

THE EYE OF RE

CHAPTER 1

Two gods are better than one, but not when they're both inside you. I was the disputed territory over which these gods were fighting, and if I wanted to survive, my only recourse was to wake the dead.

Breaching a Pharaoh's tomb was the most dangerous act anyone could attempt. The workman who had chiselled through the bricks and plaster that sealed the entrance to my father's burial chamber had dropped dead on the spot. But surely, the mummy which lay behind the gilded cedar doors in front of me would not strike down his own daughter. My hands shook as I fumbled with the thick cord that tied the door handles together. When the clay seal that covered the knot crumbled, something spiky climbed over my knuckles and skittered up my arm. I jumped back with a squeak, like a little girl. Embarrassed, I brushed at my shoulder. 'Hold the lamp closer, Lord Hapuseneb,' I said. 'Some creature ran up my arm.'

'Ugh!' Hapuseneb said, shaking his own clothes. 'There it goes.' The feeble circle of light from his oil lamp followed a wavering shadow that scuttled across the rough-hewn stone floor. 'Did it bite or sting you?'

'I don't think so.'

Twenty paces behind us in the dark passage, Senenmut called out, 'Let me come closer—you need my lamp. The crevices in these walls are teeming with spiders and scorpions.'

'Stay back, Lord Senenmut,' Hapuseneb ordered. 'Only kings and high priests are permitted to approach a royal burial. If you accidentally touched this door or anything beyond it, you would be struck dead like the workman was.'

Senenmut sighed derisively. 'I'm not afraid of mummies. That workman probably died of heatstroke.'

'I didn't know you were a doctor, Lord Senenmut, in addition to your many other talents,' Hapuseneb sniped.

'The spirit of my father would surely appreciate it if you two gentlemen would suspend your bickering,' I said. 'Please remain where you are, Senenmut. Another person and lamp will use up too much air, and it's already stifling down here.' We

were at the bottom of the steep, twisting passage that had been excavated for my father's tomb. The burial chamber was so far underground that breathing or flames quickly exhausted the air. I had no time to waste on Senenmut and Hapuseneb's ongoing rivalry. I tugged the wooden handles, and the heavy doors moaned on their hinge pins. Stale odours rushed forth, heavy with spices, aromatic woods and a faint rancid smell that hinted at things better left unimagined. The doors shuddered as if they were alive, as their lower edges scraped over rocky flakes fallen from the friable shale ceiling.

I stepped into the burial chamber. Hapuseneb followed and pulled the doors shut behind us. Although the chamber was only about the size of my bedroom, the walls seemed to extend to a vast darkness that was peopled with numinous beings. This was the locus of resurrection, where a dead preserved body transformed to a living Osiris king. That kind of magic left eerie echoes in a place.

Tiny gold scales of light winked from the two cedar sarcophagi resting in the centre of the chamber. The enormous one belonged to my father. The slender one resting by its side was my mother's. I had ordered her body moved here for safekeeping, after the criminal Nefer-Weben had desecrated her tomb.

'Tell me what you'd like me to do,' Hapuseneb said, glancing around uneasily. 'I don't see why you couldn't just make offerings to your father in his mortuary temple. Why did we have to trek all the way down here?'

'I need answers to some questions, Hapu, and in my father's temple, something is drowning out his voice. Give me the basket of offerings you brought, then stand by my side and hold the lamp high so I can see.' He handed me a small basket containing a round loaf of bread, a pot of beer and a vial of myrrh oil. I approached the centre of the chamber, treading carefully in the dark to avoid the small statues and shrines that surrounded the royal sarcophagus.

'What could possibly interfere with your father's presence in his own mortuary temple?'

I brushed off the dust and small chips of rock that had accumulated on the golden face of my father's sarcophagus. 'Something evil—powerfully evil.'

Hapuseneb tried mightily not to look alarmed, but the flickering light accentuated the worried shadows flitting across his face. 'You don't mean the Dark Lord, do you?'

I nodded gravely and whispered the fearsome name. ‘Seth.’

He peered into the surrounding darkness with superstitious dread. ‘But your father’s a god in his own right. How can Seth manage to invade your father’s temple?’

‘He follows me.’ I opened the myrrh oil and drizzled it over the golden death mask. ‘Hapu, I’m possessed by Seth.’

‘How can that be? Hatshepsut, you’re a Horus King—the god Horus lives within you. Seth can’t barge in and take you over!’

‘He didn’t barge in. I invited him.’

‘Why did you do that? That’s insane! Horus and Seth are implacable enemies.’

I turned to look at Hapuseneb’s terrified face. ‘I needed the power of the Dark Lord to win the war in Nubia. I couldn’t do it on my own—the power of Horus just wasn’t strong enough. I thought the Royal *Ka* was weak in me because I’m female. So I sought out Seth. My father invoked Seth every time he went into battle, and it never seemed to damage him.’ My voice faltered and I turned away. ‘I did terrible things in Nubia, Hapu, terrible things.’ I rubbed the myrrh over the mask’s serenely smiling lips and over its ears. ‘The Dark Lord seemed to take over my will, and I gloried in the slaughter. My father never acted like that. So I’m asking his help, to rid me of Seth.’

‘Seth still troubles you, even though the war is over?’

‘I relive every horror, any time I close my eyes and all night long.’

‘So that’s why you insisted we open your father’s burial chamber—it’s the only place Seth can’t get to you. Oh Hatch, I knew something had changed you, but I didn’t know what. Tell me how to help.’

‘Set the lamp on the sarcophagus and make sure no bugs crawl on me.’

I pressed my palms onto the lid of the sarcophagus and recited the offering prayer for the dead. Beneath the gilded wood, within the solid gold inner coffin and layers of fine linen bandages, my father’s body lay, immobile but not inert. It was the nexus where all his components—*ba*, *ka*, heart, shadow and name—united, to recreate the person who loved me and could protect me from the Lord of Chaos. I reached out to my father with my heart, and felt his presence, steady and distant as the stars. A torrent of words formed in my mind. *Father, I need your help. Horus has lived in me from the day you breathed the Royal Ka into my body. But when my ba departs, Seth enters me and attacks. If he destroys the Royal Ka, peace and justice will forever vanish from this earth. But I dare not banish Seth; without him, I cannot win the wars*

that are certain to come again. How did you harness the might of the Dark Lord without risking the destruction of Horus? Father, forgive me for my weakness!

I waited, straining for an answer faint as a feather's fall. When my father had chosen me as his heir, he believed that I would be able to cope with the demands of kingship. But no one knew what kingship would cost me. I ruled from a throne that I had never desired. I won a war that I had never wanted to fight. I had a husband that I could never tell anyone about.

'What was that?' Hapuseneb said, jerking his head towards the chamber door. 'Is Senenmut's curiosity getting the better of him?'

'Be still, Hapuseneb. I commanded Senenmut not to approach and he won't. Perhaps my father is about to give me a sign.'

An unearthly hiss came from above; clayey flecks of rock plinked onto the royal sarcophagus. Then an almighty crack snapped through the air like invisible lightning. Flat shards of shale rained from the ceiling. I ducked down, arms over my head. Hapuseneb threw himself over me. A piece of shale the size of a dinner plate hit the floor and flying chips cut my ankle.

Then it was quiet again.

Horrid dust filled my lungs. Hapuseneb slid off my back and sat in the rubble, coughing. 'You all right?' he choked out.

'I think so—just some little cuts. You?'

'I'll be fine. At least the lamp's still burning.' He offered me his hand and pulled me to my feet. 'I don't know if a rock fall was a sign or not, but I think it would be wise to continue your dialogue with your father somewhere else. Only a few rocks came loose that time, but it's too dangerous to stay down here any longer.'

'You're right, Hapu. I suppose we should go.'

We picked our way over the clinking, cracking debris to the entry. Hapuseneb pushed on the doors, but they wouldn't budge. As I held the lamp, he braced his shoulder against the wood and shoved. The hinge pins of one door leaf popped out of the rock and the wooden slab listed forward a hand-span. 'What is the matter with this thing?' he said, panic rising in his voice.

'Boost me up and I'll see what's jamming it,' I said. He laced his fingers together and hoisted me so I could hold up the lamp and peep through the crack between the door and the ceiling. In the turbid light, I saw huge slabs of rock, jumbled

and filling the tunnel all the way to the ceiling. ‘Mother of Night! The tunnel roof caved in.’

‘How bad is it? Can we crawl out?’ He lowered me to the ground.

I gazed at his face in the amber halo of light. ‘Hapu, we’re trapped.’

He worked furiously to control his expression. ‘But Senenmut will get help. He’ll get a crew to dig us out.’

‘What if he was crushed?’ I pushed down the scream that was building in my throat, a skill I learned on the battlefield.

‘There’s a whole crowd of workmen and priests at the mouth of the tomb passage. They’ll have heard the noise of the rock fall; they’ll see the dust drifting out.’ He hesitated. ‘Forgive me—I hope Lord Senenmut has not been injured. But you have. I felt blood on your ankle.’

‘It’s nothing.’

‘Let me tend it,’ he said, eager for something to distract himself. He fumbled in the dark and found a stout wooden chest, full of linens or perfumes or some other requisite of resurrection, and pulled it toward me. ‘Sit on this and shine the lamp on your wound.’

I sat on the dusty chest and stuck out my leg. ‘I told you. It’s nothing.’

He knelt at my feet. ‘I could wash off the dirt with the beer we brought. Or perhaps we should save the beer. It might be a while before we’re dug out, and we’ll need something to drink.’

‘We’ll suffocate long before we could die of thirst.’ I patted the lid of the chest. ‘Sit quietly; we should conserve the air.’

Hapuseneb sat down beside me with a resigned sigh. ‘Do you think we should put out the lamp? The flame consumes the life force in the air.’

‘No. I don’t want to be in the dark any sooner than necessary.’ I stared into the fulminating blackness around us. ‘Could this be my fault? I asked my father to protect me from Seth. Maybe sealing me in here was the only way to do it. But why would my father confine you as well?’

‘Perhaps he means us to be together at last.’ His hand stole over mine.

‘But if I die, young Tuthmosis will become the Horus King. I stipulated that you were to act as regent for him, until he comes of age. We can’t both die together! Egypt would be thrown into chaos while the nobles fight over the regency.’

‘I’m sure Lord Senenmut would take everything in hand,’ he said sardonically.

‘No. I’ve specifically forbidden him to act as regent—the other nobles would never accept him. His job is to safeguard my daughter. But what if he died in the rock fall?’ The flame trembled as a single teardrop disturbed the oil. ‘What would become of Neferure?’

‘Inet would mother her just like she mothered you. And Huy would take her into my family; she’d be well loved.’ He squeezed my hand. ‘None of that is going to happen. We’re going to be rescued, and everything will be fine.’

But confidence deserted us, as we sat quietly for what seemed like hours, listening for any faint sound of voices or digging. There were only the scritchings and rustlings of unseen creatures in the fissures of the rock. The flame retracted to an attenuated glow on the linen wick. My eardrums began to vibrate with the pounding of my heart.

Hapuseneb whispered, ‘I wonder how long we’ve been here. After sunset, your father will commence his nightly rebirth. That’s not an experience meant for the eyes of mortals. If we’re still alive by then, the sight of him rising will probably incinerate us.’

‘Maybe he’ll escort us before the Tribunal of Osiris,’ I yawned. Breathing was becoming more difficult.

‘Hatch, do you remember when I was just sixteen, and I told you I’d never love anyone but you?’

‘Of course I remember. We were best friends. We still are.’

‘I meant what I said back then.’ He slipped his arm around my shoulder. ‘I’m afraid we’re going to die down here. Do you think, just once, while the breath of life is still with us, I could know what it’s like to love you fully?’

My dulled thoughts struggled to break the surface. ‘Hapu, you’re a married man. You’re talking about adultery. Do you want to face the Tribunal of Osiris with a fresh sin on your heart?’

‘I believe Osiris will forgive me, because Huy always does. She doesn’t mind if I take some pleasure in the serving girls when she’s pregnant. And your heart wouldn’t be stained with sin—you’re single.’

I drew back from him. ‘It would be adultery for me, too, Hapu.’

‘Don’t be silly—Tut’s been dead nearly four years.’ There was a long pause. I could barely see him, but beads of sweat appeared on his forehead and reflected the failing light. He gasped, ‘You’re married! You married Senenmut!’ He jumped up clenching his fists. ‘How could you do such a thing? I knew you’d slept with him, but I thought that was a temporary lapse of judgement. How could you marry that low-born, arrogant jackass!’ I heard him pace two steps up, two steps back. ‘I vow on the Eye of Re, I hope he wasn’t crushed out there. I hope he’s digging till his fingers break to move those rocks. Because if I get pulled out of here alive, I swear I am going to strangle him!’

The linen wick shrivelled and went out. ‘Calm yourself and sit down, Lord Hapuseneb. You’re using up the air.’

