



## Chapter Two:

Abydos hummed with activity. The barter shops did brisk business, the boats ran, and the priests performed their frequent rituals. Osiris had come to his home, so the streets were packed with gawking pilgrims. They came to the temple for the scheduled devotions. They came between chores, in the midst of chores, tools still in hand, and from the idle luxury of noble villas.

Most were strangers to Abydos the city, but Abydos the kingdom extended far up and down the Nile valley, with a population in the tens of thousands. These rural throngs gaped at the sights, especially the ornate temple. They milled before its gates hoping to glimpse their sovereign, for tradition forbade all but priests to enter the temple grounds. Of course, there was pageantry, as the religious turned out in their finest robes, beat their drums, and voiced their chants. Pennants flew over the massive mudbrick pylons flanking the temple's gate, their presence announcing the god-king's readiness to accept the prayers of his people. With the crowds, the color, and the theater of faith, the city seemed in the midst of a festival.

But Osiris felt anything but festive. Touched by his people's affection and by pangs of guilt over such a long absence, he attended all the temple rites. He entered through the street gates rather than from the palace, making himself visible to his subjects. He appeared at neighborhood altars, accepting in person the offerings of astounded workman-clerics. Finally, he sat upon his ebony throne in the palace audience hall, attending to his court of nobles and hearing the pleas of his less fortunate supplicants. He was everywhere for everyone, and he was exhausted.

"He'd be amusing if he weren't so weary," Isis said. She must have felt the strain of duty, though of course it didn't show. With Osiris so much in evidence, she had increased her liturgical appearances to ensure her own cult did not fall from distinction. Her

schedule was lighter and lower key, but she had always been home for her faithful and therefore had less to prove.

And then there was Nephthys, queen of the deep desert, mistress of Abu Simbel, and wife to the storm god Set. She sat beside her sister in Isis's main hall, a perfect twin, and nothing. Living as she did in the shadow of her husband, Nephthys attracted few followers into her minor cult. Her people—that is, her husband's people—loved her, especially in comparison to her volatile, moody spouse. They ministered to her, and likely felt sorry for her, but were rarely moved to worship her. Few knew what to worship her for.

She couldn't blame them.

Now she sat on the divan, a mirror image of Isis, her hostess. But where Isis personified confident love and life, Nephthys's existence was a dark secret. She felt a little sad, a little removed from the world. She skinned a grape with her teeth while her mind ranged between her sister's animated talk and her own hidden thoughts.

"He exhausted himself," Isis was saying. "It really wasn't necessary, but you know how driven he is. He's laid out in bed right now, trying to rest before that feast."

"Feast?" Nephthys was distracted. She boiled in her own purposes, for which she felt guilt, fear and excitement at once. She couldn't tell Isis her intent, though from Isis alone she had never held secrets.

"Yes, you know, Set's little welcome home feast in the main hall. All the nobles and all Osiris's men are invited. It's informal, and all male, probably an excuse for business." Isis popped a grape into her mouth and closed her eyes to relish its taste. "Mmmm, they're delicious, aren't they? All the way from the delta!"

"Osiris is too tired for feasts," Nephthys said, her tone a timid whisper. "Perhaps he'll sleep through the night?"

"Not him. He's too much the dedicated monarch. His retainers will rouse him just before the hour."

Nephthys didn't ask what hour; she already knew. Stewed as she was in her own affairs, the 'feast' for Osiris had still managed a flicker in her survivor's heart. The party held danger. The sly, serpentine humor lately affected by her husband could mean nothing else. He craved Osiris's throne, and perhaps would move to take it.

She shivered at the thought of Set as king of Abydos. She knew his sick philosophy of rule. Just that morning, the Setim, an elite cadre of warrior-priests who accompanied Set throughout the lands, had worshipped him with incense and drums aboard his massive barge. It was moored upstream from the temple quay, well beyond sight of those in power. Nephthys hadn't been invited, and wouldn't have gone anyway, but had watched with morbid interest from her own boat tied up a short run away. Normally, she would have avoided the scene, for the Setim's worship was not so much devotion as insurance against mass murder, hard for her to stomach. But Hapi had been there, his pendulous muddy breasts glistening brown in the sunlight. He had risen from his river to offer compliments to Set. Hapi was god of the Nile, long in struggle against Abu Simbel. Why would he choose to visit the god of deserts?

"You could go to him," Nephthys said. "You could ... convince him to stay in bed."

Isis grinned, rolling two grapes in her palm. "I have duties, Nephthys. At sunset, two humans are sequestered for birthing. I'm committed to attend." She shrugged. "I only have an hour before I go."

“I’m sorry,” Nephthys breathed, looking down at her lap. “I must be keeping you.” She gripped her hands against the rich pleats of her linen dress. A pretty dress, so close and so thin that it seemed painted on.

“No, not at all,” Isis said, and touched her sister’s hand.

Nephthys flinched from the gesture. She sees something, she cried inside. What have I done to betray myself? A movement? A flit of the eyes? Can she hear the secrets hidden in my voice?

“Nephthys, are you all right?”

“Yes, of course,” Nephthys said too quickly. “I’m fine. Just a little tired. The trip from Abu Simbel, you know.”

Isis couldn’t have been convinced, but then, the mistress of the deep desert was not an easy goddess to read, thank goodness. Nephthys knew how they saw her. Odd behavior for anyone else was as normal in her as breath. She couldn’t help her readiness to cringe, to recoil from abuse. Her husband had trained her well.

“Nephthys, what has he done now?”

“What? No, not Set. Not really. We hardly spend a day together.” Her hands gestured of their own accord, small, constrained movements that whispered her fear of being noticed. She looked about the hall for help. She found none, just the floral décor on the walls, the cold brazier, two wood and rushes chairs, and the table with the bow on it. She gathered herself, and turned back to her sister. “It isn’t Set. Not this time. This time, Isis, it’s me.”

Isis waited, fiddling with a grape.

“It’s me,” Nephthys repeated, her voice collapsing in on itself. For a moment, the house stood silent. Isis moved to prompt her sister, but Nephthys spoke first. “Isis, am I a good sister?”

“What? What kind of question is that?”

“A simple one, I think. Am I a good sister? Am I trusted? Am I welcome in your life?”

“Of course you are,” Isis said, then suppressed a nervous laugh.

“Would you miss me?” Nephthys whispered. “Would you miss me if I were gone?”

Isis made silence her answer. She drew her lips to a thin line and held her sister’s eyes. Oh, even petulance was music upon her face!

“I’m sorry.” Nephthys dropped her gaze to her lap. Her fists bunched there. “I’m sorry, this isn’t something you want to hear. You’re a powerful goddess, worshipped across the land. You never have thoughts of fading...”

“Fading? Nephthys, don’t be ridiculous!”

Nephthys looked up. She glared with a spark of certitude. “But, I am ridiculous! I have no identity. I hardly have worshippers! My following is a laughable cult! What is a goddess without her believers? I am nothing, hardly even a concept or the seed of an idea. I fear I soon must fade from this world...”

Isis frowned. She put out a comforting hand, but retrieved it when Nephthys drew away. “That monster has done this,” she said. “You are not ridiculous. I love you and I do not love ridiculous things. Osiris loves you and wishes you away from that desert trap. You are loved and honored more than you know.”

“Why?”

The question stymied Isis. “Why?”

“Why, sister? I’m not a goddess of life and fertility. I’m no god of agriculture, no bringer of civilization. I am not the Nile, like Hapi, nor even a queen debaucher of love, like Hathor. I’m nothing. An immortal without purpose. I’m a dream incomplete.”

“You are my sister. Is that so insignificant?”

Nephthys furrowed her brow. “Forgive me, I love you. But I can’t face eternity as only the sister of Isis.”

Speech failed between the goddesses. Nephthys was right; she knew it. She had dwelled on the subject for years, had cultivated the festering boil of her life as humans slit their wrists, or practice self-flagellation with whips of knotted cord.

When Isis spoke again, her voice quaked with emotion. “Then don’t. Make yourself, sister. Form yourself as you see fit. Don’t allow Set to force you to fade. You embody some power, that’s without doubt. You would not exist otherwise. You just need to discover your nature, coax your power to manifest. It’s tangled thread, but I’m sure you can set it straight. Nephthys, complete your dream.”

“I intend to,” Nephthys said, trembling. “There are ways, and I intend to.”

Isis misread her intent, and smiled.



In all her eons, Nephthys couldn’t recall the last time she had smiled. She sat in the dark of her palace guest apartments long after Isis departed for her chores. Her only companions were desperation, self-disgust, and cowardice, all tearing at her like starved and greedy animals. She thought she might die before her hour came, die of a heart withered from lack of choices.

But the time did come, and she mustered her nerve. She departed her quarters and crossed the moonlit palace gardens, looking away from the unlit shadow of Isis’s house. She wore a heavy cloak with a hood that shadowed her melancholy face. Beneath it she wore her pretty dress, its stays loosened, its pleats billowing. When she came to the king’s apartments, his retainers admitted her without a word; they were not in the business of questioning the gods, and they thought she was someone else. She therefore arrived unannounced.

She knew where to go. When she found the room at the back of the house, she paused just a moment before entering.

Osiris lay in his bed, motionless in sleep. The night was still hot, so he used no covers; he also wore no bedclothes. Nephthys approached, as tense as a frightened cat, and stood for a moment beside the bed. She forced her breath into a slow, deep rhythm. Then, feeling her resolve beginning to crumble, she fumbled quickly with the ties of her linens and let them fall to the floor.

She climbed into the bed and drew herself to her brother.

“Mmmm,” Osiris murmured, reaching for her. “How well I dream, my wife...”

“Shh...” Nephthys breathed. She kissed his neck, took him in her arms, and brought him steadily to arousal. It didn’t take long; he, too, thought she was someone else.

When he was ready, she mounted him.



Set's feast was a stilted affair, doomed from the start by its clique of strutting nobles and the presence of two powerful gods, one with a foul disposition. The main hall fought to dispel the awkward atmosphere, proclaiming celebration through a galaxy of glittering lamps, brightly decorated flax rugs, and bold banners hanging from the forest of palm columns supporting the ceiling. Musicians alternately circulated alone and joined into a band, playing an energized repertoire of ballads, hymns, and bawdy drinking songs. Their drums, cymbals and reed pipes mixed with the athletic thrashings of professional dancers, performers of both sexes clothed in little but loincloths. A conjurer accented the manufactured glee by blowing fire, making trinkets disappear, and releasing birds from his sleeves. Beer and wine wetted every tongue, and course after course of meat, vegetables, and sweets tempted the guests, the fare served by polite Setim priests.

The guests sat at two banks of low tables, in richly appointed chairs of ebony and ivory. The nobles stayed to one side of the gathering, the soldiers to the other. They were too class conscious to mix. The two gods, eating little, sat at a table that joined those uncomfortable camps. They were draped according to their stations, in magnificent translucent linens intricately pleated, in heavy jewelry about their necks and in their ears, and in exquisite wigs of wool and linen. Osiris seemed uncomfortable in his trappings, but he made the best of it, passing jokes to nobles and soldiers alike, challenging the groups into fitful, short-lived conversation. But he was tired, so his heart wasn't in it; he often fell to silence. Set sat with his arms crossed, glaring at his company as at long hated enemies.

"The guests don't seem to be mixing very well," Osiris said as he toyed with a bowl of wine.

"Reminds me of animals from two separate packs," Set said. "Perhaps they aren't as civilized as legend tries to assert."

"Legend? What do you mean, my brother?"

Set's tone held sarcasm. "You are Osiris, he who brought civilization to the tears of Ra, and farming, and law, and the city itself. If they can't even think to speak to one another, then perhaps your reputation is sorely overstated."

"Civilization is a process, not a thing." Osiris looked at his bowl and swirled the red liquid. He didn't feel like sparring with Set. He wanted to go home. He wanted to find Isis, and look into her eyes. Their lovemaking had been intense, but strangely joyless. Was she as tired as he? Had something happened during her day, something he ought to know about? He wanted to dismiss the gathering before him and find his way to her rooms. He wanted to hold her in his arms and ask the questions his heart demanded. Are you all right? Is there something I should know? She had seemed so forlorn in his bed...



Qebera's mind, too, wandered far from the amusements at hand. He felt a surreal disquiet at the storm god's foundering party. The gesture was so unlike Set, and contrasted with the god's apparent mood. What schemes did he harbor? Why had he left his desert haunts? Surely not out of filial love, or because his equally inscrutable wife had demanded to visit her sister. Confound these gods; they were too easy to fathom. All that they did was constrained by their natures. So, this party of Set's was evil.

Qebera ate and conversed with his twenty-five elite guards—all the guard Osiris commanded—and grunted to himself at the truth of his thoughts. He also took care not to soil his tunic with the rich, saucy foods or the showers of libations. Sanni had toiled to bleach his uniform, to make it white again. She deserved a little effort to keep it that way.

Still, Qebera tried to enjoy himself. No sense in wasting such food and drink. He even lost himself for a time in the amusements, at least the part where the athletic, half-naked women danced before his eyes. The traditional, religious theme of their art did nothing to lessen his libidinous attention. Half-naked women were half-naked women no matter the protestations of art.

Finally, like Osiris, Qebera tired of playing the guest and sank into his chair, intending to wait out the evening. He drank beer, nibbled at food, and waited for the dirge to play, for all important parties included a dirge, and it came near the end of festivities. The dirge reminded humans of the essential fact of mortality and the precious state of the life they owned. It alerted their Ka—their twin, unseen spirits on earth—to watch over them until death. The Ka needed reminding, for if it failed to find its corporeal partner when mortal life had run its course, both man and spirit would wander lost into the afterlife. A very bad thing, Qebera asserted as he told this to a half-drunk lieutenant, a likable fellow with little self-control and a weakness for beer. The afterlife was eternity, Qebera warned, not this small diversion, and therefore in need of order. The dirge cautioned all who gave it heed that men and gods alike must keep company with their Ka, or risk suffering forever in a world as empty as the deep desert in summer.

Not that Qebera was a connoisseur of dirges. They also meant the party was over and he could go home to his wife.



Set scared away two presumptuous nobles who approached to offer their compliments. He murmured something close to a growl.

“So, why did you invite them?” Osiris asked, sounding bored. He made conversation, Set knew. Osiris had given up puzzling out his brother.

“I thought you’d like the company,” Set answered with scorn. “The wretched bags of meat, it’s like we’re trapped in a room full of beetles.”

Osiris sighed. “The beef was very good. Compliments to your cook.”

Set ignored the comment and signaled one of his circulating priests. A moment later, the background music faltered, then began again with a familiar tune.

With much irritation, Set heard relief from the crowd.

“The dirge,” Osiris said, nodding. “A good move, brother. Despite your fine hospitality, I think everyone is tired.”

“Ungrateful vermin, that’s what they are. I do this for you, brother, not for them.”



The conjurer exited the floor. The dancers arrayed into a unified, somber procession full of the miracle of life, death, grief, and rebirth. Then, from far into the hall where the oil lamps failed to reach, a crew of priests appeared as if ghosts, hauling a long wooden

sledge by taut ropes. A large, bulbous cedar box weighed on the sledge. As the priests muscled it into the light between the banks of tables, the crowd drew in its collective breath.

A beautiful coffin, Qebera supposed from their reaction. He had never seen a coffin himself. His people buried their dead in bags, in shallow graves in the desert.

The coffin lid was sculpted into a reclining male figure, richly garbed in pleated linens, copious jewelry, and a ceremonial linen wig. Details flowed through the most involved inlay of colored wood strips Qebera had ever seen, and he had seen much in the riches of the palace. Many of the guests commented that the coffin looked fit for nobility.

“And, so it is!” Set announced, and stood. He clapped his hands twice, and the music ceased. His priests left the coffin amid the crowding humans and began ushering performers from the hall. Qebera, always suspicious, squinted about the room, into the darkness beyond the lamps. Were there more Setim than a moment before? Many, many more?

“My guests,” Set continued when the entertainment departed, “we have come together to honor my brother, who is returned from yet another long journey. This occasion should be memorable to all present, indeed to all Abydos.” He gestured toward the box. “As a god I have no use for coffins, but I have commissioned this piece as a gift. To whom? Why, to one only, here in this room. To him who fits the coffin perfectly.”

A murmur of excitement rolled through the hall. It wasn't exactly approval, but it wasn't horror, either. It was a soup of both, flavored with longing. Most of the guests moved closer to the coffin, their eyes huge with awe. A few stepped away, their faces drawn.

Set smiled. “So, who will be first to try it on for size?”

No one volunteered. They looked at each other.

Four priests stepped to the coffin, two each at the head and foot. They grasped hidden handles in the lid, then lifted it up and away from the box. Qebera noted that they remained beside the sledge; they did not put the lid down.

“Well?” Set coaxed. “Anyone interested?”

A nervous silence reigned a moment, then Unas the architect put up a hand. “I'll do it!” he announced, and everyone laughed.

“Well said, noble Unas,” Set called, chuckling, “but I think we should concentrate on frames of less ... heroic proportions.”

“I'll try,” a thinner noble ventured now that the tension was broken. He ambled up to the sledge. Two Setim priests stepped from the surrounding darkness and helped him onto its runners and then into the coffin.

How many priests did he have? Qebera wondered. He noted that the noble would not fit the box. Too much room and too little body.

For the next several minutes, noble after noble—and even a few soldiers—climbed into the coffin. It became a morbid joke, the only interesting part of the party. But no one fit the interior space. They were too broad or too thin, or too long or short. Set's present remained unclaimed.

“Will no one else attempt?” Set wondered, sounding distressed. “Such a wonderful bed upon which to enter the afterlife, sure to shame kings from ages past. Surely, someone—Brother, what about you?”

Osiris had been staring into space. Now, he looked up in confusion. “Me? Whatever for?”

“The spirit of the game, O king. Come on, take a chance.”

Osiris chuckled, and shook his head. “I’m immortal, brother. I have no use for coffins. Allow my subjects the prize.”

Set huffed. “Such arrogance in the face of eternity. True, you and I will live forever, given the grace of Ma’at. But this is not certain by any calculation. Even the great Creator Ra dies each evening to be resurrected with the dawn. Besides, this box is a work of the finest art.”

“Agreed, it is magnificent.” Osiris waved his brother’s speech aside. “But I still have no use for such mortal themes.”

Set turned to the crowd. “Well! A king who doesn’t lead by example? Oh, please, keep this from the people! What do you say, pillars of Abydos? Should the king also try?”

“Yes! Yes!” the guests cried, and laughed at the silliness of the idea.

“Well, Osiris, your people have spoken.” Set seemed to enjoy the moment.

“No, no,” Osiris protested.

“Yes, yes!” the crowd returned.

The king couldn’t win that hearty exchange. After a few more raucous moments, he surrendered and approached the sledge. The guests cheered. Some forgot themselves and slapped him on the back. He climbed to the box himself, pulling himself up by the holes drilled in the rim of the coffin, the holes drilled to match other holes in the lid, and through which wooden pegs would be forced to lock the container closed. Should the coffin ever be used.

He lowered himself into the plain wood interior, joking about the coincidence that he usually slept on his back. He laughed, the guests laughed, even Set was disposed to humor. It was a perfect moment of camaraderie.

Then Qebera noticed that his king fit the coffin. He watched Osiris cross his arms over his chest and complain of a chafing at his shoulders. He watched as the priests urged the guests away. Then suspicion sparked comprehension. Qebera noticed the coffin itself, its lid held close to the box, close to Osiris within. Osiris. The lid. With the king in state regalia, the two looked much alike.

“Osiris!” Qebera yelled. “My king!”

The priests moved, heaving the heavy lid onto its box. They fell across it, holding it closed as Osiris struggled within. Four other priests burst from the darkness, carrying hammers and pegs. Setim flooded the chamber. They became a wall between coffin and guests. They held flint axes at the ready.

“Set!” Qebera roared, and snatched his sword from his belt. “What is this, you—you—?” He wanted to curse the monster, but some cautionary impulse arrested the words.

Set stepped aside to give his people room to work. Priests hammered at the edge of the coffin’s lid. “I’d watch your tongue.” The god sneered at Qebera. “You address the reigning king of Abydos.”

“Osiris is king! This is his city!” Qebera held his sword in two trembling hands. He was enraged, frightened, and confused.

“Not anymore,” Set said. “Osiris the former king is dead.”



A muffled pounding sounded from the coffin. The priests across its lid shuddered.

“Well, he will be soon,” Set corrected himself. He fixed Qebera in a threatening stare. “This is not your business, human. You were invited to witness my triumph, not to critique it. Do yourself a favor. Go home.”

Qebera couldn’t think what to do. Osiris needed him. Osiris, who had never needed anyone, who had always been his soldiers’ protection, never the reverse. He needed help, and Qebera couldn’t respond. How does one battle a god?

“Go home,” Set warned again.

Qebera looked to his men, to their wide eyes and indecision. He turned to the stunned, useless nobles. He looked to the dense swarm of Setim warrior-priests. How many? Seventy? A hundred? “Set!” he bellowed. “This will not stand! Though I perish in the attempt, I will defend my king!”

An affirming roar from Qebera’s men. Whispers of metal clearing linen belts.

Set frowned. “Very well.” He nodded to his people. “Kill them. Kill them all.”



Isis staggered. She had been walking the edge of her roof, a moment’s self-collection after just returning home. If not for her attending priestess, she might have fallen to the courtyard below.

“Goddess!” Merferet gasped, hauling her queen from the precipice. She released Isis’s arms then, bowing and cringing over the affront to her deity. “Goddess, forgive me! Are you all right?”

Isis settled to the mudbrick roof. She trembled. Her body ran with sweat. “I felt something,” she said, her voice husky. She grasped her chest above her heart. Darkness stirred there, and fear. “The king is in trouble,” she forced from her lips. “Where is his guard? Where are his priests?”



The Setim attacked as a wave. The nobles quailed and ran for the exit. Before it could register, Qebera gutted two men, Qebera, who had never killed in his life. His men crashed into the fray. The hall rang with the sound of bronze on wood and stone. Oil lamps toppled, spreading darkness. Men slipped and fell on the slicked floor, some to not rise again. The Setim were fanatical, driven by fear of their master. But they were ill-trained. They fell like reeds before Qebera’s men. Still, the king’s guard were few, and the Setim an army.

And half of Qebera’s people were drunk.

Qebera blocked a wild ax stroke, kicking back that assailant and slicing open another. Blood slimed his sword and covered his arms, striking him with horror.

How had he managed years as a soldier, and never seen the gore of combat?

Set worked across the room to the exit. Eight priests lifted the coffin and bore it behind him.

Qebera tried to separate from the bloody melee around him. The fight was a diversion, keeping him from his king. But to free himself of the Setim was no easy feat.

They were unskilled, but numerous as ants. They slaughtered his men, chopped down cowering nobles, and replaced their own fallen without thought or command. Then they heightened the level of calamity. A sword rang against Qebera's blade, a sword taken from among his fallen comrades. The sacred metal of Osiris now served his brother's minions. The sacrilege enraged Qebera further; he fell on his enemies as if possessed.

His remaining men fought with equal vigor. They hacked, kicked, and skewered their attackers, and felt the Setim buckle. But they could only watch with ineffectual rage as Set left the hall with Osiris's wooden prison. Qebera cursed as he fought, screaming damnation at the Setim, at Set, and most roundly at himself.

His first chance to prove his worth, and he already failed.

The Setim broke, their ax-wielding ranks retreating among the dark palm columns of the hall.

"Let them go!" Qebera shouted. "Form a shield here to keep them off our backs! You three, with me!"

With his three chosen comrades, Qebera charged out the main doors. He rushed from the hall and across the empty foyer, out the palace doors and into the starry night. Qebera halted his men then. He formed them into the secure wedge Osiris had drilled into him. He wanted to rescue the king, not fall into ambush.

They stalked down the ramp from the porch and into the courtyard before the palace gates. The hairs rose on Qebera's neck, for the courtyard stood in deep shadow beneath palms, acacias, and a black row of cedars, the last a gift from Syria years ago. The place had been a second home, its cultured beauty soothing the most troubled heart. Now, the courtyard threatened, its shadows impenetrable and numerous. Somewhere out there among the beds of reeds, about the house altar to the now captured god, and near the low brick walls and oversized sculptures, Setim might wait to waylay pursuers. Qebera would have done so in the service of Osiris.

The Setim charged from the dark with more zeal than talent, six men with axes brandished above their heads. Qebera's guard met them, bringing them down with little effort.

"Which way?" one of the guards asked, his chest heaving to catch his breath.

"You, you," Qebera decided, not much thought to the effort. "Go through the palace gate and into the city. The rest of us will head through the courtyard to the quay."

"And what do we do if we find them?" one man asked. "Isn't it impossible to kill a god?"

"The main thing to worry about is him killing you. Now, go!"

The party split. Qebera dove into the black mass of shadows in search of his master's brother.



Amnet shuddered. He shouldn't be where he stood at that moment, him a priest of Osiris. The queen's rooms were forbidden to him; his presence polluted her faith. Still, the high priestess had sought him out, had compelled him to see the queen. Considering the circumstances, he could not refuse.

Merferet ushered him into Isis's front room. There he met another shock. On the floor lay scattered the ensigns of Osiris's royal authority. Piles of his robes and kilts, piles of

state jewelry, a plethora of state wigs. Even the king's scepter-insignia, his glass-and-wood decorated crook and flail, lay like trash on the floor. The crook connoted the king's shepherding influence, the flail his power to enforce his will. Where was that power, when its symbols had suffered such dishonor?

Servants and priestesses rummaged through the stuff, jamming things into rough linen bags. A scribe drew on a papyrus scroll, cataloging what the servants bagged. They were all followers of Isis, all befoulers of the regalia they handled.

The queen sat on a divan nearby, holding the seat as if she might swoon. She hunched within a heavy hooded cloak so as not to overwhelm the priest. Amnet was grateful, for no man withstood the power of her flesh.

"Goddess, forgive me," Amnet exclaimed, "but as high priest of Osiris, I must protest. These are my lord's holy possessions. How did you—"

"She went to his apartments and took them," Merferet snapped, and hurried to kneel by her goddess. "Surely you won't complain, with all that's happened tonight."

Amnet couldn't help the frustration in his voice. "All what's happened? The palace is confused. Some say we're at war, others know nothing at all. Some say a number of nobles are murdered, that infiltrators—"

"My husband is captured," Isis moaned from within her robes. "Set intends to kill him." She sagged at the announcement. Merferet caught her before she fell from the divan.

Osiris? Killed? Amnet cringed from the thought. How does one commit such sacrilege? How does one kill a god?

"Set intends to kill him," the goddess said with a will. "He will kill my husband, take the throne of Abydos, then destroy my husband's temple, murder you priests, and take me as his consort!"

"Heaven forefend!" Amnet gasped, and quailed even deeper within himself.

Isis gestured at the stuff scattered around her. "These are the ensigns of my husband's reign. All are here but what he wears." She paused. When her voice returned, it was but a whisper. "Take them."

"Goddess, I cannot! It is forbidden—"

"Listen, you fool!" Merferet snapped. "She seeks to save your master, not offend him! Take the regalia, distribute it among your priests, and go quickly into hiding! Without these symbols, Set cannot rule with legitimacy. All will know he usurped the throne! Take these things, and defend them with your lives!"

Amnet's mouth opened and closed like that of a fish on land. For all his holy station, he was little more than a bureaucrat. This was beyond his experience. "I will have to consult my order..."

Isis rose to her feet. Though her priestess poised to catch her should she faint, the queen projected a defiant, if battered, regality. "By the time you consult, you will all be dead."

She stepped to within inches of the priest. She reached out a hand and touched his chest. Immediately, he calmed. "Fear is natural," she said, her voice quavering. "But your god needs you. Protect his name, if not his body. Even in disaster, you may still be of service."

Amnet willed strength to his soul. If this goddess could function in the midst of grief, then he, too, could act. "I will do it, goddess. But, what will become of you?" He bit his

lip as the question escaped, for he knew the answer already. Set would want her. He might even take her by force. He would see her as property rightfully won.

“I will endure,” Isis answered, and her voice cracked. “I must. Who else is there to avenge the name of Osiris?”



An ax sparked chips from the gate's brick frame. That strike failed, the ambusher threw himself onto Qebera. The two fell backwards into the courtyard, where Qebera immobilized the ax-wielding arm and battered the assailant with his sword's heavy pommel. Still the Setim fought, thrashing for a few fateful moments, long enough for Qebera's man to pass around them, through the gate and onto the palace quay.

“Set!” the guardsman challenged. The storm god ignored him. He directed his crew as they loaded Osiris's coffin onto a launch. The guard charged, his sword held high. Qebera dispatched his Setim nuisance in time to witness his comrade's death.

Set glanced up from his work. He gestured, then turned away.

The sand along the quay burst from the ground and combined into a scouring stream that stripped the guard to his bones. His sword and skeleton clattered to the ground.

Qebera almost fled. A part of him screamed to do so, to hide somewhere until it was safe. But the man in him defied that beast and pushed it down in the name of duty. He wiped his bloody hands on his grimy uniform, then stepped with his sword from the gate onto the quay.

Set saw him, and frowned.

The boatmen threw off mooring lines.

Qebera gritted his teeth and stepped toward the boat. Another step. Another. He grew bolder the longer he lived. Soon he marched toward the launch.

Set gestured again as his crew poled toward the river's center.

“Set! Come back here!”

Qebera almost missed the thin dervish of sand. It whipped from the ground just to his right, thickened, solidified, and came to terrible life.

A cobra swayed there, its hood flared. The beast was huge, as long and thick as a palm tree. It had a rough sand hide, sharp sand teeth, and dead sand eyes. It turned those unseeing eyes toward Qebera, and lunged.

Qebera ducked, rolled, then came to his feet in time to recoil from a second strike. The snake missed him, reared, and shrieked.

Set seemed not to notice the horror he had brought into being. He had his back to Qebera, ordering his boat to the river's midstream.

The cobra struck again. Qebera dodged, escaping death by a scant measure. The monster's gritty trunk lunged past in front of him, incredibly large, incredibly quick.

Qebera hacked the snake with his sword. The blade flashed through the body, to no effect.

The beast landed a good run away, coiled, turned, and glared at its prey.

Qebera brandished his weapon without confidence. He would die in seconds. Without thinking, he backed toward the water.

The snake flashed at him, a giant's cracking whip. Qebera braced himself and screamed useless defiance.

But he wasn't enveloped by huge teeth or crushed by snapping jaws. The monster, mid-lunge, caught him in a neat loop of its body. Qebera felt a viselike squeeze. He felt himself fly through the air. He watched terrified as a colossal, gritty demon's head turned to rip him to shreds. So, this is how the mouse feels, Qebera thought with despair, and gave himself up to fate.

But the beast had poorly judged its lunge. Even as its mouth gaped for murder, the whole thing, Qebera included, tumbled into the Nile.



Set had forgotten his human pest, if ever he had taken full notice of him. He fingered the ornate coffin in which his brother lay trapped, and listened to the faint cries muffled below the lid. He still felt struggle vibrating through his fingers, but it grew weaker as the air fouled inside.

"In time, brother," he said, "all your struggles will cease. Then I will be king and rectify your dismal experiments. Civilization, hah! Let them return to the animals they were, and the land return to the gods who made it. I need no pets to enliven my existence. Your former wife will be pastime enough."

He stood at the coffin for long, satisfied minutes while the boat poled to the river's heart. No one aboard looked at him; no one listened to his words. They knew what he was, what he had done and would likely do in the future. He was storms and chaos, fury personified. Only if they minded their business might they survive his company.

At the correct time in the correct place, Set turned from his brother's prison and raised his arms to the placid water. "Now, Hapi!" he shouted. "Come now, and seal our bargain!"

The Nile ran silent, unaltered. Set remained with arms upraised, confident the river would heed his call.

After a moment, its character changed. The current increased to left and right of the boat, almost roiling, an attitude of torture. A dull groan rose from the water's depths. It was a curse, and a command.

"Now," Set ordered his crewmen. "Pitch it in."

Priests scurried to the coffin and set their muscles against its weight. They pushed the container up a ramp devised just for that purpose, straining contorted faces and quivering muscles. A final surge of effort, and the coffin plunged into the Nile. The water snatched it beneath the surface, then settled to glassy calm.

"It is done!" Set crowed. "The magic's are satisfied! The throne of Abydos is mine!"



Sanni jumped as her linen door flew wide and three men crashed into the dim, crowded house. All the children but Hordedev were arrayed about the family room floor, all on mats of rushes. It was bedtime; Sanni herself had been about to douse the light and join her children in sleep. One look at her husband drove that thought from her mind.

"Qebera, what's wrong?" she asked at once, and groped for a longer wick for the lamp.

“Osiris is captured, and probably dead. I’ve failed him, Sanni. I’ve failed us all.” His voice hitched. Sanni flared the new wick and moved the lamp toward her husband. He and his companions were already past the outer chamber and in among the family. The two guardsmen held up their captain, an arm over each man’s shoulder.

“Gods, Qebera! What happened to you?”

“I was struck by a snake,” her husband muttered. “Don’t worry. It didn’t hold up in the water.”

“What?”

“We fished him out of the river,” one of the two guards said. “He was delirious, and half drowned. He’s lucky to be alive, he is.”

The guards eased their leader against a wall. Qebera was a fright of mud, blood, and grit. His eyes stared from dark hollows. “Rouse the children, Sanni. Take them north to Mahasna, to your mother’s house. Don’t use the river; Hapi’s in league with Set.”

The children were already roused. One began to cry.

“Qebera,” Sanni snapped. “Stop and make sense. Tell me what’s happened, and why we must flee to Mahasna. Calm down, and speak.”

“I will speak in his place,” a new voice offered, and Sanni received a second shock as her door swung open once more.

As soon as they recognized their newest arrival, the adults collapsed to their knees.

“No,” Isis said past the hooded cloak that obscured her body. “We don’t have time for that.” She entered the cramped family room with three of her priestess-attendants. The men averted their eyes, for even though blurred through layers of cloth, her body screamed to their loins. Unencumbered by that spell, Sanni peered past the layered linens to see what otherwise she might not have dared. The goddess’s make-up had failed; her black kohl eyeliner ran down her cheeks. Tears smeared her face.

“Your husband is correct,” Isis said. “Osiris is taken by Set. He will be killed unless Ra intervenes, and Ra sleeps until morning. By then, it will be too late. When Set kills my husband, he will also destroy all trace of his reign. He will raze my husband’s temple and murder his priests. He will execute what remains of the guard, and butcher their families. Gather your children and leave this place. Leave all of Abydos, or die in what will surely come.”

For a moment, Sanni could not respond. She had never had a goddess in her house; the experience overwhelmed her. Even more unnerving was the queen’s deportment, which none of the men could appreciate. Perhaps they heard strength in that sharp voice from that imagined beauty. Sanni distinctly heard fear.

Fear from a god was not lost on Sanni. She tried to adjust to this new, inexplicable reality. The queen waited while Qebera breathed in ragged gasps and one of the babies cried in a corner. A goat bleated from the front room. Finally, Sanni straightened her back and thrust out her jaw in an attitude of competence her family well understood. “Nefera,” she called, and her oldest daughter, a baby herself, appeared at her side. “Nefera, to the shaduf. Find Hordedev and bring him here.”

“Yes, mama,” the child shrieked, then dodged through grownups and out of the house.

“Hordedev is with the men,” Sanni explained to no one in particular. “They heard that something had happened at the palace. They gathered to gossip, as men will do.” She watched Isis, her face stone. “We have few possessions, little to carry. We will leave this

place as you instruct. As soon as Hordedev arrives.” She turned to her husband. “You won’t be coming, I suppose?”

Qebera slowly shook his head. “I must seek my king. I must fight for him until he is freed, or die in his service—”

“No,” Isis interjected. “Many will die, but you, Captain Qebera, must not be one of them.”

“But, goddess, my duty—”

“Is to serve your lord, not die for him.” Isis took something from one of her silent priestesses. She held it up by a rough linen lanyard, a leather bag about the size of a fist and stuffed with wadded linen. “I’ve hidden the royal ensigns with Osiris’s fleeing priests. Set will rule uneasily without them.” She placed the necklace of linen over Qebera’s bent head and onto his shoulders. She pressed its hanging bag against his chest.

To Sanni, her husband grew taller, even there on his knees. His grief receded a step.

No one in the house moved or spoke. Even the crying stopped.

When Isis removed her hand, she, too, seemed taller. “Within this pouch lies the greatest prize of Abydos. It’s a shadow in ivory of the Wadjet Eye of Ra. Never open the bag. Never touch or look upon the amulet inside. To do so, for a mortal, would surely mean death. But, please, wear it always, and defend it with your life. This amulet is the signet of the king, assigned by Ra himself.”

“Goddess,” Qebera moaned. “Why? The priests—”

“I won’t leave this power to Amnet. You were my husband’s most trusted vassal. The burden is rightfully yours.”

Qebera’s teeth bared in pain. He almost looked up to the face of his queen, but checked himself. “I’ve already failed your husband, goddess...”

“No, Qebera. You’ve just begun to serve.”

Sanni watched the exchange. The goddess’s hand reached once more toward Qebera’s chest, then checked its progress and receded, trembling. In that gesture Sanni saw both desperate hope and deep despair. It frightened her that a goddess would pin her fortune and the future of a kingdom on a mere mortal man, and a poor farmer at that. Qebera seemed to strengthen from Isis’s earlier touch. His exhaustion melted and defeat fell away from his shoulders. But he was still a farmer, nothing more.

After a moment, the goddess turned away and pushed through the press of bodies into the dark front room.

The humans looked from one to the other. Qebera stood, his men with him, and met Sanni’s moistening eyes. Some of his gloom returned. “I would rather remain near you,” he said, his voice husky with anguish, “but she is queen and goddess to our land, and this is all I can do for my lord.”

Sanni rushed into Qebera’s arms. They clung to each other, sure of coming tragedy. Sanni thought she would scream if ever forced to release her love. But release him she did, both their faces streaming tears. The children ran to their parents and hugged them about the legs.

“Ra will remember such nobility in man,” a voice said from the dark front room. Long moments passed before it spoke again. “I ask much in my husband’s name. But in you, his legacy could find no greater guardians.”

“I trust your wisdom,” Qebera said to the queen’s shadowed back. “I will do this service you ask, in hope that it will help.”

“Your way is hard.”

“I’m no stranger to hardship.”

“You will be hunted. You will endanger your family if they are near.”

Qebera looked at his wife. She nodded with grave calm.

“I’ll travel alone,” he said.

They all heard a sigh from Isis. “Come, priestesses. These people have their demons to bear. And we have ours.”

The queen retreated into the night, her attendants following. Sanni heard her voice project in a blessing to Qebera’s house, an impotent but heartfelt gift of faith.

Hordedev came, his sister behind him.

Within half an hour, the tiny house stood empty.