

HER MAJESTY THE KING

by

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Egypt, 1484 BCE

Chapter 1

If my brother had lived, I'd be marrying him today. The rituals celebrating my transition to womanhood were complete. My half-brother Wadjmose and I had been betrothed on the day I was born, and I had loved him in my innocent way. He was so like Father—intelligent and heroic. Wadjmose's likeness stood before me now, in burnished granite, a perfect masculine form. But he hadn't looked like that on the day he died. A fall from his chariot had broken his leg, and I remembered his body in spasm, skin the colour of bruised figs and a suppurating wound.

I held the spouted vase at arm's length and trickled water over the offerings. The artfully piled grapes and pomegranates shattered the stream into silvery needles that misted my linen dress. 'For the *ka* of the King's Son, Wadjmose, Great Army General, Commander of Charioteers, may he be given life like Re, forever.'

The ritual invoked my brother's *ka*, his life force, to his statue. When I needed to talk to him, I would visit this sober little mortuary temple, make him an offering and summon his *ka* from the underworld. When his *ka* was present, he could see through the eyes of the statue and hear through its ears. Perhaps it was just an illusion of the sunshine spearing through the skylight, but the statue seemed to quicken.

I smiled at him. 'Look how I've changed. I wear a woman's clothing now.' I fanned my long wig over my shoulders; the turquoise beads strung on the tresses clicked. 'No more sidelock and tunic like a child. The dress is tight, though, and I haven't learned to keep the straps centred over my breasts. Mother says I'll get used to it.' I lifted the broad gold and turquoise necklace draped over my collarbone. 'Mother gave this to me. She wore it when she came of age, just before she and Father were married.'

From the courtyard outside the small temple, Mother called, 'Hatshepsut, do hurry up. The sun is already growing hot.'

Although it was cool and shadowy inside the temple, I knew Mother wouldn't follow me in here. In the niche next to Wadjmose's figure stood a statue that my mother couldn't bear to look upon—Father's first wife, the Lady Mutnofret. She had given my father his sons, Wadjmose, Amenmose and Tuthmosis, though she had died giving birth to Tut. My mother had only produced daughters, and I was the sole survivor. But what really inflamed my mother's jealousy was Mutnofret's knack of making my father happy. Although my mother was the most beautiful woman in Egypt, and my father truly loved her, she still prickled whenever someone spoke of the late Mutnofret.

Plain, placid Mutnofret—Wadjmose remembered how much joy she had given Father. As he lay dying, Wadjmose had asked me to promise that I would devote myself to making Father happy. I was only six years old. The idea that I had any influence on the Pharaoh of Egypt had never occurred to me. The Pharaoh's happiness was an awesome burden to lay at anyone's feet. But I knew, even then, I wasn't like anyone else. I had looked into Wadjmose's fever-scorched eyes and given my promise. That was the moment that childhood had really ended for me.

I tossed a few grains of frankincense into a golden bowl; they sizzled on the coals. Fragrant filaments of smoke spiralled toward the statue. 'Dear Wadjmose, since you died, I've done my best to make Papa happy. And I'll keep trying, even though my own heart is always trampled on.' I scooped up more frankincense and sprinkled it over the coals. An emphatic puff of smoke floated upward. 'Before your body was even cold, I was betrothed to Amenmose. Everyone expected us to marry as soon as I came of age. But just a few months ago, he married some half-wit. As one of the Blessed Dead, you can see into people's hearts. Why didn't Amenmose wait for me?'

I paused for an answer. The silence ripened.

I threw on an entire handful of frankincense which crackled and hissed. 'It pleases Papa when I do well in school, so I've studied hard to be the top student. I learned to drive a chariot and hunt with a bow so Amenmose would be happy to share my company. And now I'm trying to satisfy Mother by acting like a perfect lady. I've done everything that was asked of me, so why do things turn out so badly? Why do the gods keep thwarting my expectations? Today I'm going to be stuck on board ship where I'll have to watch that simpleton fawning over Amenmose.'

Behind me, the hall of statues echoed with the flap of approaching sandals. I turned to face Lady Inet, my nurse. She compressed her double chin in an attempt to scowl, but the fine wrinkles in the corners of her eyes belied any real annoyance.

‘Princess Hatshepsut, we should go now,’ Inet said. ‘Queen Ahmose is growing impatient.’

‘I’m still praying.’

Inet looked at the pall of smoke trapped beneath the ceiling. ‘My dear, there are better ways of being pious than burning up a fortune in incense. And you shouldn’t pout. No one can see how much you resemble your mother when you pout.’

‘Oh, who cares? Anyway, I’m not pouting.’

‘Hatshepsut, I’ve taken care of you since the day you were born. I know when you’re pouting, and I know what you’re pouting about.’ She wagged a plump finger at me. ‘Your brother Amenmose had every right to marry. He’s eighteen years old and a man that age needs a wife. He has to start his own family. One day, Amenmose will follow your father on the throne. A Pharaoh must have sons.’

‘I’m royal. I’m his sister. It’s my place to bear his heir.’

‘Half-sister. And, all the gods willing, you will bear the next heir. But give Amenmose and Huy a little peace by themselves for now.’

‘But if the gods intend me to bear the next heir, why would they let Amenmose marry Huy before me?’

‘My dear, Amenmose is still a headstrong young man. Perhaps the gods are using Huy to smooth down some of his rough edges before he’s ready to marry you.’

I plucked a grape from the offerings and rolled it between my thumb and forefinger. ‘I’m not afraid to wear down those rough edges myself—if I could get that ninny out of the way.’ The grape split.

‘Hatshepsut, if you’re spiteful toward Huy, do you think Amenmose will be encouraged to marry you any sooner?’

I flicked the grape onto the floor. ‘All right. I’ll be as sweet as honey cake.’ I crossed my arms over my chest and bowed toward Wadjmose. We left the hall of statues and emerged into the biting sunlight of the temple courtyard.

Mother was sitting on a stone bench beneath the tangled shadows of a grape arbour. Her hands were folded like a pair of wings atop her pregnant belly. A line of sunlight hovered on the edge of her profile, outlining the delicate, pointed chin, full lips and subtly curved aristocratic nose. An almond-shaped eye was trained on me; she

stood up. ‘Hatshepsut, you know we mustn’t keep Pharaoh waiting. Look at that—the front of your dress has puckered.’ She poked my stomach with a tapered fingernail.

‘You got the linen wet, didn’t you? You must be careful with what you’re wearing.’

‘Yes, Mother.’ Her own linen was immaculate and uncreased.

‘Queen Ahmose,’ Inet said, ‘the bearers with the sedan chairs are ready.’

‘We’ll leave at once. Pharaoh will be very cross if we delay him.’

I followed my mother through the temple gateway. ‘It was my idea to visit Wadjmose’s temple while the ships were being loaded. I’ll tell Father any delay is my fault.’

Mother waved a slender hand dismissively. ‘Oh, that excuses everything.’

We climbed into the sedan chairs and were carried toward the two warships that were moored at the quay. The first in line was my father’s flagship, *Falcon*. Its gracefully upswept hull gave it an air of speed even when it was standing still. A golden falcon’s head, the insignia of the war god, Montu, crowned its high prow. In a little kiosk on the foredeck stood a golden sphinx trampling enemies—the battle standard of Pharaoh Ah-kheper-ka-re Tuthmosis. Behind the *Falcon* bobbed the *Rising in Memphis*. A huge cedar sarcophagus was being dragged up its gangplank by ranks of sweating soldiers. The *Rising in Memphis* rolled to port as it took the weight of the sarcophagus. Inside the sarcophagus would be two gilded coffins, nested one inside the other, holding the mummified remains of Admiral Ahmose si-Ibana.

My sedan chair lurched as my bearers climbed the gangplank of the *Falcon*. ‘I hope the admiral enjoys his last voyage aboard the *Rising in Memphis*,’ I called to my mother. ‘He won his most important victories aboard that ship.’

‘Your father would have put the *Rising in Memphis* inside the admiral’s tomb,’ Queen Ahmose answered, ‘if the chambers could have been enlarged enough.’

‘Mother, you’re exaggerating. The admiral was a great hero, but Papa needs all his warships. He’s sailing for Canaan soon.’

‘I don’t want to hear about it,’ she said, alighting from her sedan chair. ‘You know it upsets me when he goes off to war.’

I climbed out of my chair and nearly ran into my brother’s new wife. She flung herself onto the ship’s deck and spread her arms. ‘Queen Ahmose, Princess Hatshepsut, Lady Inet,’ she said to the cedar planks.

My mother reached out her hand. ‘Huy, dear, it’s not necessary to prostrate yourself in front of us. A little bow will do.’

Huy climbed to her feet and hastily centred the straps of her dress over her ample breasts. 'I'm sorry, my lady. I'll try to remember the correct protocol.'

'If she wants to prostrate herself, why not?' I said. Inet came up behind me and squeezed my elbow. Hard.

My brother Amenmose climbed down from the rigging. 'Father's on his way,' he announced. 'I just saw him leave the *Rising in Memphis*.' He brushed down the pleats of his linen kilt. 'Sweetheart, can you fetch my gold belt? The one with the big pendant in front.'

Huy nodded eagerly and trotted off to the aft deckhouse. I felt the tip of Inet's fly whisk prod me in the back. 'I didn't say anything,' I muttered.

My mother looked upwards and frowned. 'Amenmose, what is your brother doing up there?'

We all looked up the *Falcon's* mast. My other half-brother, Tuthmosis junior, was leaning out of the lookout's basket. Something sailed from his mouth, followed by cursing from the deckhands. 'Got one!' Tut crowed.

'Tut! Come down from there,' Amenmose bellowed. He shook his head. 'Sixteen years old and he acts like he's six.'

Tut clambered down the mast and thrust out his underslung jaw as he approached us. 'I wasn't hurting anybody.'

Queen Ahmose gave him a withering look. 'Do you have to behave like a baboon at every available opportunity? And straighten your wig. You look like a drunken sailor.'

Huy returned and wrapped Amenmose's belt around his hips. As she fastened the clasp, he grasped her tiny waist and whispered something to her. She smiled and blushed. I clenched my linen skirt in my fist.

The royal herald banged his staff on the gangplank. 'The King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Pharaoh Ah-kheper-ka-re Tuthmosis. Life, prosperity, health!' All the sailors and soldiers fell to their bellies as my father marched up the gangplank. My family bowed, but I peeped up.

Papa looked magnificent in his golden corselet. The wings of the falcon god, Horus, inlaid with precious stones, crossed over my father's broad chest in a protective embrace. He was crowned with the *khepresh*, a tall helmet of blue leather covered with gold rings that glinted in the morning sun. His aquiline nose and piercing black eyes

gave him the aura of a predatory bird. People said that he could slay an enemy with a single glance.

He saw me peeking at him.

He winked at me and smiled. ‘Up,’ the king commanded. ‘Make ready to cast off.’

The *Falcon*’s captain leapt to his feet and shouted orders at the crew. Towing gangs standing on the banks of the canal pulled the *Falcon* toward the Nile, away from the City of the Dead. The west bank of the Nile was the austere realm of tombs, mortuary temples and embalming workshops. As we neared the mouth of the canal, I shaded my eyes and looked across the light-webbed green water to Thebes, city of the living. The vibrantly coloured walls of its temples soared above the city’s lush gardens. Over the pylon gate of the great Karnak Temple sparkled two captive suns—the golden tips of a pair of obelisks. My father had erected these needles of stone to thank Amen-Re for victories in battle. Thebes was the capital of my father’s realm, the greatest city in the world, home to the greatest king and the greatest god.

Amenmose moved to Father’s side. ‘With that stiff northerly blowing, we could make Nekheb in two days.’

Father shook his head. ‘I’ll take three. That will give people on the riverbanks sufficient time to pay their respects to the Admiral.’

Mother’s lips pressed together. ‘So we’ll be on board the *Falcon* for two nights? It’s very cramped. The royal barge is much more comfortable.’

‘Now my dear, if anyone ever deserved a royal military escort, it’s Ahmose si-Ibana,’ Father said. ‘You and I will be very cosy in the fore deckhouse.’ He squeezed Mother’s slim shoulder.

She edged away from him. ‘But where will I put all my servants?’

‘They can sleep on the roof of the aft deckhouse. And now, ladies, you’ll have to move out of the way. Manoeuvring the ship into the river’s current is a little tricky.’ Mother crossed her arms and stalked towards the stern. I decided it was prudent to head for the bow. Huy glanced at Mother, then followed me.

The oarsmen stood with their feet braced against their deck blocks and took up the long, narrow-bladed oars. The *Falcon* glided from the canal mouth and pitched as it hit the river’s muscular current. One tip of the sail’s long boom dipped into the water. ‘Hard a-port,’ the coxswain shouted. The port rowers strained against their oars, fighting to swing the ship’s nose into the swift current. Until the *Falcon* was pointing

upstream, we couldn't raise the sail or we'd be blown back against the granite breakwater.

The helmsman heaved on the tiller that swung the huge steering oar. The ship nudged its nose into the current; foam splashed over the prow. I looked back in the direction of the canal; the *Rising in Memphis* was already emerging, before we had completed our turn. The river swept them toward us at frightening speed. Too late, her captain saw the hazard and their oarsmen felt the bite of the lash as they struggled to bring their ship under control.

The *Falcon's* coxswain yelled, 'Double time!' as he cracked his whip in the air. Our oarsmen grunted with effort, but the *Rising in Memphis* sped towards us, floundering diagonally across the flow. Father dashed to the stern of the *Falcon*. He took the tiller from the helmsman, braced his shoulder against it and thrust with all his might. Father was not a tall man, but he was brawny as a bull; the wood of the stanchion groaned as the steering oar yielded to his strength. Ponderously, the *Falcon* completed its rotation.

The captain of the *Falcon* stood in the bow with his eyes glued to the current. 'Hoist sail,' he commanded the instant the ship had its heading. Deckhands hauled on the ropes that lifted the top yard up the mast. The brilliant crimson sail bellied and snapped in the wind. Near-naked sailors, nimble as monkeys, scrambled onto the boom to adjust the sail's trim. The *Falcon's* bow bit into the Nile, raising twin freshets of spray as we surged upstream. The *Rising in Memphis* was still sliding toward us, but a gust of wind gave us an extra burst of speed. Their prow missed our sternpost by less than an arm's length.

Huy fluttered her hand against her throat. 'My, that was exciting! I've never been on a warship. When King Tuthmosis took the steering oar and saved us—oh, I'm just lost for words.'

That didn't surprise me.

Huy spread her arms. 'This must be what flying feels like.' She closed her eyes and inhaled deeply, but then her brow creased. 'What is that smell?' She looked around, nonplussed. 'Can you smell that, Princess?'

'I should have warned you,' I said. 'Sometimes it still smells up here.'

'Still? What smells?'

'I'll show you. Follow me.'

I led her past the kiosk and sphinx, right into the *Falcon's* prow. 'There,' I said, pointing. Dangling beneath Montu's golden head was a length of frayed rope, and knotted to the end were the remains of a human leg.

Huy recoiled. 'Ugh! It's awful.'

'That's my father's favourite trophy. It's all that's left of the King of Kush. When he rebelled against us, Father slaughtered his people and burnt his capital, Kerma, to the ground. The valley was knee-deep in guts.'

Huy turned pale and grasped the ship's rail.

'At the beginning of the battle, the Kushite King marched out in front of his army to taunt our troops. What a fool. With his first arrow, Father skewered him right through his chest.' I made a squishing noise. 'Then after our army had hacked the Kushites to pieces, Father hung the Kushite King upside down from the prow of the *Falcon* and sailed back to Thebes. The body was left there to rot, and no one was permitted to mention the rebel's name again.'

Huy swallowed hard. 'So he'll have no afterlife.'

'Serves him right. His other leg was still there until a few months ago, but Tut used them for target practice and knocked one down.'

'I imagine that made Pharaoh very angry.'

'At first, he was furious. But he was so surprised that Tut managed to hit anything with a bow and arrow that he forgave him.'

'Pharaoh seems like such a kind, wise man. I have a hard time imagining him slaughtering so many people, even if they were rebels.'

'You'd better exercise your imagination, then. One day, it will be Amenmose doing those things.'

Huy looked crestfallen; without her smile, she was really rather plain. 'So much is expected of a king,' she said. 'A wife is supposed to help her husband, but how could someone like me ever help Amenmose accomplish deeds equal to his father's?'

I couldn't help feeling sorry for her. She was a genial, compliant girl totally out of her depth. 'Don't worry, Huy. The King is not like everyone else. Inside him, he carries the Royal *Ka*—the life force of the god Horus himself. Horus gave it to the kings of Egypt to make them living gods, mightier than the kings of all other lands. And one day, when my father dies, he'll pass the Royal *Ka* to Amenmose. Then he'll have the power to be a great Pharaoh, just like Father.'

‘I’m so glad I have you to explain things to me, Princess. I didn’t grow up amongst royalty. I hope you don’t find my ignorance annoying.’

‘No,’ I sighed. Huy might be a ninny, but at least she wasn’t a bitch.

The *Falcon* and the *Rising in Memphis* were joined by the boats of court officials for the journey south to Nekheb. People came out from their villages to weep and wail as the fleet passed. The Admiral’s sarcophagus was displayed on the deck of his ship, heaped with blue lotus blossoms and shaded by a palm-frond canopy. He was the only one enjoying any peace and quiet. Aboard the *Falcon*, it was hard to move without tripping over somebody.

The morning of the second day, the wind dropped and the ships had to be rowed against the current. Hour after hour, the Nile Valley slipped by, gradually narrowing. The limestone cliffs characteristic of Thebes gave way to hard desert sandstone that radiated heat like an oven. I climbed the stairs to the roof of the aft deckhouse and sat in the shade of the awning, watching the sequins of light dancing on the water.

Amenmose joined me. He carried a small lute, made from the shell of a tortoise. ‘How about a song? It would make this trip less boring.’

‘I don’t feel like singing.’

Amenmose set the lute down and sat next to me. ‘Why don’t you just tell me what’s bothering you? You know I can’t guess people’s thoughts like you can.’

My brother was exasperating. He could command a squadron of chariots and plan an infantry assault without effort, yet he couldn’t understand why I might be upset. With him, I had to be direct. ‘It makes me unhappy to see you with Huy.’

He looked puzzled. ‘But she’s my wife.’

‘That’s the point. I should be your wife.’

‘You’re only fourteen.’

‘I’m a grown woman now.’

Amenmose pulled off his short wig and rubbed his hand over his stubbled scalp. ‘Father warned me this would happen,’ he sighed.

‘Then you should have listened to him.’

‘I did. He said it was inevitable.’ His mouth tightened. ‘Hatch, I think we should wait until I become king before we get married.’

‘Why?’ I demanded.

‘Because you’re my half-sister.’ He closed his eyes and leaned back against the awning pole. ‘All your life, you’ve known that you’d marry one of your brothers. But when I was growing up, Father was still a general in King Amenhotep’s army. I wasn’t raised with the idea of marrying my own sister. When I become king, it’ll be different. It’s what the gods require of us. But until then...’ His voice trailed off.

‘So the idea of marrying me disgusts you?’

‘No! You know I think you’re gorgeous.’ He leaned forward and took my hand. ‘Hatch, I love you as my little sister. When you’re my Great Royal Wife, I’ll always treat you with respect and consideration. But I have to be honest with you—I’m never going to feel about you the way that I feel about Huy.’

I shook off his hand. ‘And what am I supposed to do in the meantime? Entertain the harem you’ll accumulate?’ I shoved the lute with my foot. It rolled away with a discordant twang.

‘We’ll have fun the way we always do. We’ll go fishing together. We’ll go hunting in chariots. Huy doesn’t like those sorts of things.’

He patted me on the head like a dog. I always hated that, and he never noticed. I lay down on a cushion and folded my arms over my face.

‘You know, Hatch, once we’re married, you’ll be pregnant most of the time. You won’t be tearing around driving your own chariot. Don’t be in such a hurry to grow up. Have your fun now, before you become the Great Royal Wife.’ He rocked the edge of my cushion with his foot. ‘I hear there’s going to be some fine horses at Nekheb.’

‘Who told you that?’

‘Father. The scribe who’s in charge of protocol for the admiral’s funeral has brought some of his own horses with him.’

‘What’s a protocol scribe doing owning his own horses?’

‘He’s an army scribe Father used as a scout the last time we were fighting in Gaza. He rode a tall chestnut mare that was the fastest horse I’ve ever seen. Father asked him about the horse. Turns out he got it from a desert nomad—one of the *Shasu*. He said the *Shasu* had been breeding horses that could survive in the wastelands their tribes inhabit. Father told him to try and get more *Shasu* horses. Guess he succeeded.’

I leaned up on my elbows. ‘And you think there’s a chance we could drive these *Shasu* horses?’

‘Don’t see why not. We could charge around in the desert. Maybe have some races.’

‘Hmm,’ I said, tapping two beaded strands of my wig together. ‘I suppose that would be fun.’ Especially since Huy wouldn’t want to join us.

I was on deck early the morning we approached Nekheb. I wanted to see which ships had arrived before the funeral fleet. I was hoping my friends Neshi and Hapuseneb would already be there. At the end of the last school term, I’d been whisked into seclusion for the ceremonies of womanhood, while Neshi and Hapuseneb had graduated and taken up their first appointments in the royal administration. We had a lot of catching up to do.

The thick whitewashed ramparts of Nekheb came into view as the *Falcon* rounded a bend. The boats moored at the quay were bathed in rosy dawn light. One large ship stood out like a butterfly amongst moths—the *Silver Sun*. Its high prow, shaped like a papyrus umbel, was sheathed in electrum, a silvery metal more precious than gold, and topped with an electrum ram’s head, symbol of the Great God, Amen-Re. The fabulous vessel belonged to my mother’s older sister, Ahmose-Meritamen. She was the God’s Wife of Amen, the immensely powerful priestess who was the god’s earthly spouse. The gold and ebony-trimmed ship of the Vizier Imhotep was dwarfed next to the *Silver Sun*. Hapuseneb was the vizier’s grandson, so there was a good chance he was already in Nekheb. The knot inside my chest loosened a little. Hapuseneb was my best friend; he was always good at soothing my jangled emotions.

I overheard a muttered curse. Father was on the foredeck, fiddling with the gold plait that hung from the back of his *nemes* headdress.

‘Need help, Papa?’ I asked, joining him.

His eyes crinkled as he saw me. ‘I’m afraid I dressed in a hurry this morning. The queen and her maids have taken over the deckhouse while she gets ready.’

My fingers creased the pleats of the blue and gold headcloth so the stripes matched on either side of Father’s face. ‘It’s not a good idea to get in her way when she’s dressing.’ I straightened the lappets of the headdress that rested on his collarbone. ‘Is Mother unwell?’

‘She’s always a little uneasy near the end of a pregnancy. Let’s hope the gods will be kind this time.’ He felt the golden cobra and vulture *uraeus* on his headband to

make sure they were centred. ‘She’s very brave to try again and again. I don’t know what I’d do if I lost her.’

‘Papa, you’re the most powerful man in the world.’

‘Ah, little one, your faith is touching.’ He put his arm around my shoulder. ‘But even I need people to help me. Your mother comes from a line of kings going back to Ahmose the Liberator. She knows everything there is to know about royalty. When I first came to the throne, I may have known my way around a battlefield, but I didn’t know the first thing about court protocol. Your mother made sure I never set a foot wrong. I have great respect for her judgement.’ He wanted to say more, but the words died on his lips. Instead he stared off at the cliffs behind Nekheb.

I watched as the sun buttered the tips of the rocky crags. ‘I wish I could be as elegant and refined as Mother.’

‘You have her lovely face—that’s a start.’

‘Look at all those birds up there, Papa.’ Tiny soaring specks were circling over the cliffs.

The king studied the sky. ‘Vultures. The sacred vultures of Nekhbet, the patron goddess of Nekheb. And one of my royal protectors,’ he said, tapping the golden vulture on his headband. ‘The goddess is sending us a good omen—perhaps a son is on the way this time. I’ll tell your mother. That will cheer her up.’ The goddess Nekhbet had saved him from breaching whatever subject was troubling him.

He left me to watch the vultures sailing the air currents. It was odd to see them so early. The wisps of air they rode usually didn’t rise till later. My eye caught a flicker of movement from atop an isolated tower of rock. Someone was crawling around up there.

Inet interrupted my observations. ‘There you are. You haven’t got your make-up on yet.’ She led me back to the deckhouse to paint my lips and line my eyes with black kohl. She fussed with my long wig and cobra diadem until we heard the noises that meant the *Falcon* was tying up at the quay of Nekheb. ‘Come now, child. And remember...’

‘Smile and wave. I know, I know.’

We assembled on deck with the other members of my family. My mother stood, tall and regal, in a little pool of sunshine. Her diaphanous linen gown contrasted with the heavy jewelled collar and bracelets that threw flakes of golden light as she moved. Her eyes were shaded with green and outlined with kohl that had little sparkles in it. She

wore the headdress of the Great Royal Wife, a beaten gold vulture with wings that embraced the sides of her head. And although it was already getting hot and she was heavily pregnant, there was not a drop of sweat on her. My mother never perspired.

A crowd of people thronged the quayside. As the gangplank was dropped, Father's herald banged his staff and shouted, 'Pharaoh Ah-kheper-ka-re Tuthmosis, King of Upper and Lower Egypt. Kiss the earth!' As one, the people prostrated themselves. All those bodies hitting the ground simultaneously made an explosive whoosh.

The sound broke over me like a wildfire. I felt suddenly giddy; flames seemed to writhe in my limbs. All the shadows that had been plaguing my mind were incinerated as a vision of terrifying clarity put its hands on me: my expectations were never fulfilled because my expectations were wrong. The gods had marked out a path for me that I could never have anticipated. Now a divine force was crowding me toward some upheaval that would come in this dusty provincial town. I staggered.

Inet steadied my shoulders from behind. 'That's what you get for neglecting your breakfast,' she whispered. 'If you feel unwell, you can stay on the ship and skip the procession.'

If I stayed back, perhaps I could escape this uncertain fate. 'Just give me a moment,' I mumbled. I tried to shake off the harrowing premonition as Father commanded the crowd to rise. He strode down the gangplank to the acclaim of his subjects. After allowing for the distance dictated by protocol, my mother followed. 'Great Royal Wife, Lady of the Two Lands, Queen Ahmose,' the herald announced. Oohs and aahs rose from the crowd—she always provoked that reaction. Amenmose, Huy and Tut followed as their titles were announced.

Then it was my turn. I had always chosen, of my own free will, to do what was asked of me. If the gods were summoning me to my destiny, I would accept the challenge. I set my foot upon the gangplank. With every step, I felt a predictable future crumbling into a charred heap behind me.

Waiting for us were three ornate parade chariots wreathed with purple morning glories and scarlet poppies. The horses harnessed to the chariots held me spellbound. They were all a deep auburn colour; their coats had been polished with oil that made them shine like new copper. They had large, intelligent eyes and tapered muzzles, and their tails arched like elegant fountains. I had never seen such beautiful animals. I turned, open-mouthed, toward Amenmose. He gave me a thumbs-up and grinned.

Father and Mother climbed into the lead chariot, Amenmose and Huy into the second. Inet, Tut and I were in the third. We were joined by a groom who bowed politely and took up the reins. ‘That won’t be necessary,’ I said. ‘I can drive a chariot.’

‘Yes, my lady,’ the groom replied, bowing again, ‘but I’ve been ordered to drive this team. I beg your pardon, but the owner of the horses is very particular about such things.’ He gestured towards a man who had his back to me. He was chatting with Father and adjusting the harness of the lead chariot.

He was long-legged and lean; a crisp linen kilt sat at a slight angle on narrow hips. The taut muscles of his back could have been chiselled by a sculptor. His arms were bound with four gold bands, each signifying a position he held. If this was the army scout Amenmose had mentioned, he must have recently gained several promotions.

The man turned and caught me staring at him. He locked my gaze with dark, incendiary eyes. My cheeks flared like the sunrise. With a shadow of amusement on his lips, he faced back to Father and bowed. As he walked away from Father’s chariot, he glanced my way with a bold, inquisitive smile.

My heart re-started with a thump. ‘Who is that?’ I asked the groom.

‘That is Senenmut, my lady. The owner of the horses.’

In the lead chariot, my mother turned and narrowed her eyes at me. ‘I saw that,’ she mouthed.

