

NICK DRAKE

EGYPT

THE BOOK OF CHAOS



The future of Egypt lies in the hands of one man . . .

About the Book

Egypt, 1320 BC

The future of Egypt lies in the hands of chief detective Rahotep when he undertakes a clandestine mission across enemy empires and rogue states to deliver a top-secret letter, written by the Queen to her arch-enemy, the King of the Hittites.

It is a mission from which Rahotep may not return. But he also has a wildly personal motive: to seek out a depraved murderer at the heart of a mysterious and brutal new opium cartel that has emerged within the criminal underworld of Thebes.

His quest brings Rahotep face to face with his own dark demons, which he must conquer if he is to return home in time to save Egypt's greatest dynasty and his own family from the terror that threatens them all.

***EGYPT: The Book of Chaos* is an epic historical tale of adventure and intrigue from a master storyteller. It shines a light on one of the most compelling unsolved mysteries of the Ancient World.**

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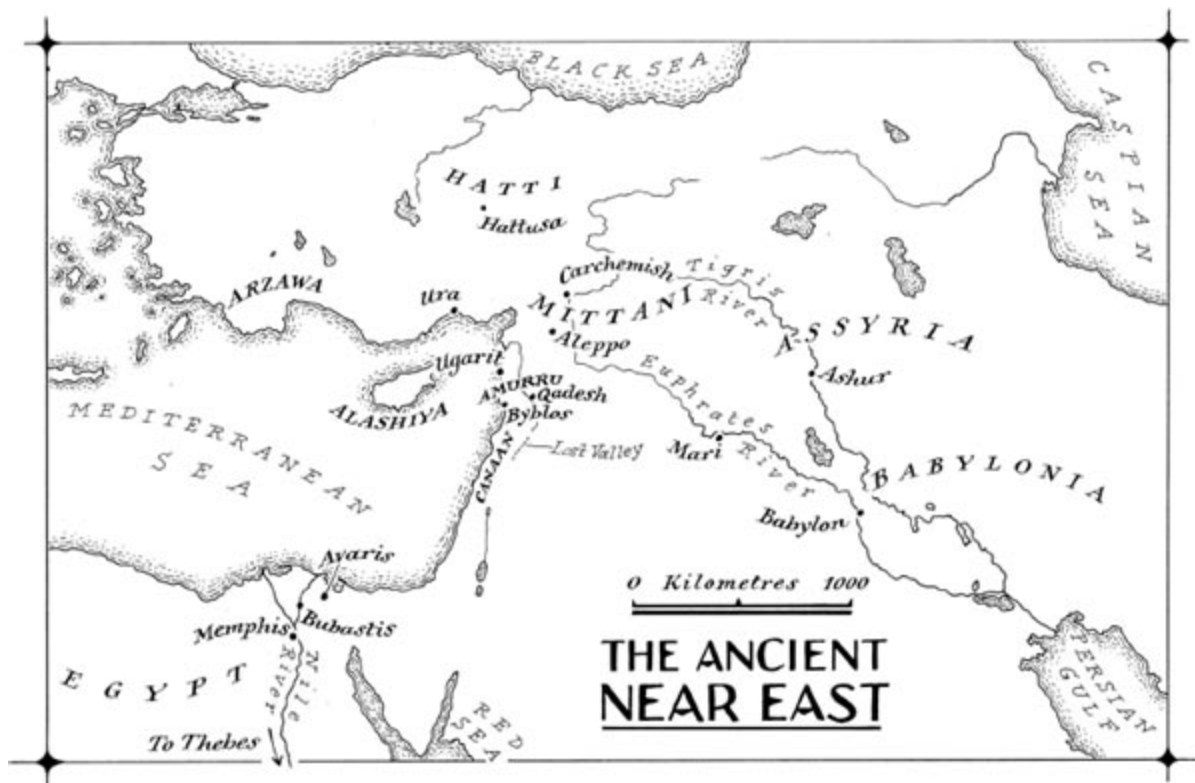
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EGYPT

The Book of Chaos

Nick Drake





Cast List

Rahotep - Seeker of Mysteries, detective in the Thebes
Medjay (police force)

His family and friends

Tanefert - his wife

Sekhmet, Thuyu, Nedjmet - his daughters

Amenmose - his young son

Thoth - his baboon

Khety - Medjay associate

Nakht - noble, Royal Envoy to All Foreign Lands

Minmose - Nakht's manservant

The royal family

Ankhesenamun - Queen, mid-twenties, daughter of
Nefertiti

Ay - King

The palace and other officials

Simut - Commander of the Palace Guard

Nebamun - Chief of the Thebes Medjay

Panehesy - Sergeant in the Thebes Medjay

Khay - Chief Scribe

The Hittites

Hattusa - Ambassador

Suppiluliuma I - King

Crown Prince Arnuwanda - his eldest son

Prince Zannanza - his fourth son
Queen Tawananna

*Save me from that God who steals souls. Who laps up
corruption. Who lives on what is putrid. Who is in charge of
darkness. Who is immersed in gloom. Of whom those who
are among the dead are afraid.*

Who is he?

He is Seth.

The Book of the Dead
Spell 17

PART ONE



You shall be decapitated with a knife, your face shall be cut away all round. Your head shall be removed by him who is in his land. Your bones shall be broken. Your limbs shall be cut off.

The Book of the Dead
Spell 39



1

*Year 4 of the Reign of King Ay, God's Father, Doer of
Right
Thebes, Egypt*

I STARED DOWN at five severed heads that lay in the dust, at the god-forsaken crossroads, in the small dark hour before dawn.

It was cold, and I drew my old Syrian woollen cloak closer around me. The night sky was moonless. The city was all shadows. Doors and windows were shut. No early workers, up before dawn on their way to another long day's labour, paused to observe the spectacle. No one would dare to approach a scene like this. Not in these dark times. The old phrase came to me unbidden: 'The earth is in darkness as if in death ...' Only the stray dogs of Thebes howled to each other across the districts of the city, from the poor slums to the rich suburbs, as if giving voice to the *ka* spirits of these murdered Nubian boys, hungry for sustenance as they flew between this world and the next.

Under the setting stars shimmering in the ocean of the heavens, a few officers of the city Medjay moved about in the flickering light of their torches, chatting nonchalantly, their shadows wavering on the mud-brick walls of the nearby dwellings. A few nodded at me; others didn't. They had already carelessly trampled their sandals all over the crime scene, destroying any evidence that might have

remained. Not that it would matter, for the investigation would be cursory at best. Massacres like this had become commonplace, and the gangs who committed them with impunity seemed to have taken control of the poor districts. They trafficked in opium, gold and human beings, trapping and selling young girls and boys into dead-end prostitution. Their victims even included Medjay officers, fantastically tortured, then decapitated and dismembered for refusing to take the golden opportunity of corruption. Rival gangs slaughtered each other in score-settling bloodbaths along with their screaming girlfriends; the teenage sons and daughters of high-ranking bureaucrats were kidnapped and brutally murdered *after* the ransoms had been paid; and so, despite all the security and high walls gold could buy, no one in Thebes felt safe.

But these decapitated victims were just street kids – Nubian boys, with tattoos and braided hair, and little arrow amulets on leather necklaces to mark their gang membership. They would have run the low-level opium sales for their bigger brothers. They were from the poorest, most dismal of the slums; uneducated, without employment or prospects, vulnerable to the stupid outlaw mystique of the gangs. All bore the wounds of previous street battles: knife-scars on their cheeks, blotted and sunken eyes, blunted, misshapen noses, and ears deformed by beatings. None were older than sixteen – most were younger. Their childish faces now wore the empty look of disappointment common to the newly dead.

The boys' heads were set in a neat row at the feet of their corpses, which had been laid side by side, so that they looked like innocent friends dreaming together. Their dusty hands and feet had been roughly, tightly bound with cheap cord – but when I examined them I was puzzled, for the knots were unusually expert. Also, when a man is beheaded, his blood pumps in arcs from the neck wound; but judging from the absence of any other bloodstains in

the street dust, these boys must have been executed somewhere else, and then dumped here as a warning, probably from one gang to another.

I bent down to examine the wounds in better detail: the neck muscles and the spine of each boy had been severed by a single, powerful stroke, which suggested a practised, indeed an exemplary, skill. And the killer must have used a high-quality blade; perhaps a ceremonial *khopesh* scimitar, or a butcher's long yellow flint blade, razor-sharp for eviscerating cattle. Knives have powers of protection and of retribution. The Guardians of the Otherworld carry knives, and so do the minor Gods of that dismal place, with their fearsome faces and their heads turned backwards; and so, clearly, did this killer. I could picture his excellent technique, and his unusual pride in his skill. This did not seem like the work of the usual brutal gang executioners.

In my years on the Thebes force, I had seen every kind of meaningless brutality enacted on the human body. Cruelty, rage, grief – and something others carelessly name evil – can reduce the strange collation of profanity and beauty which makes up each of us to an inanimate lump of decaying meat. I had stood in grim backrooms, and stooped over the twisted bodies of children battered to death. I had considered the ruined remains of young women face down in the still-warm shadows of their own blood. I had seen the matter of the brain – that peculiar ivory jelly, which some say is the repository of our thoughts and memories – dashed across mud-brick walls. I had seen the raw meat of our physical beings exposed as in a butcher's shop; I knew how quickly youth and beauty bloat and stink, when the *ka* and *ba* spirits have departed.

I had seen much worse things than the sight of these five Nubian boys' expertly decapitated heads. And yet it angered me deeply. Perhaps it was our apparent powerlessness to stop this tide of violence. Perhaps it was the Medjay's obvious lack of interest in protecting the poor.

Or perhaps I was simply growing old. The hair on my head was grey now, the glossy black of my youth a distant memory; my belly was still trim, but some dawns I felt my bones creaking, and the weight of the skin on my face, and a strange slowness in my blood when I rose to confront the new day.

I shook my head to dispel such pointless thoughts. And then I noticed something, just visible between the pale lips of one of the Nubian boys' heads. I inserted my finger between his white teeth, and retrieved a folded slip of papyrus. It was sticky with blood and saliva. I carefully peeled it open. Neatly drawn in black ink was a strange sign: *a black star with eight radial arrowheads*. Gangs often left scrawled, barely literate messages with their victims' body parts – all part of the grim ritual, the blood-soaked display of power. But usually the messages were banal: *Learn Respect; Keep Silent; Be Afraid*. This was different. It was not, for one thing, an Egyptian hieroglyph, for our stars have five points, and look nothing like what was before me.

Suddenly, a chariot, drawn by two tired little horses and accompanied by a running guard, clattered up the street, and Nebamun, Chief of the Thebes Medjay, descended. The officers, who until this moment had been sharing their usual diseased banter, straightened up in silence. Nebamun glanced over in my direction. I knew he would want this scene cleared up and the bodies disposed of before dawn broke, and the city awoke. There would, of course, be no proper investigation. Instead, a few likely culprits would be dragged off the streets of the slums, and tortured to confess, and then swiftly executed, as a sign to the world at large that the city Medjay could still do its job. Whatever their petty misdemeanours, these dead boys were still murder victims, and they deserved justice. But because they were poor Nubians they wouldn't get it; Nebamun – 'a man of this world', as he repeatedly claimed, justifying his

short cuts to justice, his casual corruption, and his remorselessly practical violence – would see to that. To talk of justice was to be out of date, old-fashioned and laughable. He was coming towards me. Against the rules, and with a corresponding touch of pleasure, I quickly hid the papyrus in my leather satchel, for further contemplation.

‘Shit always travels downhill, eh, Rahotep?’ Nebamun said, nodding at the dead boys, and coughing grimly at his tired, old joke. He wrapped his long, finely pleated linen gown tighter around his stately form. He was wearing his gold *shebyu* collar of honour as always, just to remind us of his worldly success. Once impressively muscular, his stocky physique had collapsed into the soft middle age of a man who had succeeded in his profession. His features were blunt, and his hands were not as steady as they had once been, but his eyes still glittered with the pleasure of power. I caught a waft of the sweet smell of beer on his breath. He had never developed a taste for decent wine. I instinctively took a step back from him. He grinned, revealing his poor teeth, and then spat a fat gob of phlegm into the dust a bit too near my sandals. My baboon, Thoth, growled quietly at him.

‘Five more dead Nubian street kids. Who cares?’ he said, prodding their bodies with his sandals.

I knew better than to respond.

‘Let’s get this cleared up. No point in distressing the decent hard-working citizens of Thebes with a nasty sight like this, eh?’ he said, and he made a sign to the officers to get to work. Then he turned back to me, as if something had just occurred to him.

‘What are you doing here, Rahotep?’ he said.

‘I couldn’t sleep.’

Which was true.

Nebamun and I had never seen eye to eye. He had beaten me to the office of Chief of the Thebes Medjay, and

immediately proved his innate stupidity by becoming a petty tyrant, intimidating his best men rather than freeing them to do their jobs. In particular he had used his power to sideline me to the point where I was no longer ordered to the scenes of murders, but put to work on petty cases which should have been given to junior officers. And in doing so, he had taken from me the thing I valued above almost everything: my work as a Seeker of Mysteries. Twice before, I had been called upon, over his head and beyond his authority, to solve mysteries by the highest in the land – first by Nefertiti, and then later by her daughter, Ankhesenamun, and her husband, King Tutankhamun. Twice I had been summoned and set to work, independent of his authority. And twice, he would insist, gleefully, whenever he had the chance, I had failed. For Nefertiti had vanished, and Tutankhamun had died. And yet I could never tell him the true story behind these events, to justify myself, for I had promised my silence on those matters.

Suddenly, a Nubian woman ran into the street. She was breathless and desperate. The officers moved to stop her, but Nebamun shook his head, casually giving permission for her to approach her dead child. She fell to her knees before one of the heads and began to keen a high, desperate howl of inconsolable misery.

‘I’m sorry for the death of your son,’ I said quietly.

She gazed up at me, her face shattered.

‘What was his name?’ I asked as gently as I could, but Nebamun interrupted me.

‘You don’t belong here, Rahotep. This isn’t your case.’

‘It won’t be anyone’s case,’ I said, before I could stop myself. ‘Like you said, five more dead Nubian boys? Who cares? End of story.’

‘Exactly so. So why don’t you fuck off home, before I kick you all the way to the end of the street,’ he snapped back, delighted to have antagonized me.

He nodded to his men. They grasped the grieving mother under the arms, and dragged her away, her howls echoing through the dark and silent streets.

Once, I would have owned this scene. Once I was known as the best Seeker of Mysteries in the city. This would have been my case, and perhaps I might have been able to give that mother something, in the end, that looked like justice. I might have discovered why the knots on the ropes were expert, and found the killer who was so strangely skilled at beheading teenage Nubian boys.

I looked around one final time, shading my eyes against the dawn light. Soon the day's heat would take control of the city. Thebes would shimmer and bake under the furious eye of Ra. It would be another day ruled by this world's new gods: gold and power.

I took Thoth by the leash, and we walked slowly away into the last of the shadows.



2

THE NOBLE NAKHT, tall, slim and elegant, was standing at the top of the entrance stairs of his grand city house, greeting his rich and elite friends as they arrived and passed through into the grand reception hall. He was wearing his finest pleated linens and a magnificent *shebyu* collar - two strands of solid gold rings. Such collars were royal gifts, signs of high favour and office, strikingly beautiful, and very heavy. Such ostentation was a recent development in his personal appearance, which had always been austere; but his rise to even greater eminence, as royal envoy, seemed to have encouraged him to a more open display of personal opulence, about which - as he made very clear - he was not to be teased. Nakht was now one of the most powerful men in the land: the chief official who oversaw the relations between the judiciary, the priesthood, the government and the palace, and who, as royal envoy, represented Egypt abroad. In short, he was the keystone of power. And yet I could never quite square that with the man I knew, who was more interested in studying the mysteries of the stars, and the obscure puzzles of ancient texts, than in the crude, day-to-day business of power and politics. I observed him in action from my bodyguard's vantage, just to his side. His finely drawn face, with its delicate features, moved through exactly the right range of expressions as he greeted each dignitary according to his stature, and by name (for his memory was famously

prodigious): the nobles and priests with poised grace, the overseers with a sly, collaboratively subversive wink, the new magnates with respect. And yet, his topaz eyes, alive with intelligence, seemed to observe the pageant of all this, and indeed of all human life, as a slightly remote spectacle. He had the concentrated hunting eyes of a hawk in the smooth face of a gentleman.

Our friendship was unlikely. We had met when we were younger, at a grand reception in Akhetaten, the new temple city built by Akhenaten and Nefertiti midway between Thebes and Memphis. Nakht had been born into a world of gold and privilege, but despite the differences in our origins we had taken to each other immediately.

And now, all these years later, and despite his eminence in high politics and intellectual life, he still seemed to find something amusing and interesting in me. I, for my part, remained intrigued by his life of the mind, his bladed intelligence, and above all by his warm love for my children. Perhaps he borrowed from me the one thing he lacked in his life – a family. And I was glad to share them with him.

Once upon a time, I had been an invited guest at Nakht's famous social functions. Tonight I was here because I was working. Nakht had started to employ me occasionally as his personal bodyguard, saying he could trust my discretion in a way he could trust no one else. With his customary tact, he had made it seem as if it was I who was doing him the favour. And given the unreliable and ever-diminishing payments from my Medjay work, and the spiralling costs of even the most basic of foods, I was absolutely desperate for any means to provide for my family. Many of my fellow Medjay officers, alarmed by the increasing murder rate among our own kind, and the worsening violence in the city, had been drawn into private security work: either at rich men's houses, or rich families' tombs, loaded with treasures and gold – which were always threatened with

violent robbery. Some made money on both sides, by collaborating with gangs of tomb-robbers. Others had also been drawn by need or weakness into blackmail, protectionism and extortion. Many times I regretted refusing the Queen's offer to become her private guard, which she had made five years before; but the palace was never my world - I was a Seeker of Mysteries, and no matter what the cost, and no matter how absurd it might seem, I had no choice but to remain true to myself.

Up on the roof, the large terrace was set out with many trays on stands, piled high with the finest of foods in ostentatious quantities: whole ducks in thick glazes; big roasted haunches of gazelle, sliced finely to reveal the pink meat; roasted gourds and shallots; bread rolls; honeycombs; olives glistening in oil on decorated platters; lustrous bunches of shining grapes that caught the evening sunlight; and mountains of figs and dates. Servants dispensed fine wine from the Dakhla oasis. I would dearly have loved a goblet of decent wine, as I could no longer indulge such luxuries at home. My mouth watered; I stopped myself from smuggling a handful of almonds from a dish. After the last guests had departed, Nakht would insist that I take as many of the leftovers as I wished home for the children. 'Otherwise it will just be thrown away,' he would say, trying to find a way to make his charity acceptable, while pressing a small cask of excellent wine upon me. We would eat like kings for the next few days; and for a little while we would not have to suffer the same old onions, garlic, bony fish and gritty bread that had become our staple diet.

As Nakht made elegantly witty conversation with a rich couple, while they fawned over and flattered each other, I gazed out over the city in the glorious evening light. The grey, red and yellow flat rooftops of Thebes, crowded with drying vegetables and broken bits and pieces of household furniture, spread away in every direction. The Avenue of

Sphinxes, the vast, straight, paved processional, ran to the north, joining the Temple of Karnak and the Southern Temple, whose towering, painted mud-brick walls reared up near by. I watched as a temple army phalanx laboriously conducted the handover to the night guards in the open ground before the vast pylon. To the west ran the Great River, the source of all life, like a brown and green serpent, glittering silver now as the sunset flowed on its ever-changing surfaces. Further, beyond the cultivation on the west bank, and the stark borderline where the Black Land of the cultivation and the Red Lands of the desert divided, lay the long stone mortuary temples; and beyond them the hills and valleys, now painted in the blacks, yellows and reds of sunset, where the royal tombs preserved the great kings in their stone sarcophagi and gold coffins, timeless and secret. To the south, also on the west bank, I could just make out the squat shapes of the Malkata Palace, home of the royal family, hidden at the heart of the extensive labyrinth of overseers', administrators' and officials' accommodation. And beyond the city's boundaries, beyond the green and black fields, beyond all the monuments and statues made by men upon the face of the earth, lay the great unknown of the Red Lands, that other world of dust and sandstorms and dangerous spirits and death, which had always held such power for me.

The evening sun had dropped low now, and the sky was turquoise, indigo, crimson and gold; the sweet northern breeze of the evening hour had begun to cool the air. At a discreet nod from Nakht, the servants took down the exquisitely embroidered awnings, and lit many little oil lamps. The guests settled on chairs - with low chaises for the women - set out for comfort. I looked at their affluent faces and opulent outfits, gilded by the last of the evening light. They lived in a different world from those in the streets all around them.

I shadowed Nakht as he moved over to a small coterie of close friends who frequented his mansion. Hor the poet was talking, as usual; wittily and bitchily entertaining his friends with scurrilous accounts of high-level indiscretions and scandals, usually of a sexual nature. I used to think poets were dreamers of truth and beauty, with their heads in the Otherworld. But Hor was chubby and self-satisfied, worldly and successful. His little fingers were heavy with valuable gold rings. He was famous for a series of verses, circulated anonymously some years ago, which daringly satirized Ay, once vizier, now King. Today such things would earn him summary execution.

‘Friends, I have written a new poem,’ he announced ostentatiously. ‘It is a trifle, but perhaps I may impose it upon you ...’

A polite murmur of encouragement followed.

‘I hope it is a cheerful one,’ said someone.

‘There is no such thing as a cheerful poem,’ he replied. ‘Happiness writes in water, not ink.’

Everyone nodded as if this was a very wise thing to say. He assumed his posture of poetic delivery, head tilted, fingers of the right hand raised, and when he had satisfied himself that he had everyone’s attentive silence, he intoned:

*Who can I trust today?
Brothers are evil, and friends have no compassion.
Hearts are greedy
And each man steals
His neighbour’s worldly goods.
Compassion has perished,
Violence walks the ways,
Evil runs rampant
Throughout the land –
Evil, endless evil ...*

And so it went on. When it was over, his cheerless dirge – which I thought truthful, but repetitive and not particularly original – was met with a worried silence, before the audience applauded hastily. Nakht sensed the mood of the evening was threatening to turn the wrong way.

‘Remarkable poem. Concise, memorable and honest,’ he said.

‘I see I have shocked you all a little. But to be a poet is to accept the responsibility of speaking the truth! No matter what the cost to my personal safety,’ said Hor, taking a deep, sustaining gulp from his cup of wine.

‘Your relationship with the truth has always been a very flexible and accommodating one,’ said Nebi, a well-known architect, dressed in an expensive embroidered tunic.

‘Of course it has, in matters of men and this world. I’m a poet, not a complete fool ...’ Hor replied.

‘But the truth itself is so complicated these days,’ said another.

‘The truth is always the truth,’ said Nakht, smiling at his own triteness.

Hor waved him away. ‘I can’t bear platitudes. They actually hurt my feelings,’ he said.

All this talk of truth was making me want to go and do something useful.

‘However, I have heard some interesting news, friends,’ continued Hor, smiling his evil little grin. The others huddled a little closer, checking over their shoulders to make sure no one else was listening. And then, after a carefully timed pause, the poet leaned forward, as if among conspirators, and in a theatrical whisper said: ‘*He* will soon be with the Gods.’

Everyone understood what he meant but could not say. Ay, the hated tyrant who ruled over the Two Lands, had long outlived the expectation of his natural life.

‘But this is hardly *new* news. And even if he were to pass on, how would anyone really know? He’s looked dead for

years ...' joked Nebi's wife, to a little round of laughter.

'Mark my words. I have it on authority: it may be only weeks. And none of us will be laughing then.'

The guests glanced at each other and shivered, as if the balmy evening air was suddenly running with strange, cold currents.

'So the moment we have all feared for so very long is about to arrive! The end of this great dynasty – and the end of the age of peace and prosperity!' cried another, mournfully.

'And so at last comes General Horemheb's chance,' said Nebi. 'And with it perhaps the end of the world as we have known it.'

'The general will claim more than the crowns. He will claim everything. And then he will do what he likes with us ...' said an older man, with his elegantly beautiful young wife sitting subserviently behind him.

'I heard he has a secret papyrus on which he has recorded a list of the names of all his enemies, and all those who have opposed him, or failed to support him, over the years,' whispered Nebi.

'How many of us will be on that list!' replied the older man, looking around at the company.

'It is a dismal prospect,' agreed Hor. Lifting his stubby hand to the west, like a tragic actor, he intoned: 'Like an army of shadows, his numberless soldiers in their divisions will return from their long campaigns against our arch-enemies, the Hittites, and turn their forces instead upon our own great people, to conquer and dominate and suppress our liberty. I see his ships, under blood-red sails, appearing out of the dark night. I see his troops occupying the streets of our city. I see the best men led forth to execution. I see calamity. I see blood running in the streets. I see the world turned upside down.'

The audience seemed spellbound by his prophecy. I glanced at Nakht, who was observing the poet. We

exchanged a slight rise of the eyebrows at the oracular melodrama of the performance. But Hor was serious.

‘I have you all amazed. But Horemheb is famous for his cruelties and his passion for revenge. I heard a story, from the mouth of one who was there, that, once, the general ordered a captive Hittite commander to be boiled alive before him, for his entertainment ... *while he ate his dinner.*’

There were cries of revulsion among the group. More guests had gathered to listen, with their goblets and trays. But at this point, Nakht intervened.

‘Come now, friend. Your poetic imagination is a great gift, but as a prophet perhaps you relish your visions of doom too greatly. The future is not so sure. Nor is it necessarily so bleak. No oracle can decide for certain what will happen. Indeed, we have reasons for imagining a different future altogether.’

‘Such as? The ascension of Horemheb bringing “order” and “a return to the old values” and so on ...?’ said Hor, sarcastically.

‘His ascension would, in any case, be entirely illegitimate: he has not one drop of royal blood in him. Even Ay himself could claim a bloodline association with the royal family, however debatable. But Horemheb has simply married his way into the family, driven his poor first wife madly to her death, and then made the Queen, last of the true dynasty, into his sworn enemy,’ said Nakht.

He rose, and walked among the little gathering. ‘Life, prosperity, health to the Queen,’ he intoned loyally, to appreciative murmurs from most of those present. And then he continued. ‘Friends, is Horemheb truly so powerful? Has he no opposition? Yes, he is General of the army of the Two Lands of Egypt; but do we, the leading men of Thebes, have no faith in our own power and authority? Do intellect and morality count for nothing in the way the future unfolds? Does Amun, the God of our great

city, and of the royal family itself, have no power to save us? Can we not save ourselves?’

There was a murmur of support for Nakht’s speech from the guests. But only Hor spoke what was on everyone’s mind.

‘We would not be in this position at all if King Tutankhamun had not died in such tragic circumstances. He would have ruled, perhaps gloriously. There would have been heirs. The empire might have been great again. A new king, son of kings, could have emerged, heralding a bright future. Instead of which ...’

He held up his squat hands, with their many gold rings, and shrugged helplessly.

‘The King’s death was an accident. No one could have foreseen it, or prevented it,’ replied Nakht, in a manner that warned everyone from contradicting him, or from saying anything further.

Only one person spoke up: ‘It is true, there is a crisis in this land. Outside this bubble of affluence and illusion there is desperation. Poverty, cruelty and injustice have done their work on the people; corruption has replaced justice for the poor, and contempt has replaced respect for dignity, labour and integrity. Greed is our king, and corruption is his servant.’

Everyone turned in astonishment to stare at me, because the angry, bitter voice was mine. Nakht stared at me with a remarkably unfriendly detachment. Everyone else clearly thought I was mad and would be instantly dismissed; a servant dares to speak! But someone was slowly clapping. It was Hor.

‘I remember you, sir; you are that Medjay Seeker of Mysteries who used to write poetry in his innocent youth.’

‘I am Rahotep,’ I replied.

‘There is truth in what you say. Truth is a dangerous muse. One dies for the truth.’

He plucked a silver goblet of wine from a tray, and thrust it into my hand.

'To the truth! And much good it may do us,' he cried sarcastically, and drank the toast. Then he nodded at me, and walked away, quickly followed by the other guests.

'To the truth,' I muttered, and drank from the goblet. I was in for another shock. The wine was superbly rich, with a dark, melancholy beauty. Such were the pleasures of wealth.

When I looked up I saw Nakht was staring oddly at me, but then he turned his back and began to talk to another guest.



3

I SHOULD HAVE hurried home through the dark streets, with the bag of leftovers for the family. At the end of the night, Nakht had pointedly said nothing about my outburst. As he handed me my small payment of gold, and the parcel of food and wine, he simply ordered me to accompany him to an important meeting, tomorrow, at noon, in a tone that would brook no discussion. I was about to try to apologize, in my clumsy fashion, but he bade me a brief goodnight, and swiftly shut the door.

The evening had left me in a foul temper. The last thing I needed was to vent my anger on my wife and children. So, taking Thoth by the leash, I headed to a backstreet tavern, an old haunt where I went when I wanted to think, undisturbed. I ordered a small jug of wine, and chose a rickety stool in the corner, where the shadows could keep me company, and no one would approach me. Thoth settled down by my feet. In any case, by this late hour the place was emptying out; the only other drinkers were workmen and labourers. Their exhausted faces looked drawn in the guttering light from the oil lamps; they gripped their drinking bowls with work-damaged hands twisted like claws to the habits of their labours. When the wine arrived in its jug, it tasted exactly how I felt: cheap, crude and bitter.

I took the papyrus out, unfolded it, and pondered the black star. All gangs have their own signs and symbols.