Sensational!” Bakamun was amazed.

“Now who was the murderer?” asked Ptahmose.

“The Pharaoh?” asked Bakamun.

“No, Bakamun, not the Pharaoh,” said Mutnedjmet. “*You* were the murderer!”

Mutnedjmet looked deep into Bakamun’s eyes and he froze.

“That’s nonsense, I couldn’t have been the murderer,” said Bakamun, “I was at a funeral at the time of the crime. In the big place in the rocky valley. A hundred people were there.”

“I can confirm that,” said Ptahmose.

“When I asked you recently, almighty Ptahmose. You said you *thought* he was there. Other witnesses I interviewed could not confirm the presence of Bakamun.”

“I was simply overlooked in the crowd,” Bakamun defended himself.

“There is a witness,” said Mutnedjmet, “and that was your crucial mistake. Your greed, that was the reason I finally exposed you. Hetepaten’s wife had missed a valuable golden pendant that Hetepaten wore when he died. After killing Hetepaten, you tore the pendant from his neck.”

“They even tried to kill me,” Bakamun said. “I was assassinated with a boulder.”

“You staged this yourself to mislead me,” said Mutnedjmet, “to divert my suspicion to vizier Meriptah. A little simple-minded.”

“That’s complete rubbish,” Bakamun broke out.

“A fine sash of fine panther skin you have there,” Mutnedjmet said to Bakamun. “You traded it in to Hermonthis for the pendant, the very day of the murder.”

“I don’t have to put up with this any longer!” yelled Bakamun.

“Where is the proof?” Ptahmose asked.

“Here is the proof,” said Mutnedjmet.

She took out the pendant.

“A gold pendant in the shape of a sign, engraved with the name of the Pharaoh. A unique piece.”

The pendant glowed golden yellow in the torchlight of the mortuary chamber. Mutnedjmet stepped to the door and shouted, “Come on, bring him in.”

Two guards came into the room with an older man. He was wrapped in a noble cloth, wearing several golden rings.

“Do you recognize the man?” Mutnedjmet asked him.

“Yes,” he answered, “that’s him,” and pointed to Bakamun.

“Is this the man who, in your shop at Hermonthis, exchanged this pendant for the panther skin apron?”

“Yes.”

“Are you absolutely sure?”

“Yes.

Bakamun stood there in shock.

“Thanks. You may go,” said Mutnedjmet.

The guards took the trader away.

“I told you,” Mutnedjmet said, “you were seen. Just for your greed and vanity. But I am not finished yet. Because you were

not alone. You had a helper who supported you and planned the crime. And that was you - *Amunsetep*."

"I resent that. You're out of your mind," shouted Amunsetep in outrage."

"You see," said Mutnedjmet, "I exposed you through the stone that fell from Meriptah's roof. It was too heavy for Bakamun to get it up on the roof alone, someone must have helped him. You both lifted the stone from the neighbouring priest's house onto the roof. Then Amunsetep threw it down when Bakamun passed by. Also, Bakamun could never have made sure that the Sarko-phages were in the chamber at exactly the right time. It had required an assistant. And that helper was you, Amunsetep. You were responsible for the schedule of the mortuary chambers. "

"This is complete nonsense! There is not the slightest proof," said Amunsetep.

"If Bakamun is to be decided by the court," said Mutnedjmet, "he will reveal his accomplice, I am sure of it."

Amunsetep remained silent.

"But that is not all," said Mutnedjmet, "You two were but instruments of a powerful employer who promised you high clerical offices. And that patron was *you* - venerable high priest!"

"But now it is enough," said Ptahmose, "you will have to answer for that. Even as the queen's sister. To accuse the high priest of Amun of murder will have consequences, you know that."

"Not if I prove it," says Mutnedjmet.

"I am curious," said Ptahmose, "Someone even tried to kill me. With a sickle sword, just like one Hetepaten used."

"You wanted to confuse me with this," said Mutnedjmet, "but you would have been better off not letting me look into the shrine of Amun, from which the killer allegedly jumped

out. The floor of the shrine was covered with a finger-thick layer of immaculate dust. The dust of several centuries. Nobody had stood there waiting for you. When my research showed first successes, you inflicted a slight injury on yourself. And you thought I will fall into your trap. But the real trail that led me to you was another: The papyrus.”

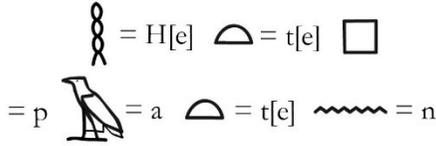
Mutnedjmet picked up the papyrus again. “precise and perfect written *noncursive* hieroglyphics. The author has gone to a great deal of trouble to keep his writing particularly anonymous. Anyone who was about to die would have written the letter in *cursive* hieroglyphics, which can be written much more quickly. But then one could have recognized the individual handwriting of the real writer. So the text was written in the elaborate decorative *noncursive* hieroglyphics to blur any trace. What else can we take from the text. An interesting quotation: ‘*Who does maat is free from injustice,*’ Mutnedjmet read from the papyrus.

“It is a saying from the wisdom teachings of the old philosopher and vizier Ptahhotep,” Mutnedjmet continued. “A very educated man must have written this, for only such a man would be familiar with the old wisdom books. Neither Bakamun nor Amunsetep would have been able to do so. I tested them independently. I quoted Ptahhotep’s proverbs before them and passed them off as texts by the philosopher *Kagemi*. Neither of them noticed this! They would not have had the knowledge to write this text. Unlike you, venerable Ptahmose. Shortly after you had done the attack on yourselves, you said to me: *Follow your heart as long as you live, but do not do more than you are told.* This is a proverb from the wisdom teachings of Ptahhotep. So you had the knowledge to write the text.

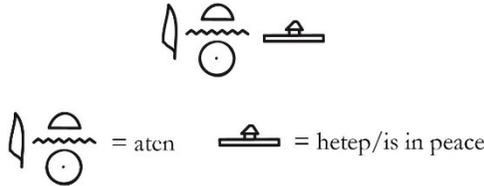
And a third point. The name of Hetepaten at the end of the papyrus:



The name Hetepatens was written in uniliteral signs:



But Hetepaten would never have written his name in uniliteral signs, but according to its meaning, like every Egyptian. The name Hetepaten means Aten is in peace. He would have spelled his name:



But the forger should have known that. So why did he spell the name Hetepatens wrong? The solution is simple: out of pure hatred and cynicism! Only the names of non-Egyptians are written in uniliteral signs. Hetepaten and the Pharaoh gathered foreign advisers around him, and Amenhotep even married a woman from the distant Kingdom of Mitanni. To spell the name like that was a cynical side blow to it.

The text on this papyrus must have been written by someone who hates anything non-Egyptian. Your perfection and your hatred and cynicism betrayed you, venerable high priest.”

“This is supposed to be evidence you’re presenting to me here.” said Ptahmose. “These are nothing but speculations of your garish imagination. That will cost you dearly.”

“All you care about is keeping power,” said Mutnedjmet. “You want to be the real King of Egypt. You are sticking with Amun only to have influence over this city and this county. You did not forget that the Pharaoh insisted on another high

priest. He wanted to overthrow you and put Hetepaten in your place. And when you could prevent this, Amenhotep had his own temple built, with his own god Aten. Whom he raised above all gods of this land. One central god, one central truth and all this in the hands of the king. You had to stop this development. Everything your familial clan has built over centuries would otherwise be in vain. The last kings of this country depended on you. You kept them on a leash like dogs. But this one wouldn't give in. You don't care about the truth. All you care about is keeping the power. You manipulate the Oracle. You don't believe Amun even exists. You don't represent the spirit of Amun. You claim to be Amun himself. You want to destroy every free thought in this country. You have taken it to the extreme."

Then Mutnedjmet looked Ptahmose straight in the eyes, like a poisonous Nile snake, just before its deadly strike: "You ridiculous, miserable creature, you think you are Amun yourself. I have proof that Bakamun committed the murder, Bakamun will betray Amunsetep and Amunsetep will betray you. I will hunt you down as sure as I am the queen's sister."

Dead silence in the room. Only the sharp breath of Ptahmose could be heard.

"You puny little hyena," he hissed softly, "who do you think you are. You're absolutely right. I will destroy this Pharaoh. The priesthood owns this land. For thousands of years. This Pharaoh wants to destroy the country. He wants the enemies of Egypt to move in here. He even tolerates non-Egyptians in its own ranks. He's even married a woman from the Midiannian Empire. Just like you. You foreigners are the dregs of society. You only bring new ideas, new pagan religions to our land. You're like an epidemic that must be averted. The priesthood made Egypt what it is today. Thanks to the

traditions of the clergy this land is the most powerful under the sun. It will remain the land of Amun. Forever and ever.”

Ptahmose piercing gaze fixed Mutnedjmet. He continued speaking almost whispering. “Yes - you are quite right. It was me who ordered the murder of Hetepatens. He was an ulcer, just like the Pharaoh. But you’ll never prove it to me that it was so. Amunsetep and Bakamun will keep their mouths shut, on my advice. They are under my protection. Your so-called evidence, various amulets, will be of no help to you against the power of the Oracle. The Gempaaten will soon be a thing of the past, and believe me, the Pharaoh will soon suffer a similar fate as Hetepaten. Just like you. And Ay, your father, he will slowly and surely rot in his dark tomb.

Diabolically triumphant, like glowing torches, the eyes of the high priest shone as he expressed all his hate.

“You think I won’t be able to prove your crime,” said Mutnedjmet. “Well, you thought wrong. Once again, your hate and content for mankind was the tiebreaker.”

Mutnedjmet raised her hands high above her head. Ptahmose, Amunsetep and Bakamun looked at her in perplexity. Then Mutnedjmet clapped her hands five times.

Suddenly there was a rumbling in the three wooden sarcophagi that stood inconspicuously in the background on the wall. Slowly the lid of the first coffin opened.

It was Horemhab who was in it. Then the lid of the second one went up. And vizier Meriptah climbed out of it. Finally the lid of the third sarcophagus opened and slowly the Pharaoh himself rose from it. Ptahmose’s face gave the impression that the blood in his veins was frozen.

“I think we’ve heard enough,” said the Pharaoh. “So you want to destroy me. But I guess you’ve done the math without the queen’s clever sister. I congratulate you, Mutnedjmet. I didn’t think the high priest of Amun would let himself be

drawn out like that. You were right. His deep-seated hatred has caused him to make mistakes. You are right, Ptahmose. The people of the Kingdom of Mitanni are really becoming a danger to you.”

Amenhotep turned to Horemhab, “Have you heard all this, Horemhab?”

“Every word,” Horemhab said, “loud and clear.”

“And you Meriptah,” said the Pharaoh, “what about you?”

“The high priest of Amun has admitted that he had murdered the high priest of a neighboring temple with malicious intent and planned a coup d’etat,” said Meriptah.

“Is that proof enough for you,” said Mutnedjmet, “venerable Ptahmose. “So we finally came to the solution in the end. Even though your version was easier to believe in the beginning, you did not succeed in burying the truth under the earth of Egypt forever. The sandstorms you sent yourselves have exposed reality again.”

Chapter Twenty-Six

Dull knocking could be heard for a long time in the rock. A hallucination? A vision in the pitch black darkness? The muffled sound came closer and closer. Sounds became audible, like the voices of men. And suddenly, through a small hole in the rock, light came into the rock tomb. The hole was hewn bigger and bigger, bright torchlight penetrated.

“Ay?” said a voice.

It was Mutnedjmet who had put her head through the hole.

“Ay!” she shouted again.

“Mutnedjmet?” it sonders, “Mutnedjmet, is that you? Am I dreaming?”

“No, it’s me! It’s reality.”

Mutnedjmet slipped through the hole in the wall and lit up Hetepaten’s tomb. Ay sat on one of the wooden boxes and could hardly believe it.

“The Oracle held its meeting today,” she said, “and it has decided to exchange you for this.”

She pulled out a small statue of the dead.

“You are still needed in Egypt.” She stretched out her arms to Ay. They fell around each other’s necks.

“I can’t believe it,” Ay said, “but it’s true.”

Mutnedjmet left the statuette, then the two of them climbed out of the grave. The workers, who had cleared the passage, immediately began to fill it in again. Mutnedjmet and Ay made their way through the gloomy vault to the exit.

“How is this possible?” Ay asked.

“With luck...or maybe with Aten’s help.”

* * *

The two were dazzled by the bright sun as they left the rock. Tey, and Nefertiti waited in front of the tomb of Hetepatens next to a number of workers and guards for the return of Ay.

“I can’t believe it!” Ay said.

He embraced Nefertiti.

“We not let us be browbeaten,” she said.

Then he stepped to his wife Tey.

“It seems to me like I fond my happiness a second time,” she said.

The two fell around each other’s necks.

“How is that possible?” Ay asked again.

“You owe it to Mutnedjmet’s tenacity,” Tey said, “If we didn’t know better, you’d think she had inherited it from you.

“We have found a way to convince the Oracle that this is the better way,” said Mutnedjmet.

The glowing solar disk was a blessing to the family today, like a shining star of joy. And they made their way back to Thebes.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

“We are all greatly indebted to you,” said Amenhotep as he rose from his throne. Before him stood Mutnedjmet, next to him Ay.

“By your intransigence to find the truth, you have prevented evil and strengthened the existence of Aten. You have also strengthened the idea that there will be a new Egypt. New and fresh blood shall flow in the veins of our land.”

“I thank you, venerable Pharaoh,” said Mutnedjmet, “allow me to ask, what will happen to Ptahmose now?”

“Ptahmose will be banished from this city,” said Amenhotep, “he will be sent to the distant quarries on the east coast and shall never return.”

“That’s it?” Mutnedjmet said.

“Look,” Ay said, “the Amun priesthood still has unbowed power in Thebes. And Ptahmose is their high priest. Changes are slow to happen in this country. We must be more careful. We should have learned that.”

“We are greatly thankful to you,” Amenhotep said to Mutnedjmet. “For this reason you shall receive what you have asked for. I foresee a great wedding celebration. All of Thebes shall celebrate with you and Horemhab. I think there is no one left who would object to that.”

“My daughter’s wish comes before all other considerations,” Ay said.

“If I may make a wish known, I would like a word with Horemhab before any decisions are made.”

“You have sole freedom of decision in this matter,” said Amenhotep.

Mutnedjmet bowed to the Pharaoh and was already slowly withdrawing.

“One more thing,” said Amenhotep.

“Venerable Pharaoh?” Mutnedjmet replied.

“After long deliberations we decided to keep this whole matter to ourselves. Ptahmose will retreat in silence and we do not want to bother Thebes or history with these highly sensitive events. The truth is that the solar disk of Aten will shine above Egypt and the world. It shall not be stained by events that are the result of the darkest and obscurest thoughts of our kingdom. We want to spread a cloak of eternal silence over it. For we shall seek a new place for a new beginning. We will leave the city of Thebes behind us”

Mutnedjmet didn't quite understand. Should the truth again remain invisible in a fog of confusion. Ptahmose should get away with no more than just a little slap on the wrist because of the traditions? But perhaps in the end, the result was all that mattered. Or maybe not?

“As you command, venerable Pharaoh,” said Mutnedjmet and slowly left the temple.

* * *

Horemhab was walking happily through his villa when Mutnedjmet arrived. She entered the room a little hesitantly. Horemhab was euphoric when he saw her.

“Mutnedjmet. It will be a great celebration,” he said, “I will do everything I can. I will have you carried through the city in a palanquin lined with a hundred musicians, servants, and priests. All the world shall know of our happiness. The Pharaoh thinks that I am a big talent. He has let me know so personally. I will make sacrifices to Aten, that will drive him to enthusiasm, eighty goats, ten oxen, twenty cattle. At least.”

Mutnedjmet slowly sat down on a low chair. “You plan my wedding as carefully as you plan my life.”

“Yes.” said Horemhab, “we must plan our future, for it will be a great one.”

Mutnedjmet could hardly bring herself to tell him what she had to say. But there was no turning back now.

“Horemhab,” she said, “listen. I’ve been thinking about it for a long time. Through the events of the last few days I have come to realize that it is important to recognize what is important in life. And I must also follow this realization. That is my opinion. I see it this way: I have the choice to become the respected wife of a great man, to found a family and to lead a contemplative life. Just the way you want it. And hundreds of women in Thebes don’t want anything else. *And* I have the choice as a co-worker of the temple to explore the traditions of Egypt of the last millennia, to find out what is true and right and to change the thinking of the people. For me *both* are important. But for Thebes and the people of this country the *second* is crucial. That is why I made my choice. Now it is up to you to decide whether you want to wait for me and above all whether you want to take me as I am. As a woman and as a partner.”

Mutnedjmet left the house of Horemhab and her heart was lighter. Though the truth was unpleasant, she knew she could never depart from it. For only then peace would fill her soul, like the light of the clear disc of the sun fills the day.

END OF EVENTS

Ptahmose

was sent away on a quarry expedition to the east coast and never returned to Thebes.

Thutmose

created as his artistic highlight the world-famous limestone bust of Nefertiti. Today it is exhibited in the Egyptian Museum in Berlin.

Pharaoh Amenhotep IV.

left Thebes one year later and founded his own city "Akhetaten" (today Amarna), in which he worshipped Aten as the only god of Egypt. He changed his name to "Akhenaten" ("useful to Aten"). He remained Pharaoh for 17 years, his grave was never found.

Nefertiti

gave birth to Amenhotep six daughters. She remained one of the most dazzling women of the eighteenth dynasty. Her remains were never found, what happened to her is not known.

Kiya,

the second wife of the Pharaoh, bore him his only son: Tutankhamun. He ruled nine years as King of Egypt. His magnificent tomb was discovered in 1922 and is considered the greatest archaeological sensation of the 20th century.

Ay

was appointed as Pharaoh after Tutankhamun, but only guided Egypt for four years. In his tomb in Achetaten an inscription can still be seen today in which he pays homage to Aten as a great god.

Horemhab

ruled afterwards as Pharaoh over the country at the Nile and remained this for 28 years. He arranged himself with the Amun priesthood, but moved the capital to Memphis.

Mutnedjmet

finally married Horemhab and thus helped him to become Pharaoh. She became a powerful queen of Egypt. She passed away at the age of thirty-five at the birth of a child. Her mummy was found with the baby's body in Saqqara, the Necropolis of Memphis in Egypt.

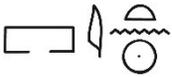
Appendix

Time period: about 1360 B.C., 18th Dynasty, New Kingdom

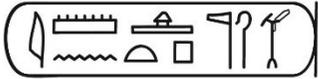
Ankh symbol “life, live, be alive”:



Temple/house of Aten:



Amenhotep IV.:



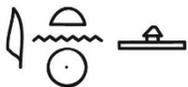
Throne (not written before New Kingdom):



Throne (also written before New Kingdom):



Hetepaten:



Amun:

.....most powerful all-god since the dawn of time

Aten:

.....new favourite sun-god of the Pharaoh

Osiris:

.....god of resurrection in the realm of the dead

Maat:

.....goddess of truth/justice

Ahmoose:

.....first Pharaoh of the 18th dynasty

Senusret I.:

.....Pharaoh of the 12th dynasty

Thebes:

.....capital of Egypt

Gempaaten:

.....new temple of Aten in Thebes

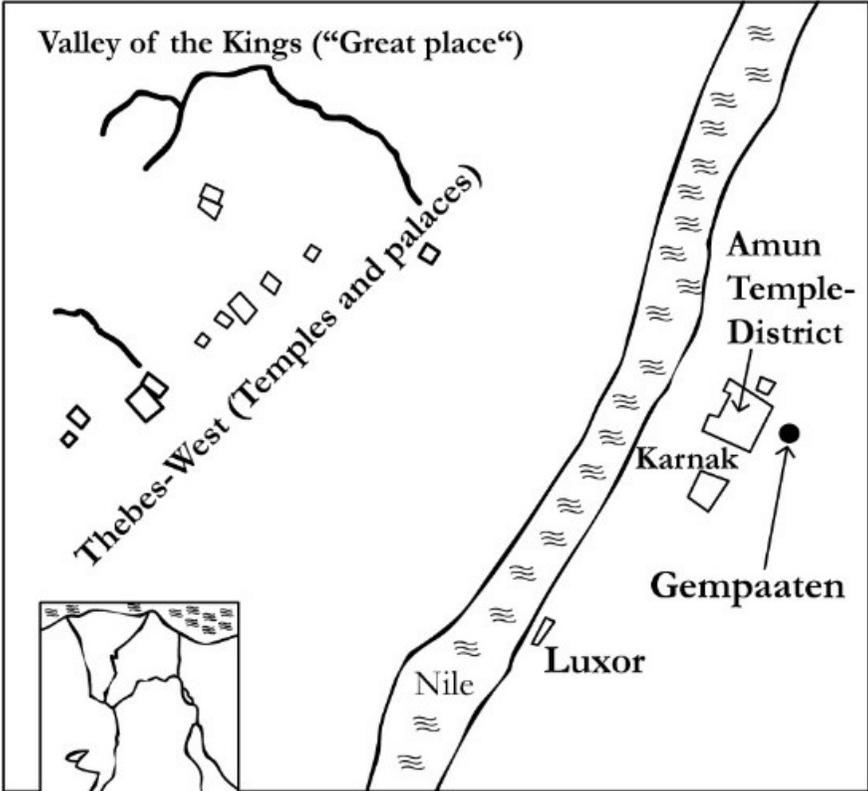
Big/great place:

.....Valley of the Kings

Hermonthis:

.....city southwest of Thebes

Thebes



Egypt

Comment

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