



NEFERTITI

NICK DRAKE

TRANSWORLD
BOOKS

About the Book

EGYPT 1800BC

'Power is like fire. It consumes everything. And when it is gone, all that's left is ash.'

Nefertiti – the most beautiful, powerful and charismatic Queen of the ancient world. With her husband, Akhenaten, she rules over an Empire at the peak of its glory and domination. Together, they have built a magnificent new city in the desert on the banks of the Nile. They are about to host kings, dignitaries and leaders from around the Empire for a vast festival to celebrate their triumph.

But suddenly, Nefertiti vanishes.

Rahotep is the youngest chief detective of the Thebes division; a Seeker of Mysteries who knows about shadows and darkness, and who can see patterns where others cannot. His unusual talents earn him a summons to the royal court. Rahotep is given ten days to find the Queen and return her in time for the festival. Success will bring glory, but if he fails, he and his family will die...

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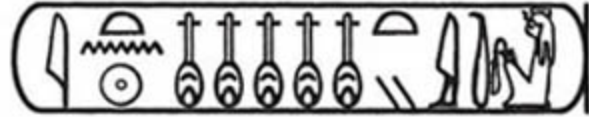
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NEFERTITI

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD

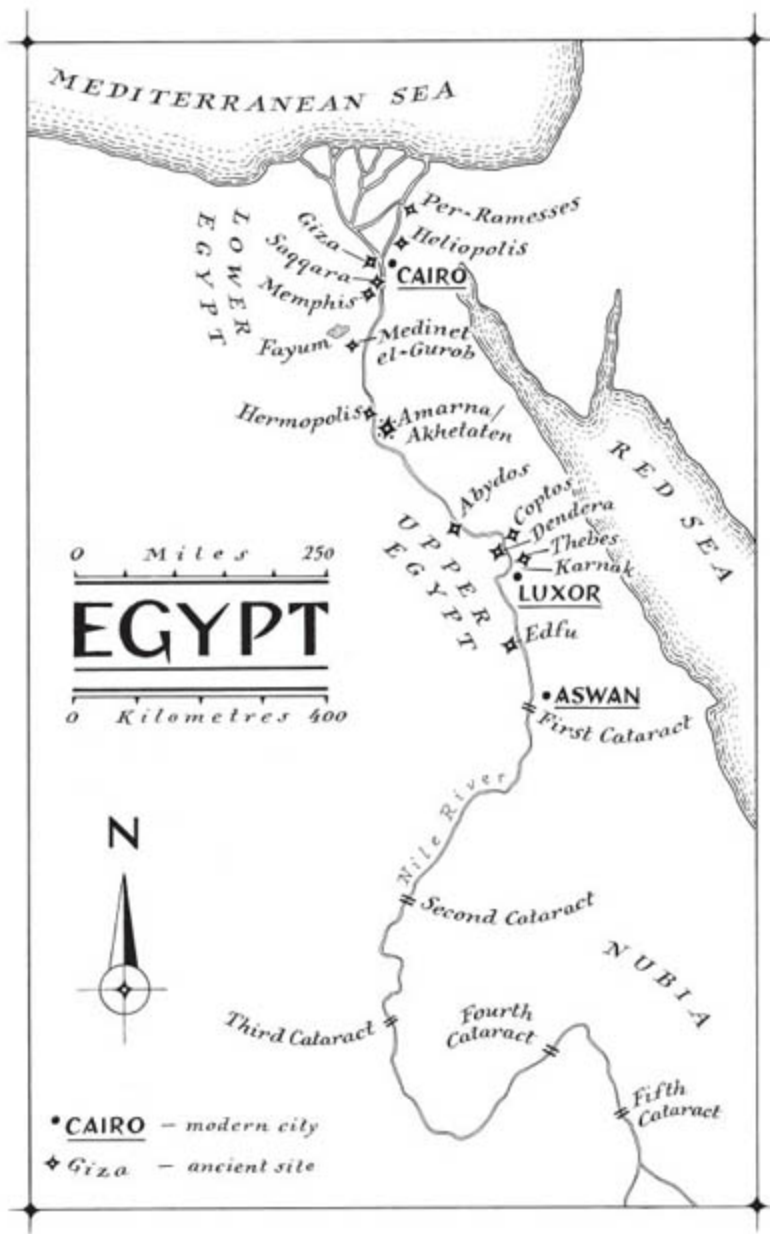


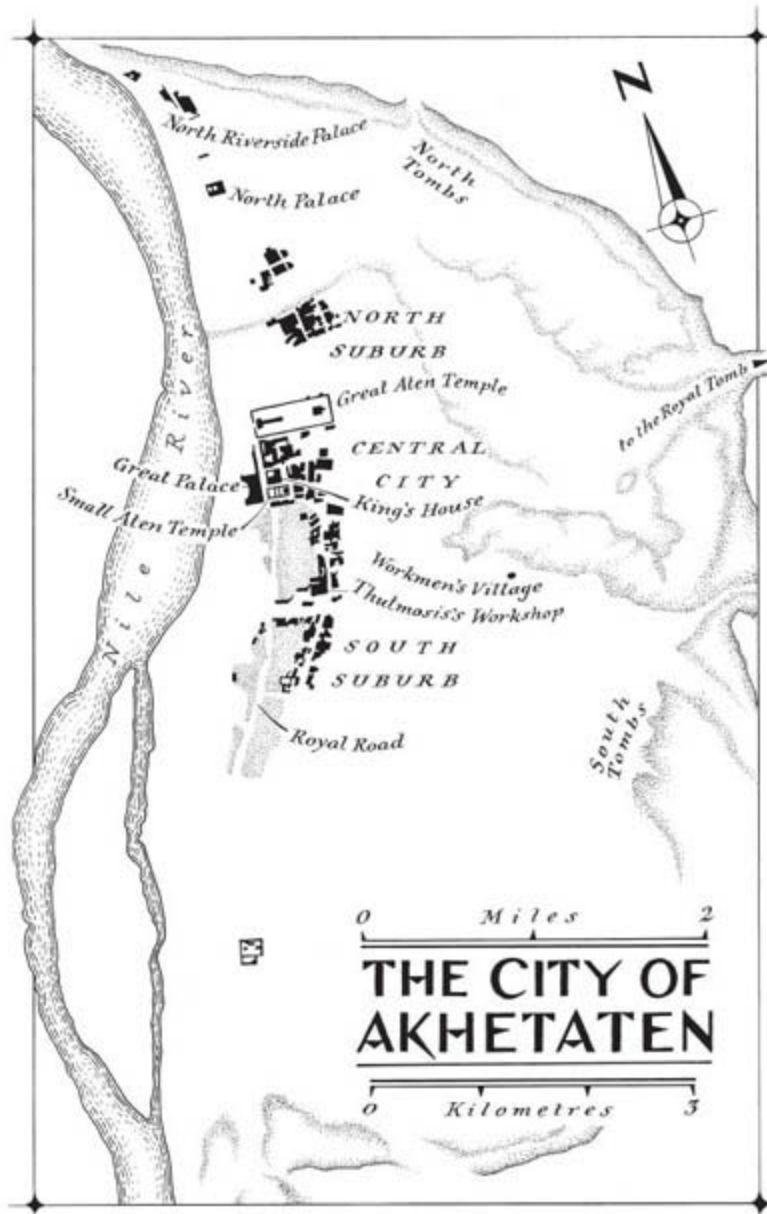
Nick Drake

*To my father,
Miles Drake*

*O my heart which I had from my mother,
O my heart which I had upon earth, do
not rise up against me as witness in the
presence of the Lord of Things*

The Book of the Dead





CAST LIST

Rahotep - Seeker of Mysteries

His family:

Tanefert - his wife

Sekhmet, Thuyu, Nedjmet - his daughters

Medjay colleagues in the city of Akhetaten;

Mahu - Chief of Police

Tjenry - Assistant

Khety - Assistant

The Royal Family

Akhenaten - King

Nefertiti - 'the Perfect One' - Great Royal Wife

Meretaten, Meketaten, Ankhesenpaaten, Nefernefruatzen,
Nefernefrura, Setepenra - daughters of Akhenaten and
Nefertiti

Tiy - Queen Mother, wife of Amenhotep III (deceased)

Also:

Senet - Nefertiti's maid

The Court of Akhenaten in the city of Akhetaten

Ramose - Vizier, Chief Minister to the King

Parnefer - Overseer of all the Works in the House of
Akhenaten

Ay - Courtier

Horemheb - Army Commander

Meryra – High Priest
Thutmose – Sculptor
Nakht – Noble

Harem women
Seshat
Anath

AUTHOR'S NOTE

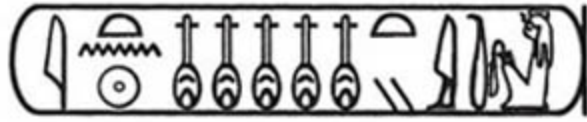
Three and a half thousand years ago Akhenaten inherited an empire at the peak of its international power and wealth. It was a time of astonishing sophistication and beauty, but also of vanity and brutality. The Empire had a police force – the Medjay – and extensive papyrus archives to keep tabs on its citizens. The affluent worried about going grey, enjoyed their hunts and love affairs, and spent large amounts of money on their tombs in preparation for the afterlife. There were career bureaucracies and an enormous workforce, both local and immigrant. This complex society depended on the waters of the Nile that weaved like a great snake through the desert, dividing the Egyptian world into the fertile Black Land and the barren Red.

Akhenaten chose to do something extraordinary with his riches. He and his Great Royal Wife, Nefertiti – ‘the Perfect One’ – initiated a period of revolution in religion, politics and art. Rejecting and abolishing Egypt’s traditional institutions, gods, and challenging the powerful priesthoods, they built an extraordinary new city, Akhetaten, as a centre for the celebration of their new faith. At the heart of this was the worship of the Aten, now the only god, represented by the disc of the Sun.

Today little remains of the city. Outside the modern Amarna you can trace the line of the Royal Road, and the palaces and Aten Temples. You can visit the cliff tombs of the great men who worked for Akhenaten and Nefertiti:

Mahu, the chief of police, Meryra, the High Priest, Parennefer, the architect of the Amarna style, and Ay, 'God's father' and influential adviser to the King. You can descend the many steps into Akhenaten's empty burial chambers.

But you cannot visit Nefertiti's tomb, for she, the most powerful and charismatic woman of the ancient world, mysteriously vanished in year 12 of Akhenaten's seventeen-year reign. Why she vanished when she did, and what happened to her, is the mystery this story explores.



1

Year 12 of the Reign of King Akhenaten, Glory of the Sun Disc.

Thebes, Egypt

I had dreamed of snow. I was lost in a dark place, and snow was falling slowly and silently, each flake a puzzle I could never solve before it disappeared. I awoke with the feeling of its fleeting, cryptic lightness on my face. It made me feel surprisingly sad, as if I had lost something, or someone, for ever.

I lay still for a moment, listening to Tanefert breathing quietly at my side, the heat of the day already rising. I have never seen snow, of course, but I remember reading the report of a box of it carried from the furthest north, like treasure, packed in straw. And one hears the stories brought back from beyond the horizon. A freezing world. Deserts of snow. Rivers of ice. White and weightless, it may be held in the hand if one can endure the pain of its cold fire. Yet it is nothing but water. Water, which cannot be held in the hand. Only its incarnation has been changed, and I believe it changes back again depending on the world in which it finds itself. I also heard that when they finally opened the box, it was empty. This mysterious snow had vanished. Someone no doubt died for the disappointment. Such is treasure.

Maybe this is also death. That is not what we hear from the Priests. We all learned the prayer: 'when the tomb is

opened may the body be perfect for the perfect life after life'. But have they seen the heat of the sun god rot and putrefy the charming flesh of the living, the young and the beautiful, with their non-sensical hopes and pointless dreams, into the contorted shapes of horror and monstrosity and petrified agony? Have they seen lovely faces cut apart, holes ripped open through muscle, heads smashed to bony fragments, the strange puckering of burned flesh where the fat has boiled? I doubt it.

Such thoughts are the torment of my work. I, Rahotep, youngest chief detective of the Thebes Medjay division, see my children playing or struggling to concentrate on their musical instruments. And I know their skin, which we caress and kiss, and care for with almond and moringa oils, and perfume with persea and myrrh, and dress with linens and gold, is merely a bag containing organs and bones and jars of blood; the hopes of being alive and in love depend on this butcher's business. I keep this to myself, even when I make love to my wife and for an instant her elegant body as it turns to me by the light of the oil lamp blurs from perfection into death. Apparently this is a rather famous thought. I should be grateful, perhaps, to have such thoughts. I should be more poetic, more philosophical, more often, if only to amuse during my private hours. Well, I have no private hours. And then again, as I stand over yet another corpse, a life – a little history of love and time – ended in a moment of frenzy or hatred or madness or panic, I feel it is the only time I know where in the world I am.

Of course, as Tanefert says whenever she finds the opportunity – which these days is too often – it is typical of me to think the worst of any given situation. But in these impossible times of the reign of Akhenaten I am confronted daily with justifications for this attitude. Things grow worse. I see it in my work: in the ever-increasing numbers of tormented and mutilated bodies of murder victims, and

in the robbed and desecrated tombs of the rich and powerful, with the Nubian security guards grinning from ear to ear through their slit throats. I see it in the ostentation of the rich and the endless misery of the poor. I see it in the greater world in the shaking news of the Great Changes: the King's banishment of the Karnak Temple Priesthood from their ancient places and rights; the denial and sometimes the desecration of Amun and all the lesser, older, popular gods; the imposition of the strange new god we are now supposed to celebrate and worship. I see it in the eccentric conception and extravagant expense of the mysterious new temple city of Akhetaten, under construction these last years in the desert, midway between here and Memphis and therefore so deliberately far from everyone. And I see all this imposed upon a perilous economy at a time of turbulence and uncertainty in our Empire. So, indeed, how else should I think? She says it is not normal, and she is right. But I passed through that portal long ago, when I understood that shadows and darkness live inside each one of us, and how little it takes before they leach through the soul and the smile. Death is easy.

So when I returned home at noon with the news of my sudden calling to investigate a great mystery at the heart of the regime stuck alarmingly in my mind, Tanefert took one look at me and said, 'What has happened? Tell me.' She sat down on the bench in the front room, where we never sit. I reached out to her, but she knows this ploy. 'I don't need you to hold my hand. I've been through this before.'

So I told her. About Ahmose coming into my office that morning. He was relishing a pastry, as always, not noticing the crumbs that fell clumsily into the ample folds of his robe. His belly makes him slow, and a detective should be strong but trim (as I think my daily exercises have made me). About how, with his usual sullen manner, he communicated with more than usual reluctance and

aggression the arrival of the command from on high ordering me immediately and without delay to Akhetaten, to attend the court of Akhenaten in pursuit of a great mystery.

We stared at each other.

'Why has this honour fallen to me?' I asked.

Ahmose shrugged, and then smiled like a yawning necropolis cat. 'That's your job to find out.'

'And what is the mystery?'

'You will be enlightened when you meet the head of the new Medjay there, Mahu. You know him by reputation?'

I nodded. Notorious for his zealous application of the letter of the law.

Ahmose noisily swallowed the last of his pastry, and leaned towards me. 'But I have contacts in the new capital. And I hear it is a question of a missing person.' And he grinned ominously again.

Tanefert held herself still, her expression tight with fear. She knows as I know that if I fail to solve this mystery, whatever it may be - and Ra knows it cannot be other than a great mystery involving great figures and great powers - there will be no mystery about my fate. I will be stripped of my position, my few honours, my belongings, and set to death. And yet I did not feel afraid. I felt something else I could not acknowledge at that moment.

'Say something.' I looked at her.

'What do you want me to say? Nothing will make you stay with us. You actually look excited.'

Which was true, though I still would not admit it.

'That's because I am trying not to look worried in front of the girls.'

She did not believe me.

'How long will you be away?'

I couldn't tell her the truth, which was that I had no idea. 'About fifteen days. Perhaps much less. It depends on

how quickly I can solve the mystery. On the state of the evidence, the existence of the clues, the circumstances ...'

But she had turned her head away and was staring without seeing out of the window. Suddenly, the way the afternoon light struck her face pushed my heart into my mouth, and silenced me.

We sat like that for a little while, not speaking.

Then she said, 'I don't understand. Surely the city Medjay there should investigate the mystery? It's an internal issue. Why do they want you? You're a stranger, you have no contacts, no-one you can trust ... and if it's supposed to be so secret why are they commanding an outsider? The local police will resent you for trespassing on their territory.'

Everything she said was true, as usual; her nose for the simple truth is smart and infallible. I smiled.

'There's nothing to smile about,' she said.

'I love you.'

'I don't want you to go.'

Her words caught me out.

'You know I have no choice.'

'You have a choice. There is always a choice.'

I embraced her, felt her shaking, and tried to soothe her. She calmed herself, and gently placed her hands on my face.

'I never know, every morning, whether this is the last time I will see you. So I memorize your face. I know it so well, now, that I could carry it perfectly to my grave.'

'Let's not talk about graves. Let's talk about what we'll do with the Lord's gift I will receive when I solve this mystery and become the most famous detective in the city.'

She smiled at last. 'Some gift would be welcome. You haven't been paid for months.'

The economy is a mess, the harvests have been poor for several years running, there are even reports of looting; and the waves of immigration from beyond our northern

and southern borders, drawn by the promises of the great new constructions, have created a rootless and hopeless unemployed constituency with nothing to lose. Grain is scarce, they say, even in the royal granaries. No-one has been paid. It is the talk of the town. It has made everyone even more anxious. Everyone has mouths to feed. People fear the shortages. They wonder when they will be forced to barter their good city furniture on the black economy for a side of meat and a basket of vegetables from the countryside.

‘I can take care of myself. And every moment I will be thinking only of coming back to you. I promise.’

She nodded, and wiped her eyes on her sleeve.

‘I must say farewell to the children.’

‘You’re leaving *now*?’

‘I must.’

She turned away from me.

As I came into their room, the girls stopped what they were doing. Sekhmet looked up at me from her scroll. Her topaz eyes under her black fringe. A hard choice between reading the next words of her story and a proper greeting. I stood her on a chair and put our faces together. I smelled the familiar sweet milkiness of her breath. She draped her weightless arms around my neck.

‘I have to go away for a while. Work. Will you look after your mother and your sisters for me until I come home?’

She nodded, and whispered seriously into my ear that she would, that she loved me and would think of me every day.

‘Write me a letter,’ I asked.

She nodded again. My little sage. She is self-conscious this year: her voice has a new and careful refinement in it.

Next, Thuyu, grinning, her teeth all there now, making a silly face. She wanted to bite my nose, and I let her. ‘Have fun!’ she yelled, and dropped to the floor.

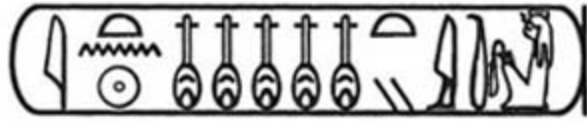
Nedjmet, the baby, 'the sweet one' as we call her, hopefully; a determined creature, her absoluteness so shockingly like mine. Her night weeping has given way to an utterly serious consideration of the world around her. I can no longer fool her at breakfast, when I try to persuade her a sweet roll is fresh when it is left over from yesterday's bake.

And lastly my Tanefert, my heart, with your hair the black of a moonless night, and your strong nose and long eyes. Forgive me for leaving you. If I have done nothing else with my life I have at least made this family. My bright girls. May they be given back to me at the end of this story. I will lay anything on the libation table for this. One knows the things one loves when one must leave them.

As is my habit and working method, I will keep a journal through the time to come. I shall record at the end of each day or night what I know I know, and also what I do not. I shall record clues and questions and conundrums and enigmas. I shall write what I please and what I think, not what I ought to write. In case something happens to me, perhaps this journal may survive as a testament, and return to its home like a lost dog. And perhaps the mystery will unfold from the bits and pieces, the shards and apparent irrelevances, the dreams and chances and impossibilities that make up the evidence and the history of a crime, into a successful, well-ordered and, who knows, sensible, logical, brilliantly deduced conclusion. But it would not be true. In my experience, things do not add up so easily. Things are, in my experience, a mess. So in this journal I will record the digressions, the thoughts that do not fit, the unrefined, the nonsensical and the inscrutable. And see what they tell me. And see if, from the broken evidence (for I normally deal in what is unredeemable), the outline of truth will emerge.

And then I did the hardest thing I have ever done. Dressed in my finest linens, and with my authorizations in

my case, I made a brief libation to the household god. I prayed, with unusual sincerity (for he knows I do not believe in him), for his protection, and for the protection of my family. Then I embraced my girls, kissed Tanefert, who touched my face with her hands, put my feet into my old leather sandals and, with shaking hands, closed the door on my home and my life. I walked away towards a future where nothing was certain, everything at risk. And I am ashamed to write here that I felt more alive than ever, even though my heart was broken glass in my chest.



2

Great Thebes, your lights and shadows, your corrupt businesses and your chattering parties, your shops and your luxuries; your rotten, squalid quarters and your youthful, fashionable beauties; your crimes and miseries and murders. I never know whether I hate or love you. But at least I know you. Above the low rooftops of my neighbourhood I can see the blue, gold, red and green of the temple façades, their colonnades and pylons standing to the sun. The holy sycamore groves around them like dark green candles. Orchards and hidden gardens. And next to them rubbish in piles between dark shacks, and in dangerous passageways. Behind the costly villas and great palaces and temples lie the shanties made from the cast-offs and detritus of the rich where the multitudes scrape meagre livings. The niches of the household gods, each dish with its daily offering. They say there are more gods than mortals in the city, yet I have never seen one that was not shaped from the materials of this world. No, I do not hold with gods. They are selfish, in their temples and heavens. They have too much to answer for, in their relish of our sufferings and misfortunes, and their neglect of the petitions of our hearts. But this is sacrilege, and I must silence my thought – although I will write it here, and who reads this must honour my stupid trust.

I walked down the streets towards the docks, beneath the dusty white awnings that protect us from the noon sun.

I saw the local kids running along the rooftops, shouting and darting between the piles of drying crops and fruit, jostling the cages of birds causing tiny uproars of shrieks and songs, jumping over the afternoon sleepers and leaping the crazy gaps between the buildings. I passed by the stalls piled with colourful produce and walked down the Alley of Fruit and then into the shadowy passages under the patterned awnings where the expensive shops sell rare clever monkeys, giraffe skins, ostrich eggs and tusks engraved with prayers. The whole world brings its tributes and its wonders to us: the remarkable fruits of its endless labours are presented at our doors. Or, at least, the doors of those who do not have to wait so many months for their gift of pay (note to self: reapply to treasurer for unpaid salary gifts).

I prefer this great chaos of the living streets to the hushed and ordered temples, courts and sanctuaries of the gods and the hierarchies of the Priests. I prefer noise and mess and dirt, even the workers' suburbs in the east, and the smelly pig yards, and the dogs on chains in the miserable dark hovels these people must call home. Those are the places we enter with the caution of experience, knowing we are hated and in danger. The law of the Medjay, whose authority to maintain order stretches through all the Provinces of the Two Lands, has no power there, although few of us would admit it. When we approach, kites, their stretched canvases painted with the eyes of angry gods, rise, dart and swoop in the sky, to warn of our approach. But then I think our law has no sway in the palaces and temples either. They too have their definitive powers. I will no doubt find this where I am bound.

I arrived, finally, at the docks, and found among the thousands of vessels the boat which was to carry me on the first stage of this journey. I was the last to board, and as soon as I was installed the sailors pushed off, the oars came

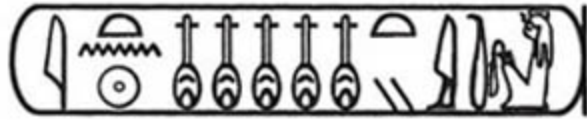
out, and we began to merge into the life of the Great River, which now spread out wide with all its traffic of people and goods, as far as the eye can travel to the horizon where the Black Land meets the Red and holds it back for all time.

Lightland, our world of light. The triumph of time. Countless boats, sails bowed to the invisible wind: the fishing men, the larger transports of stones and cattle, the ferries that travel between the banks of the river, between the temples to the east and the tombs to the west, between the rising and the setting of the sun, with their mortal passengers. Flocks of ibis wading in the shallows. Votive blue lotus flowers bobbing in the waters beside the remains of everyday life: bits of food, clothing, rubbish, dead fish and dogs, and dog fish, and cat fish. The endless quiet creaking of the shadoufs. The ceaseless gifts of the Great River. Thebes survives for and by it. Or rather, the river grants the waters of life to the city. Where would we be without water? We would be nothing but the desert that fears the river.

They say the gods possess the river, and that the river is a god, but I think its owners are the Priests in the offices, and the rich with their villas and terraces where the cool water laps at their soft and lazy feet. And he who owns the water, owns the city – indeed owns life itself. But no-one in truth owns the river. It is greater, more enduring and more powerful than any of us, almost more than any god. It can tear us apart with its force or starve us by withholding its yearly inundation. It is full of death. It carries corpses of beasts and men and children whose dwelling time in its depths has shocked them green. Sometimes I believe I sense their hopeless and unfinished spirits as they touch upon the water, sending out silent concentric rings as signs to tell us they were here and are gone without rest. And yet it sustains our rich black earth from which spring our green crops, our barley and emmer wheat.

As the city of my birth and life dwindled in our wake, I left the world I know, where we live out our brief stories between the Black and the Red, between the land of the living and the rising sun and the land of long shadows and death, between the little moments and luxuries of our life and the western desert, that wilderness where we send our criminals to die only for them to return as demons to haunt us as we sleep. Once, they say, before time began the whole of the land was green, with herds of water buffalo, gazelles and elephants. And suddenly I remembered years ago, when my father and I rode into the desert. A great storm had changed again the landscape of the dunes. We found revealed the skeleton of a crocodile, so far from any kind of water. What else lies hidden there? Great cities, strange statues, lost peoples, their ships built to sail the Otherworld's eternal sea of sand.

Alas, I am carried away again. I must be sober as the great serpent of water carries me away from all I know, and all I love, on its blackness, its perpetual glittering scales, with its sightless memory of a long journey from high in the unknown stones of Nubia, down through the great cataracts, and into the fields, into the fruit and the vegetables, into the wine, into the sea; and somewhere into snow.



3

I admire the neatness of a boat. The simplicity of necessity. Blankets folded in the morning and stowed. Objects made small and precise for their purpose. Everything in its place. The captain has blue eyes, a handful of crooked white teeth, a confident belly and the hands-on look of an intelligence at home on the water; an intelligence that can look through people of the land and discern their motives and thoughts as if they were as easy to read as small fish in the shallows. Then there is the boat itself, a wonderful construction, an equation between wind and water that results in sails filling to perfect curves, drawing out the ropes to an immaculate geometrical tension that brings about the miraculous power to draw the vessel and its temporary passengers through the water. Look: the perfect cut of the prow through the skin of the water that heals as we pass. The wake - blind white fingers feeling their way along the edge of some unknown material, then relenting, with little shrugs and gestures of farewell, and sinking back into the blackness whence they so briefly appeared.

Here I am, a senior detective of the Medjay, spending my time pondering the inscrutable puzzles of the passing water as we are carried with the current of the river past Coptos, Dendera and the Temple of Hathor, and the Temple of Osiris at Abydos. My mind like a water fly, thinking of nothing, when I should be preparing myself for the urgent mystery at hand.

The captain invited the passengers to dine together this evening, around the brazier, for it is cold on the water once the sun has descended. I hate dinner parties, and I annoy Tanefert by making sure work prevents me from attending the invitations we receive. In part, this is because I cannot talk, at the table or even anywhere else, about my work: who wants to hear about murder when they are enjoying their meat? And in part because I just cannot discuss the perils and evils of the world from the point of view of luxury, around a table set with good things, as if it were all just matter for debate.

We greeted each other politely as we took our places, and then fell into an uneasy silence. It is true that the Great Changes have brought about more caution, and sometimes almost suspicion, into daily life. Once we spoke freely; now people think twice before they express an opinion. Once one provoked laughter and amusement for expressing a heretical point of view; now such things are met with silence and discomfort.

I was seated next to a portly gentleman whose belly was the most notable part of his anatomy; it was like a great globe with a white moony head gazing down in constant surprise at itself. The food, which was simple and plentiful, drew from him gestures of approval and delight: his polished little hands wafted in the air to describe his pleasure. He leaned over to me, and broke the silence: 'And what, sir, is your purpose in our new City of the Horizon of the Aten?'

I could tell he was pleased with himself for calling the new capital by its rather pompous proper name. I like to engage in the amateur drama of an assumed identity in these circumstances.

'I am an official in the Office of Accounts,' I replied.

'So we should make friends with you, as otherwise we shall never be paid!' He looked around the table for approval of his little quip.

‘Indeed, our Lord’s finances are a great mystery, but the greatest is that they are never-ending, and ever bountiful.’

He appraised me and the conformity of my reply with a cool eye. Before he could get further into this, I quickly asked, ‘And what are your own affairs in Akhetaten?’

‘I am director of the court orchestra and dancers. It is a position enjoying considerable status, and I believe there was great competition for it. I shall be directing the opening drama for the city’s inauguration. Did you know, all the members of the court orchestra are women?’

‘Do you mean, sir, that women are less capable than men in the expertise of dance and music?’

A handsome, intelligent woman had spoken from the opposite side of the table. Her husband, a smaller and somehow diminished middle-aged man with the appearance of a born bureaucrat, glanced at her as if to say: it is not your place to speak of this. But she gazed calmly on the Great White Moon.

He sniffed and said, ‘Dancing will always be the woman’s art. But music makes great technical and spiritual demands. I am not speaking of mere decoration but of the deep soul.’ He picked out the morsel of a prawn from its pink sheath and popped it between his fastidious and ambitious lips.

‘I see. And is our Queen Nefertiti decoration? Or is she of deep soul?’ She smiled at me, an invitation to share her amusement.

‘We know too little of her,’ he said.

‘Oh no, sir,’ she responded. ‘We know she is beautiful. We know she is clever. And we know she is the most powerful woman alive today. She drives her own chariot, and she wears her hair as she wishes, not as tradition would dictate. She smites her enemies as a King. And no-one tells her what to do. She is, in fact, the epitome of the modern woman.’

A small silence ensued around the table. Finally, the Moon spoke: 'Indeed, and that may very well be why we find ourselves in a world which is changing faster than perhaps everyone would like.'

The conversation was becoming more charged; the stakes of the game increased. She answered him with a counter-play.

'Do you not, then, approve of the new religion?'

This was a subject not to be carelessly discussed among strangers. Moon Man squirmed with discomfort and uncertainty, caught between speaking his mind and fearing for his future. 'I approve it with all my heart. Of course I do. I am merely a music-maker. It is not my business to ask questions, merely to do what is asked of me and make it sound as tuneful as possible. I only wonder, privately, and I am not alone in this, whether our Lord and his Lady, she-who-will-not-be-told-what-to-do, have not bitten off more than they can chew.' And with that, he placed a fried sprat between his lips and teased off the flesh from the bones as if he were playing a tune on a small reed pipe.

The handsome woman's eyes were alive with amusement at the absurdity of his turn of phrase, which she seemed to want to share with me.

'We live in a time of great turbulence,' said her husband. 'Can we know whether we are blessed or cursed? Will the people miss their old gods, and the Priests their easy riches? Or are we moving forward, together, as a society, towards a higher and greater truth, however challenging?'

Moon Man spoke again: 'Higher truths need proper financing. Enlightenment is expensive. So I am pleased to hear you' - here he pointed a greasy finger at me - 'can confirm the finances of our Lord are drawn from so perpetual a spring of plenty. I hear the harvest is poor again this year. And I hear salaries are in arrears, sometimes by several years. Indeed, it is the guarantee of regular gifts from Akhenaten that has persuaded me to

uproot my life and cast my fortune on the success of the new capital.'

I did not respond. Instead, the handsome woman gracefully changed the subject. She turned to the young man to her left, who had remained silent throughout these exchanges. He was an apprentice architect.

'So, what can you tell us about the construction of the city?' she asked. 'And more importantly whether the bigger houses have gardens, for little else would have persuaded me to sacrifice my own home and friends for the desert.'

'I believe the villas are luxurious. And the supply of water to the gardens is prodigious. So although the city is surrounded by the desert, and would seem an arid and unpropitious place to build a new world, yet it is now green and fertile. But alas, I am working only in a minor capacity.' He paused, embarrassed.

'And what is that?' I asked.

'I am designing the toilet area near the Great Aten Temple.' Everyone laughed at that. Encouraged, he added, 'Even Priests must take their libatory shits in sacred surroundings!'

'Don't talk to me about the Priests,' Moon Man said. 'Their calling is riches. And that's all there is to it. The least Akhenaten will have achieved is the destruction of their great temples to the gods of profit!'

We all fell into silence. It is dangerous to criticize the Priests, or let us say the Old Families who have commanded so much inherited power for so many generations and are now in turmoil, like an enraged monster, at their losses of status, land and income. Likewise the Medjay: many believe that elements within the force are compelling the less orthodox members of society to accept and conform to the new religion by the use of the old techniques – intimidation, violence and suffering. I have heard stories of people disappearing, of unidentifiable bodies washing up in the river, their hands chopped off, their eyes plucked out. But it