

RANDOM HOUSE *e*BOOKS

Tutankhamun
Nick Drake

About the Book

Tutankhamun, son of Akhenaten, has inherited an empire that seems to be at the height of its power and international glory. But the young King, just eighteen years old, is faced with the political and personal intrigues and conspiracies of the Court, where his godfather Ay, and the General Horemheb are locked in a bitter struggle for ascendancy. Tutankhamun must steer the empire back from the brink of disaster and dissent to which his father Akhenaten's rule led the Two Lands of Egypt, and re-assert the stability and authority of his famous dynasty.

Rahotep, chief detective of the Thebes division, has his own worries - his daughters are growing up in a changing world of danger and instability, while out on the streets of Thebes things are falling apart; poverty and dissent are breaking out into a nightmare of violence, gold and corruption seem all-powerful, and the city's shadowy underworld is itself witnessing mysterious acts of shocking brutality.

Yet when he receives a mysterious invitation to the secret halls of the Royal Palace, he cannot refuse. What he finds there, and the quest on which he embarks, will change his life, and put everything he thought he believed, and everything he loves, at risk.

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Tutankhamun

The Book of Shadows

Nick Drake

Cast List

Rahotep – Seeker of Mysteries, Chief Detective in the Thebes Medjay (police force)

His family and friends

Tanefert – his wife

Sekhmet, Thuyu, Nedjmet – his daughters

Amenmose – his baby son

Thoth – his baboon

Khety – Medjay associate

Nakht – noble

Minmose – Nakht's servant

The royal family

Tutankhamun – Lord of the Two Lands, the 'Living Image of Amun'

Ankhesenamun – Queen, daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti

Mutnodjmet – aunt of Ankhesenamun, wife of Horemheb

The palace officials

Ay – Regent, and 'God's Father'

Horemheb – General of the Armies of the Two Lands

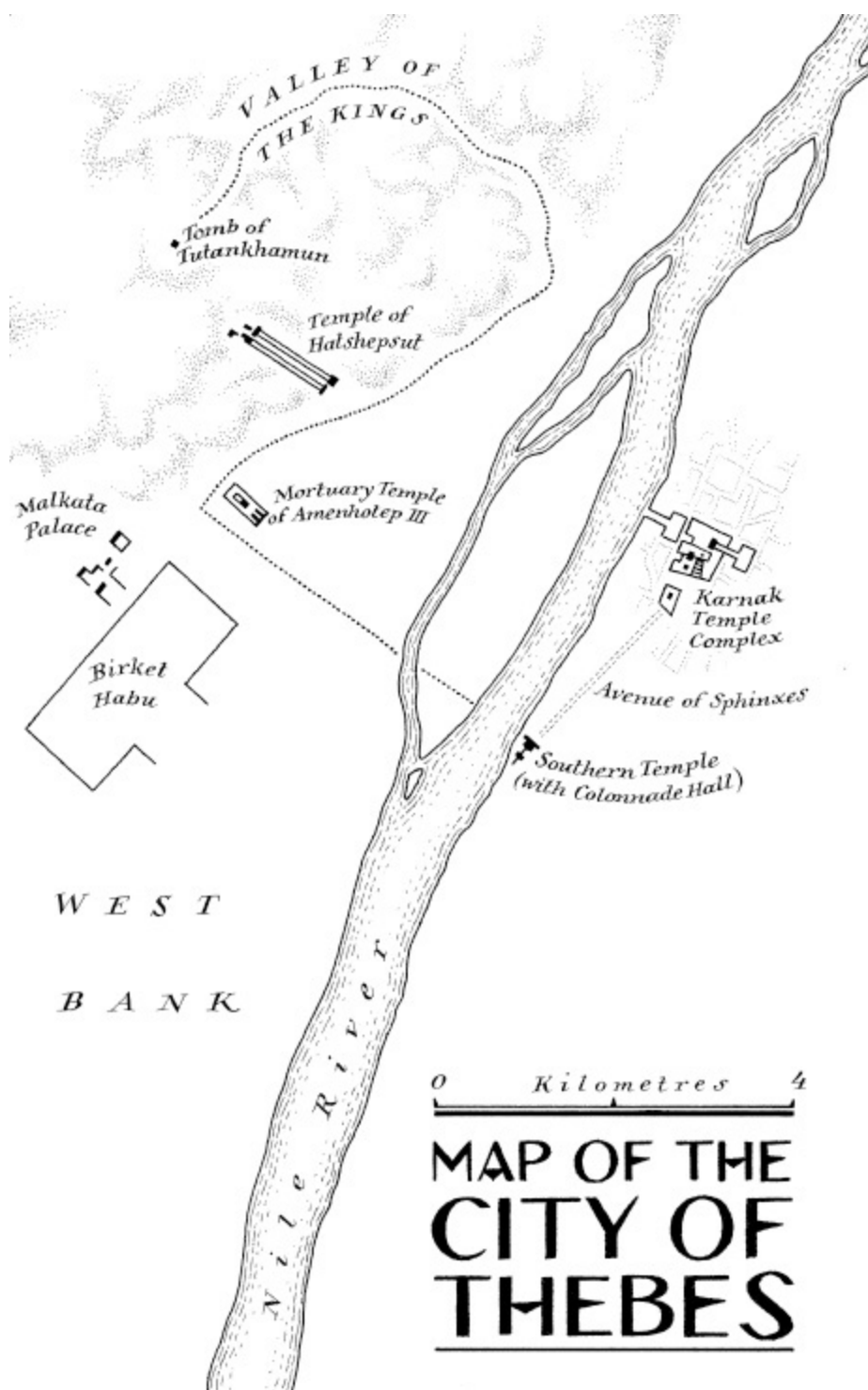
Khay – Chief Scribe

Simut – Commander of the Palace Guard

Nebamun – Head of the Thebes Medjay

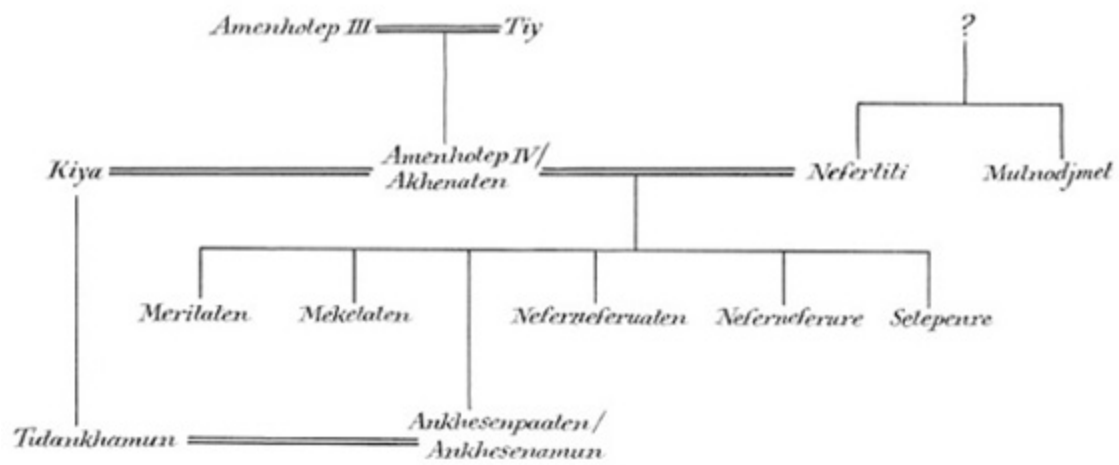
Maia – wet nurse to Tutankhamun

Pentu – Chief Physician to Tutankhamun





THE KINGDOM OF EGYPT IN THE 18TH DYNASTY



DYNASTIC FAMILY TREE

Now when His Majesty was crowned King, the temples and the estates of the gods and the goddesses from Elephantine as far as the marshes of lower Egypt had fallen into decay. Their shrines were fallen into ruin, become mere mounds overgrown with grass. Their sanctuaries were as if they had not yet come into being, and their buildings were footpaths. The land was in chaos. The gods had turned their backs upon it. When an army was sent to northern Syria to extend the boundaries of Egypt, it had no success. If one prayed to a god to ask something from him, he did not come at all. If one beseeched any goddess in the same way she did not come at all. The gods' hearts were faint in their divine statues. What had been made had been destroyed.

*From the Restoration Stela, set up in the temple
complex at Karnak in the early years of
Tutankhamun's reign*

Part One

I know you, I know your names

Coffin Texts
Spell 407



1

*Year 10 of the reign of King Tutankhamun, Living
Image of Amun*

Thebes, Egypt

Three short knocks. I listened to the silence that followed, my heart thudding in reply. Then, to my relief, came the familiar last short knock of the signal. I let my breath out slowly. Perhaps I was getting old. It was still dark, but I was already awake, for sleep had betrayed me once again, as it often does in the melancholy small hours before dawn. I rose from the couch and dressed quickly, glancing at Tanefert. My wife's head was resting elegantly on its sleeping stand, but her beautiful, disturbed eyes were open, observing me.

'Go back to sleep. I promise I will be home in time.'

I kissed her lightly. She curled into herself like a cat, and watched me leave.

I drew back the curtain and looked for a moment at my three sleeping girls, Sekhmet, Thuyu and Nedjmet, on their beds, in their shared yellow room crammed with clothes, old toys, papyri, slates, drawings from their childhood, and other objects whose significance eludes me. Our house is

too small now for such grown girls. I listened for a moment to the rattle of my father's strained breathing in his room at the back. It ceased for a long moment, but then another breath worked its way laboriously through his old body. Lastly, as always before I leave the house, I stood beside my young son, Amenmose, sleeping entirely peacefully, his limbs thrown every which way like a dog before a fire. I kissed him on his head, damp with warmth. He did not stir.

Taking my night passes with me, for the curfews were in force, I closed the door soundlessly. Thoth, my clever baboon, loped over to me from his sleeping place in the yard, his short, tufted tail curved upwards, and he rose on his hind legs to greet me. I let him smell my palm, then ran my hand through his thick, brown mane. I made a brief gesture of libation to the little household God in the niche, who knows I do not believe in him. Then I opened the gate and stepped into the shadows of the lane, where Khety, my assistant, was waiting for me.

'Well?'

'A body has been found,' he said quietly.

'And you woke me for that? Could it not wait for dawn?'

Khety knows how bad my mood can be when I am disturbed too early.

'Wait until you see it,' he replied.

We set off in silence. Thoth strained on his leash, excited to be out in the dark, and eager to explore whatever lay ahead. It was a beautiful clear night: the hot harvest season of *shemu* had ended, and with the appearance of the sign of Sirius, the Dog Star, the inundation had arrived to overflow the banks of the Great River, and flood the fields with rich, life-giving silt. And so once again the time of festival had returned. In recent years the waters often did not rise far enough, or else they rose too much, causing vast devastation. But this year they had been ideal, bringing relief and joy to a population subdued, even depressed, by

these dark times of the reign of Tutankhamun, King of Upper and Lower Egypt.

The bright face of the moon cast enough light for us to walk as if she were our lamp. She was almost full, with the great drift of stars about her like a fine mantle: the Goddess Nut who the priests say our dead eyes will gaze upon as we lie back in the little boats of death that carry us across the ocean of the Otherworld. I had been brooding about this as I lay sleeplessly on the couch, for I am one who sees the shadow of death in everything: in the bright faces of my children, in the overcrowded ways of the city, in the golden vanity of its palaces and offices, and always, somehow, in the corner of my eye.

‘What do you think we see after death?’ I asked.

Khety knows he must humour my occasional philosophical musings, as he must humour so much else. He is younger than me, and despite the grim things he has seen in his life of service in the Medjay, his face has somehow preserved its openness and freshness; and his hair, unlike mine, remains naturally as black as midnight. He is still as fit as a thoroughbred hunting dog, with the same passion for the hunt – so different from my own pessimistic and often weary nature. For as I grow older, life seems to me simply an endless succession of problems to be solved, rather than hours to be enjoyed. ‘What fun I am these days,’ I reproached myself.

‘I think we see green fields, where all the pompous aristocrats are slaves and all the slaves pompous aristocrats, and all I have to do all day is hunt ducks in the reed marshes and drink beer to celebrate my glorious success.’

I let his jest pass unacknowledged.

‘If we are supposed to see anything at all, why do the embalmers push onions into our eye sockets? *Onions!* The bulb of tears . . .’

‘Perhaps the truth is we see the Otherworld only in our mind’s eye . . .’ he replied.

‘Now you are sounding like a wise man,’ I said.

‘And yet those who have been born into wealth laze about all day enjoying their luxuries and their love-affairs, while I still work like a dog, and earn nothing . . .’

‘Well, that is a much greater mystery.’

We passed through the maze of old, narrow passageways zigzagging between precarious houses built to no plan. By day this quarter would be noisy and crowded, but by night it was silent under the curfew: the expensive shops and their luxury offerings were protected behind shutters like the grave goods of a tomb; the carts and stalls of the Alley of Fruit had gone for the night; and the workshops of wood, leather and glass were deserted and shadowy; even the birds in their cages hanging in the moonlight were soundless. For in these dark days fear keeps everyone in obedience. The disastrous reign of Akhenaten, when the royal court and temples were moved from Thebes to the new desert temple city of Akhetaten, collapsed ten years ago. The powerful priests of Amun, who were displaced and dispossessed under Akhenaten, had their authorities, vast landholdings and incalculable worldly riches reinstated. But this did not restore stability; for harvests were poor, and plague killed countless thousands, and most believed these disasters were punishment for the grave errors of Akhenaten’s reign. And then as if to prove the point, one by one the royal family died: Akhenaten himself, five of his six daughters, and finally Nefertiti, his Queen of great beauty, whose last days remain a cause of much private speculation.

Tutankhamun inherited the Kingship of the Two Lands at the age of nine; and he was then immediately married to Ankhesenamun, the last surviving daughter of Akhenaten and Nefertiti. This was a strange but necessary alliance, for they were both children of Akhenaten, by different

mothers; and as the last survivors of their great dynasty, who else could be crowned? But they were merely children; and it was Ay, the Regent, 'God's Father' as he was officially entitled, who since then ruled implacably, establishing his rule of fear, through officials who seemed to me loyal to fear alone. Unreal men. For a world with so much sun we live in a dark place, in a dark time.

We arrived at a house that was no different from most of the others in this quarter: a high crumbling mud-brick wall to defend it from the narrow lane, a doorway with one old, warped wooden door ajar, and beyond it the simple mud-brick house, several floors of new accommodation stacked precariously on top of each other - for there is no space to spare in the overcrowded city of Thebes. I tied Thoth to a post in the courtyard, and we went inside.

It was hard to guess the victim's true age; his face, almond-shaped, almost elegantly delicate, was both young and old, and his body was that of a child but also that of a crone. He might have been twelve or twenty years old. Normally his poor bones would have been twisted and bent into each other from the lifelong errors of his crippled body. But I could see, in the dim light cast by the oil lamp in the wall niche, that they had been broken in many places, and rearranged, like the fragments of a mosaic. I carefully raised his arm. It was as light as a snapped reed pen; the fractured bones made it both jagged and floppy. He was like a strange doll made of fine linen and broken sticks.

He had been laid out in funereal fashion, his crooked legs straightened, his thin, uneven arms crossed, his clawed hands like a falcon's talons prised open, and laid over each other. His eyes were covered with leaves of gold, and the Eye of Ra, in black and green, had been drawn around them. I carefully lifted the leaves away. Both his eyes had been removed. I stared at the mystery of the empty sockets, and then replaced the gold leaves. His face was

the only thing that had not been successfully rearranged, perhaps because its contortions – think how many muscles it takes to make a smile – could not be persuaded from their habitual lopsided grin by the hammers and tongs and other instruments that must have been used to reshape the imperfect material of this body. That grin remained like a little victory in the face of so much cruelty. But of course, it was no such thing. His pale skin – a sign that he had rarely been allowed into the sun – was cold as meat. His fingers were long and fine, the carefully clipped nails undamaged. His twisted hands seemed to have been little use to him in life, and not to have struggled against his grotesque fate. Strangely there were no marks of binding on his wrists or ankles or neck.

What had been done to him was vicious and cruel, and would have required considerable physical strength, as well as knowledge and skill in anatomy; but it wouldn't necessarily have killed him. I had once been called to a victim of the gang wars in the poor suburbs. The young man had been rolled in a reed mat, with his head exposed, the better to observe his own punishment, which was to be beaten with heavy clubs. I still remember the look of terror on his face as the mat, dripping with his own blood, was slowly unrolled, and his body fell apart, and he died.

Most murder victims reveal the story of their end in their postures and in the marks and wounds inflicted upon their bodies. Even their expression still sometimes speaks, in the clay-like emptiness of death: panic, shock, terror – all these register, and remain in traces for a while after the little bird of the soul, the *ba*, has departed. But this young man seemed unusually calm. How so? A thought occurred: perhaps the murderer had placated him with some kind of narcotic. In which case he must have knowledge of, or access to, pharmacopoeia. Cannabis leaf, perhaps; or else the lotus flower in an infusion of wine? But neither would have had more than a mild soporific effect. The root of the

mandrake plant, when extracted, is a more powerful sedative.

But this level of violence, and the sophistication of its concept, suggested something even more potent. Possibly the juice of the poppy, which could be obtained if you knew where to go. Stored in vases shaped like inverted poppy-seed pods, it was imported only by the most secret routes into the country, and most of the crop was known to be cultivated in the lands of our northern enemies, the Hittites, with whom we are engaged in a long war of attrition for control of the strategically vital lands that lie between our empires. It was a forbidden, but highly popular, luxury commodity.

The victim's room, which was located on the ground floor, giving directly on to the yard, was as characterless as a store chamber. There were few mementos of the boy's short, private life, other than some rolled papyri and a rattle. A simple wooden stool was set in the shadows from where he could have watched the passing life of the street through the frame of the doorway - and through which his murderer could have easily entered in the darkness of the night. His crutches leaned against the wall by the bed. The mud floor was swept clean; there were no traces of the murderer's sandals.

Judging from the house and its location, his parents were of the lower bureaucratic class, and they had probably kept their son hidden from the critical and superstitious eyes of the world. For some people believed such infirmities signalled abandonment and rejection by the Gods, while others believed they were a mark of divine grace. Khety would interrogate the servants and take statements from the family members. But I already knew he would turn up nothing; for this killer would never allow himself to commit any mundane errors. He had too much imagination, and too much *flair*.

I sat in silence, considering the strange puzzle set out before me on the couch, intrigued and confounded by the deliberate strangeness of the act. What the killer had done to the boy must be a sign of something else: an intention or a commentary, written on the body. Was the cruelty of the act an expression of power? Or was it, perhaps, the expression of a contempt for the imperfections of flesh and blood, signalling some deep need for a greater perfection? Or, more interestingly, did the boy's possible similarity to the King, with his own infirmities – although I had to remember these were but rumours – have a specific implication? Why had his face been painted as Osiris, God of the Shadows? Why had his eyes been removed? And why, strangely, did all this remind me of an old ritual of execration, in which our ancestors used to damn their enemies, first by smashing clay tablets on which were written their names and titles, and then by executing and burying them, decapitated, upside down? Here was sophistication, and intelligence, and meaningfulness. It was almost as clear as a message. Except it was in a language I could not yet decipher.

And then I saw something. Around his neck, hidden under his robe, was a strip of exceptionally fine linen on which hieroglyphs had been written in beautiful ink. I held the lamp up. It was a protection spell, specifically for the deceased during the night passage through the Otherworld in the Ship of the Sun. It concluded: *'Your body, Oh Ra, is everlasting by reason of the spell.'*

I sat very still, considering this rare object, until Khety coughed discreetly at the entrance to the boy's chamber. I put the linen away in my robe. I would show it to my old friend Nakht, noble in wealth and character, expert in matters of wisdom and spells, and in so much else besides.

'The family are ready to meet you,' he said.

They were waiting in a side room lit by a few candles. The mother was rocking and keening quietly in her grief; her husband was sitting in uncomprehending silence beside her. I approached them, and offered my futile condolences. I nodded discreetly to the father, and he accompanied me out to the little courtyard. We sat down on the bench.

‘My name is Rahotep. I am Chief Detective in the Thebes Medjay division. My assistant Khety will need to talk to you in greater detail. I’m afraid it is necessary, even at a time like this. But tell me, did you hear or notice anything unusual last night?’

He shook his head.

‘Nothing. We keep no night guard, for everyone here knows us, and our house is not rich. We are ordinary people. We sleep upstairs, for the cool air, but our son slept here, on the ground floor. It was much easier for him if he wished to move about. And he liked to watch what was going on in the street – it was all he saw of the life of the city. If he needed us in the night, he would call.’

He paused, as if listening to the silence in the hope of hearing his dead son’s voice calling. ‘What sort of man would do this to a boy of such simple love and soul?’

He looked at me, desperate for an answer. I found I did not have one that would help at all, at this moment.

The vivid grief in his eyes had changed suddenly into the desperate purity of revenge.

‘When you catch him, give him to me. I will kill him, slowly and mercilessly. He will learn the true meaning of pain.’

But I could not promise him that. He looked away, and his body began to shudder. I left him to the privacy of his grief.

We stood in the street. The eastern horizon was swiftly turning from indigo to turquoise. Khety yawned widely.

‘You look like a necropolis cat,’ I said.

'I'm as hungry as a cat,' he replied, once he had finished his yawn.

'Before we think of breakfast, let's think about that young man.'

He nodded. 'Vicious . . .'

'But strangely purposeful.'

He nodded again, considering the almost visibly changing darkness at his feet, as if it might provide him with a clue.

'Everything's upside down and back to front these days. But when it comes to mutilating and rearranging lame, helpless boys . . .' He shook his head in amazement.

'And on this day, the biggest day of the festival . . .' I said, quietly.

We let the thought settle between us for a moment.

'Take statements from the family and servants. Check the room for anything we might have missed in the dark . . . do it while it is all still fresh. Find out if the neighbours saw anyone unusual hanging around. The killer selected this boy carefully. Somebody may have seen him. And then get off to the festival and enjoy yourself. Meet me back at headquarters later.'

He nodded, and turned back into the house.

Taking Thoth by his leash, I walked away down the lane and turned into the street at the end. The God Ra had just appeared above the horizon now, reborn from the great mystery of the Otherworld of night into a new day, silver-white, spreading his sudden, vast brilliance of light. As the first rays touched my face it was instantly hot. I had promised to be at home with the children by sunrise, and I was already late.



2

The streets were suddenly crowded. People were emerging from different quarters, from the upper-class villas behind their high walls and reinforced gates, as well as from the poor back streets and rubbish-strewn alleys. Today, for once, the city's mules and their burdens of mud-bricks and rubble, vegetables and fruits, were not on the streets, and the immigrant labourers who would normally be hurrying to their harsh work were enjoying a rare day of rest. Elite men of the bureaucracies in their pleated white clothing clung on to the back of their little horse-drawn chariots as they bumped and rattled along the ways of the city, some accompanied by running bodyguards. Men of the lower hierarchies walked with their servants and sunshades, along with rich children and their guardians, and expensively groomed women setting forth on early visits accompanied by their excited maids; everyone making their way, as if in time to some unheard drumbeat, towards the Southern Temple at the end of the city's territory in order to attend the ceremonies of the festival. Everyone wanted to watch the arrival of the sacred boats bearing the shrines of the Gods, and even more importantly to get a glimpse of the King receiving them in public - before he entered the

most secret and sacred of the temple shrines to commune with the Gods and receive their divinity into himself.

But whereas, once upon a time, everyone's concern would have been about making sure the whole family was as finely dressed, as neatly styled, as well fed, and as impressive as possible – in these days of strained obedience, the wonder and the awe had been replaced by uncertainty and anxiety. The festivals were not as I remembered them from my own childhood, when the world had seemed like a boundless fable: the processions and the visitations, station by station, of the divine figures in their gold shrines, carried on gold barges, all unfolding and passing in pageant, revealed to the overheated crowds like great images on a living scroll.

I entered my courtyard, and untied Thoth from his leash. He immediately loped over to his bed, and settled down to watch from the corner of his eye one of the cats working at her exquisite toilet, an elegant front paw thrust out in the air as she licked it clean. She looked like the coy mistress of an older gentleman, playing up to her audience.

Inside, the house was in chaos. Amenmose was sitting cross-legged at the low table like a little king, beating his clenched fist in time to some tune in his cheerful head, as the milk in his bowl slopped out on to the floor for another of the cats to lick up. The girls were running to and fro, getting themselves ready. They barely registered my presence. 'Good morning!' I shouted, and they chorused back some semblance of a greeting. Tanefert kissed me briefly as she passed. So I settled down at the table with my son, who regarded me with mild curiosity for a moment, as if he had never met me before. Then, suddenly, he honoured me with one of his vast smiles of recognition, and continued to bash at his dish to show me how well he could do it. He is the golden child we did not expect, the surprise and delight of my middle years. At his age, he still believes everything I tell him, so I tell him the best of everything. Of

course, he doesn't understand a word. I tried to amuse him by feeding him his milk, and as if it were a special occasion, he solemnly drank.

As I watched him, I thought about the dead boy in his shattered condition; his grotesque image suddenly like a shadow at the table of life. That he had been killed in this fashion on the very day of the festival might not be a coincidence. It might not also be any kind of coincidence that the victim's imperfections recalled those of our young King. Although of course no one publicly dares make any mention of his infirmities – his *alleged* infirmities – it is rumoured that Tutankhamun is less than perfect in his earthly body. But since he is rarely seen in public – and even then he always rides in a chariot, or sits on a throne – no one can say for sure what truth lies in the matter. But it is common knowledge he has never exercised power on his own account, even though he must now have come of age.

I had met his father several times, years ago, in the city of Akhetaten. And on one of those occasions I had also glimpsed the boy who had now become the King, if in name only; I remembered the *tap, tap, tap* of his cane down the echoey corridor of that vain, tragic and now surely derelict palace. I remembered his face, charismatic, angled, with a small, shy chin. He had looked like an old soul in a young body. And I remembered what my friend Nakht had said to me about the boy, who in those days was called Tutankhaten: *'When the time of the Aten is over, the Amun will be restored. He may yet be called by a new name. Tutankhamun.'* And so it had proved to be. For the maddened Akhenaten had been confined to his palace in the dusty Otherworld of his crumbling dream city. And after his death, all its vast open temples and multitudes of great statues of the King and Nefertiti had begun their inevitable return to rubble; the very bricks of the city's hasty construction were now said to be turning back into the dust of their making.

After Akhenaten's death, throughout the Two Lands of Egypt and its dominions, his cult of the Aten had been abandoned. The image of the sun disc, and its many hands reaching down with the Ankh, sign of life, to bless the world, was no longer carved upon the walls of the temples in any of our cities. Life in Thebes had continued as if everyone had agreed to pretend that none of these things had ever happened. But of course people's private memories are not so easily wiped clean of history; the new religion had had many committed supporters, and many more who, in the hope of worldly preferment, had placed the fate of their livelihoods and futures upon its triumph. And many remained privately opposed to the Amun priests' astounding earthly powers, and to the absolute authority of one man in particular: Ay, a man not truly of the natural world, his blood cool, his heart as deliberate and indifferent as the *drip, drip, drip* of a water clock. Egypt in our times is the richest, most powerful kingdom the world has ever known, and yet no one feels safe. Fear, that unknowable and all-powerful enemy, has invaded us all, like a secret army of shadows.

We set out together in a hurry, for we were, as usual, late. The intense light of dawn had given way to the broad, powerful heat of morning. Amenmose sat on my shoulders clapping his hands and yelling with excitement. I pushed ahead, shouting at people to make way. The official insignia of my Medjay office seemed to have less effect than Thoth's bark; he helped to clear a path through the excited mass of sweaty bodies jostling for space and air, congesting the crooked, narrow lanes and passageways leading to the Great River. Music from strings and trumpets warred with shouts and songs and jeers as men called out to each other in cheerful recognition or fantastic abuse. Tied monkeys jabbered and caged birds shrieked. Street-sellers bellowed their wares and their snacks, and insisted on the perfection

of their offerings. A lunatic, with a bony face and wild eyes searching the heavens, proclaimed the coming of the Gods and the end of the world. I loved it all as much as my son.

The girls followed, dressed in their finest linens, their hair shining and scented with moringa and lotus oil. Behind them Tanefert made sure no one got lost, and no one tried to approach. My girls are becoming women. How will I feel when the three great glories of my life leave me for their adulthood? I have loved each one from before the moment they entered the world yelling in answer to their names. As the thought of their leaving began to hurt me, I glanced back. Sekhmet, the oldest, smiled quietly; the scholar of the family, she claims she can hear me thinking, which is an alarming thought, given the nonsense that makes up most of my musings.

‘Father, we should hurry.’

She was right, as usual. The time of the arrival of the Gods was approaching.

We found seats on the official stands under the shade of the riverside trees. All along the east bank, offering booths and shrines had been set up, and large crowds had gathered, full of expectation, waiting for the ship to appear. I nodded to various people I recognized. Below us, young Medjay officers were failing to impose much order on the crowd, but it has always been this way during the festival. I glanced around; the numbers of troops seemed surprisingly high, but security has become a national obsession in our times.

Then Thuyu shouted and pointed at the first of the towing boats as it came into view from the north; and at the same time we glimpsed the boat gangs on the river-bank struggling to pull the *Userhet*, the Great Ship of the God Amun. At this distance the famous and ancient floating temple of gold was just a glow on the glittering waters. But as it drew closer and made a turn towards the shoreline, the rams’ heads at the prow and stern became clear, and

the sun's full glory hit the polished solar discs above their heads, sending blinding light scintillating across the vast green and brown waters, glancing and flashing among the crowds. The girls gasped and stood up, waving and shouting. From the flagpole of the ship, and from the oar at the rear, brightly coloured streamers fluttered. And there at the centre was the golden shrine, veiling the hidden God himself, which would be carried ceremonially through the crowds for the short distance from the dock to the temple entrance.

The rowers at the rear of the ship, and the gangs on the shore, efficiently brought the vessel alongside the great stone dock. Now we could see the protecting frieze of cobras above the shrine, the crowns above the rams' heads, and the gold falcons on their poles. Amenmose was utterly silenced, his little mouth wide open, amazed by this vision of another world. Then, to a vast and deafening roar, which made my son nestle into my chest anxiously, the God's carrying shrine was raised upon the shoulders of the priests. They struggled to balance the burden of so much solid gold as they processed slowly and carefully down the gangplank on to the dock. The crowds surged forward against the linked arms of the guards. Dignitaries, priests and foreign potentates knelt down and made their offerings.

The temple was only a short distance from the river-bank. There was a ritual way station where the shrine would pause briefly for the hidden God to accept offerings, before being carried across the open ground towards the temple gateway.

It was time to move, if we were to get a good view of the carrying shrine's arrival.



3

We pushed our way through the crowds to Nakht's grand city house that stands close to the Avenue of Sphinxes, to the north of the temple entrance. Here are the residences of only the richest and most powerful families of the city, and my old friend Nakht belongs to that select group, although in person he could not be less like the haughty, arrogant grotesques that make up the vast majority of our so-called elite class. I noticed again my own stiff contempt for these people, and tried to prepare myself for the inevitable condescensions this party would involve.

He was waiting to greet his many rich and famous guests inside the large main door, wearing his finest linens. His face has sharp, delicate features that have become more pronounced with the passing of time, and unusual, flecked topaz eyes that seem to observe life and people as a fascinating but slightly remote pageant. He is the most intelligent man I have ever met, and for him the life of the mind, and of rational enquiry into the mysteries of the world, is everything. He has no partner, and seems to need none, for his life is full of interest and fine company. There has always been something of the hawk about him, as if he is merely perching here on earth, ready to fly into the empyrean with a brief shrug of his powerful mind. Why we