

NEFERURA

THE PHARAOH'S DAUGHTER

MALAYNA EVANS

ONE



IN THE END, EVERYONE'S HEART WILL BE WEIGHED.

Some will be heavier than the Feather of Truth. Those hearts will be crushed by the sharp teeth of the goddess Ammit, the Devourer. For the poor souls whose lives have rendered their hearts heavy, death is a sad ending. But for those whose hearts are light enough to balance the scales, death is a beginning, a door to a new, eternal life—a life free of unruly bodies and controlling mothers and cruel boys who think they're men.

Fortunately, as the god's wife of Amun, I'm rich in opportunities to serve my people and lighten my heart, especially on sacred festival days like today.

"Gut in, Neferura," Mother jeers, although I'm not sure why—the tight shift dress I wear already squeezes my stomach in as far as it goes. Plus, she's standing in front of me, as usual. She can't possibly see me with that towering crown balanced on her head.

I swallow the angry retort that stings my tongue and shift my shoulders back, looking out at the crowd of raucous revelers that fill the streets of Waset, waiting for the procession to begin. Amun,

the god I serve, faces me and the high priest as we stand side by side behind Pharaoh, my mother. The god's golden statue is hidden inside a shrine that rests atop his ship-shaped float, which is covered in gold foil and encrusted with gemstones. Golden ram figureheads are fixed on the prow and stern. Behind Amun, his wife, Mut, and son, Khonsu, wait, hidden inside their own lavish shrines.

The crowd stretches behind them as far as I can see. The divine triad will soon be carried by priests in parade, cheered on by the crowd and musicians and acrobats. They'll cross the river to visit the mortuary temples of the ancestors. Their ultimate destination is Djoser-Djeseru, Mother's Temple of Millions of Years.

To prepare Amun for such a public spectacle, I spent my morning bathing the golden statue in precious aromatics and dressing him in the finest linens and most extravagant jewels. All the while, the people were enjoying bread and beer as dancers and musicians entertained them.

It's been a long day already.

Finally, the priests lift the gods onto their shoulders on long cedar poles and the parade begins. The musicians redouble their efforts. A cacophony of trumpets weaves around the chanting of priestesses who work for my estate, their bodies cloaked in white linen robes, lotus flowers tucked into braids and belts, their chins held high. The air is heavy with scents—a heady mix of cooked meat, perspiration, and blossoms. Amun, Mut, and Khonsu will be doused in a rainbow of colorful flowers as they move through the city. The ankh-shaped bouquets, fashioned by hand and thrown by the people, will soak up the gods' spirit before being gathered back up and placed in tombs and at grave sites in private family celebrations later tonight.

"It took them long enough to get moving." Mother turns to me as the parade shifts away, wiping her face with a linen cloth. Imagine

the scandal if someone spotted Pharaoh with a dewy brow. “I do hope you’re prepared to service the god again tonight, Neferura?”

“Of course, I am, Mother.”

As a woman, Mother is a rarity among pharaohs. And I’m no typical princess. My mother, the great Hatshepsut, has no queen. So it falls to me as the king’s eldest daughter, lady of Upper and Lower Kemet, and mistress of the Two Lands to perform the queenly duties, which include serving as Kemet’s most powerful priestess, a role I’ve managed since I was a young girl. At first, I didn’t believe I could succeed as the god’s wife of Amun. But over time, I’ve earned the trust of the priesthood and expanded the wealth and influence of the House of the Adoratrice beyond even the lofty heights it reached during Mother’s tenure, before Father passed and she climbed onto the throne. Mother has no reason to doubt my abilities or my dedication. It’s not as if this is my first festival.

“We’re in for a night of revelry.” Senenmut strides up wearing a friendly smile. A handsome man with long legs and a lean build, Senenmut is my royal tutor and Mother’s steward, treasurer, and lover. I’m not supposed to know that last bit, but their love affair is the worst-kept secret in a court full to bursting with poorly kept secrets. “Kemet will be teeming with new babies by the time we celebrate again next year.”

“Let’s hope the lands are as fertile.” Dimples slice through the priest’s chubby cheeks as his eyes follow a remarkably nimble acrobat, her bare body flipping so fast it makes me dizzy to watch.

“They will be,” Mother intones.

If she says so, it must be true. Mother takes good care of the gods, so they take good care of Kemet. She’s worked to ensure festivals like today’s are more opulent than ever so the land will be bountiful when the river rises again.

“We have some time until we meet the gods at Djoser-Djeseru,” Senenmut tells Mother. “The royal pleasure barge is prepared to serve us while we cross back to the west bank.”

Mother nods, just enough to agree to Senenmut’s agenda without tilting the two large plumes rising from her gold diadem, one of several headdresses she’ll don throughout the day.

The four of us walk toward the sacred parts of the temple, reserved for the priesthood, to let the crowd disperse before we venture to the barge. Senenmut and the high priest are both gifted at meaningless chitchat. I’m barely listening to the priest babble about the tomb he’s building when Mother’s old handmaid breaks protocol, rushing up to slip a scroll into Mother’s hands, then dash off again.

Mother scowls as she rolls it open, reading it with pursed lips. She curses under her breath, then crushes the papyrus in her fist. “Thutmose is coming to Waset.” Her tone is icy.

A chill runs down my spine. My half brother has rarely visited the primary palace since Mother tossed him from court as a child.

“Is he?” The high priest is blissfully unaware of the enmity that brews in my family. “What a shame Thutmose wasn’t able to make it for today’s festival. Imagine both pharaohs together before the gods.”

“Yes.” Mother is droll. “Imagine.”

I clasp my hands behind my back, trying to mask the tingle of trepidation that flows from my head to my toes. Although we were once close, Thutmose decided years ago that he’d rather be enemies than friends. Our early childhood comradeship, playing in the kitchens and running the grounds, turned hostile and cold. Now he hates me, which is one reason Mother keeps her co-pharaoh—in name only, bless Amun—busy training with the army and hobnobbing with low-level foreign bureaucrats in Men-nefer so he’s isolated, both from the court and Kemet’s true political power: the rich priesthood

I serve. After all, Thutmose is not Mother's son. He's the heir of my father, dead more than a decade. And now, apparently, my perpetually aggrieved half brother is ready to come home.

"It will be good to have him back," Senenmut lies while, with the diplomatic skills that led my tutor from the lower rungs of society to the top, he puts a hand on the priest's shoulder and steers him away from me and Mother with talk of wine from the islands of the great green sea awaiting us on the barge. My tutor is giving me time to gather myself and act the proper god's wife. I suspect he's worried Mother will break out her crook and flail and beat me if I don't calm my breathing and settle the jitters running through my limbs.

I'm managing well enough until the priest, who's toddled a few steps away, rubbing his bald head, turns back to me and says, "Don't worry too much about him, Adoratrice. You are an excellent god's wife. The priesthood will stand up for you. We won't back down."

The tingles swell. The priest returns his attention to Senenmut, and I turn to Mother. "Back down from what?"

In lieu of an answer, Mother glares at me. Her flinty eyes are ringed flawlessly in kohl, a nod to her vanity and a failed effort to pull attention away from her double chin and crooked nose—a nose I have the misfortune to share.

"What is the priest talking about, Mother?" I push forward, testing my luck. "Is Thutmose up to something?"

"That boy is always up to something, Neferura. You know how desperate he is to pull power away from us, your estate above all. If it were up to Thutmose, the military would feast while the House of the Adoratrice—and the people—starve."

She's right, of course. It's no surprise that Thutmose wants to diminish my power—he detests me, and he blames the position I

hold for Mother's rise to the throne. For good reason. She was able to take and hold power in large part because of the riches and loyalty she earned as god's wife, a loyalty I have only nourished.

I curl my hands into fists and breathe, reminding myself that the heart pulsing inside my body will one day determine my fate, its blood and tissue made light—or heavy—by my lifetime of decisions. I squeeze my eyes shut and see an image of the Devourer examining my heart, blood dripping from her razor-sharp teeth. Thutmose stands before the goddess, pressing his fat thumb on the scale, forcing the pan to dip. Ammit, realizing my heart now outweighs the feather, snaps her sharp teeth, and my eyes fly open.

Mother lifts a haughty brow as if she's seen my vision and judged it unseemly. Perhaps she has. She is the embodiment of the god on earth after all.

"What aren't you telling me?" I try again.

"There are many things I don't tell you, Neferura. And still, miraculously, you seem to know all you need to know." She turns away, beckoning for Senenmut and putting an end to another futile conversation. As my tutor and the priest wander back toward us, she shares a final piece of advice. "Do tread carefully around Thutmose, daughter. He is reckless. And reckless men are never to be trusted."

I feel the frustration grow in my chest, the potent irritation at missing information and unsolved riddles, and I turn to Senenmut. His eyes are warm with concern as he lifts a hand to his ear and tugs once—one of our secret signals. We concocted them when I was a child: tapping your forehead three times means someone is lying; tugging both ears means you know something about the topic at hand you'll explain later, in private; scratching your head with your left hand means you think the person speaking is a fool. The ear tug

is unique. It doesn't translate easily into words. It's more of a feeling, a kind of pep talk. It means something like *We can do this. Let's make it work.*

But I'm not a child anymore. Small gestures won't satiate me. And news that Thutmose is on his way certainly can't be quashed by an ear tug.

Mother, Senenmut, and the high priest jabber about some small skirmish between two venerated priests at the temple of Ptah in Men-nefer as my head spins, worrying over what Thutmose could be up to. My half brother's plans may be opaque, but they're also imminent. He's probably sailing toward Waset now as we chant hymns and pour wine and cater to the needs of the gods, as the people gather flowers and drink beer and visit the tombs of their ancestors, begging the dead to give them wisdom or revenge, money or fertility.

The thought reminds me how important the work we do today is. The regeneration of the land depends on me, especially on festival days. If I fail the god, creation could collapse, the sun could vanish, the river could run dry. Plants and animals could wither and disappear, leaving nothing for the people to eat. I can't waste time worrying about Thutmose now.

I take a final deep breath and banish him from my mind. Thoughts of my rogue half brother won't hijack the day. Closing my eyes, I utter a quick prayer.

Mighty god, I am your servant. Forgive my mind for wandering.

Amun, sacred of arm, regenerate the land we love, show the people Mother's rule is right and blessed, and let the crops be bounteous.

Also, powerful Amun-Ra, bull of your mother, if it pleases you, let Thutmose choke on a chicken bone and drop dead before he gets here and disrupts the good work we do together.



The clickety-clack of Iset's sandals slapping against the stone floor grows faster and closer at my back like my handmaid is rushing to catch up before I pass through my quarters' doors and leave her behind. As if I could. With few exceptions, Iset is glued to me like tar to a ship's hull.

Kamut's presence, on the other hand, is less predictable. I suck in my gut and lift my head higher when I see him standing guard at my door. He doesn't notice me—not in the way I wish he would—but I see him. Only a year older than me, he's the youngest of my guards. And he's handsome—tall and broad, eyes deep and dark when they flicker my way. Even the scar that crosses his cheek from the corner of his left eyebrow to the bottom of his left ear is interesting. That doesn't stop me from squirming every time I see it. The scar is my fault after all.

He drops his eyes as I approach: eye contact between a princess and her guard is forbidden. He and my pretty handmaid, on the other hand, are free to gaze into each other's eyes all they like. I imagine Kamut and Iset smiling at each other behind my back. I'm so certain they're mocking me, I almost whirl around to confront them. But of course I don't. Mother says lashing out is a sign of weak character.

The door shuts behind me as Kamut's staff bangs against the floor: twice fast, once slow. It's another of the signals Senenmut and I invented years ago. This one means my tutor is in my study, waiting for me. Finally, my questions will be answered. If I'm lucky, the god heard my prayers and Senenmut is about to announce that Thutmose was gored by a crocodile, or drowned in the river, or got stung by a particularly vicious scorpion on his way here.

I move faster, rushing past my receiving room, weaving around

cedar chairs and golden stools, through my bedroom, where I set busies herself with my wardrobe, and into the small study I've set up in the back of my quarters. It used to be a dressing room. Now it's stuffed, floor to ceiling, with scrolls. Like my bedroom, the study is open to my pool and deck with its picturesque view. The blue of my small pool, surrounded by palm trees and drenched in lotus blossoms, contrasts with the calm, green waters of Iteru, the river that gives Kemet life, floating past two stories down. My desk is situated so that the breezes keep me cool as I review ledgers and copy the words of our wise men, dipping my brush into water, then wetting the ink cake—red or black—before painting onto papyrus.

"You're late." My tutor is perched in his favorite high-backed chair that sits facing my desk, one leg propped on the other so his ankle rests on his knee. He wears his favorite wig, falling in wavy black curls to his shoulders, and a sheer top with intricately pleated sleeves that match his skirt. A broad gold collar, inlaid with a carnelian scarab beetle, girdles his neck.

"You've been avoiding me," I retort, sinking onto the stool by his feet, still cross that he turned away from me after yesterday's parade to disappear into the revelry.

His smile is sly. "Never."

"You have been. And you know it. You knew I wanted to speak with you, so you dashed off. I tried to talk to you again last night, but you were stuck to Mother like sand to the desert. I'm surprised you didn't cancel today's session."

"You would have tracked me down," he deadpans.

"Yes," I agree. "I would have. I hope this means you're ready to tell me what Thutmose is up to."

Senenmut's sparkle dims. He lifts his slim shoulders. "The same as ever. Chaos and spectacle."

I think of Thutmose's usual antics—poking foreign bureaucrats to create drama Mother must manage or siphoning resources from the temple of Ptah to reward his band of petty followers—and I shake my head. “I don't think so. His spectacle usually occurs far from court. He's coming here without even being summoned. Mother was surprised he's on his way. That's new. She seemed more bothered by news of him than usual. And she refused to tell me what the priest meant when he said they'd stand by me. Why would I need that?”

Senenmut folds his arms. “It can hardly come as a surprise that Thutmose is interested in your position. He's always working against you, even when he's doing nothing at all. There's nothing new about that. But he's no match for you and the god. You know you're going to serve Amun faithfully, running off to temple at dawn each morning, no matter what Thutmose does. Remember when you were ill? The doctor ordered you to sleep in and you simply ignored him.”

“The doctor is no pharaoh.”

Senenmut's smile turns snide. It says what he'd never say aloud. Thutmose isn't much of a pharaoh either. In theory, the throne belongs to Thutmose as much as it belongs to Mother. In reality, Mother rules every cubit of the Two Lands, every peasant and patrician. Even the gods no longer outrank her: she's declared herself their equal, the living conduit through which Amun speaks. Thutmose is a mere soldier in comparison.

“Stop avoiding the question,” I snap. “You can't distract me with compliments anymore. You know the specifics around Thutmose's visit. Is there a reason you think I don't deserve to know as well?”

Senenmut sags, reaching out to cup my cheek in his palm. Although touching a royal is punishable by death for most people, the rule does not apply to Mother's paramour. “You are correct, as usual, dear one. But it's nothing really. We've just heard word that

Thutmose has been making the rounds. He's visiting nobles. He's whispering in their ears. We believe he's attempting to poison them against your influence. He tells them the god's wife estate has too many priestesses, that the House of the Adoratrice has too much power, that you spend too much—"

"Feeding the people," I interrupt, bitterness rising in my throat.

"Correct. But since when has Thutmose cared about the people?"

I stand to pace, fingers digging into my palms. "Is Mother planning to stop him? Or is she going to let him damage the estate she once managed?"

"I'm sure she has a plan—"

I pivot. "What plan?"

"She is the omnipotent one, dear one. Not me. We both know my abilities to predict her are"—he pauses—"limited."

I scoff. Senenmut is Mother's one true love. She didn't love my father, who was, by all honest accounts, a weak man with a fragile hold on power. The court pretends Father was a mighty pharaoh just like they pretend not to notice that Senenmut and Mother are lovers.

Still, it's clear Senenmut doesn't know what Mother intends, so I try a different approach. "Are the nobles swayed by his arguments?"

Senenmut taps long fingers against his bony knees. "A few agree that the resources you wield are excessive. But most see only the good you do. It doesn't hurt that you've managed to promote women from virtually every noble family in Kemet. You've earned loyalty from Swenett to Per-Wadjet. I don't believe the nobles will side with Thutmose over you and your mother, and the priesthood is fiercely loyal to you both."

"And the military?"

Senenmut pauses, weighing his words. "The military respects Thutmose. But they also respect your mother. They won't take sides,

not now anyway.” He crosses his arms. “Thutmose can’t hurt you, dear one.”

“Yet.” I twirl and march back across the small room, only to spin and pace my steps again. “But it’s only a matter of time until Mother has to give Thutmose some real power. He’s not a child anymore. And we both know he’ll use whatever influence he gathers against me.”

“He may try.” Senenmut’s head swivels back and forth, tracking my march. “And you are right—your mother does have some difficult decisions to make. Her current strategy—treating Thutmose like the spoiled little boy he once was—is unsustainable. I suspect that’s why news of Thutmose feels more salient now.” He sighs. “You may not see it, but your mother’s hardships—”

“Hardships?” I interrupt.

His eyebrows inch up. “You can’t believe it was easy for her to capture the throne. Hatshepsut faced more battles than you can imagine. The pressure to be perfect pushes her forward still. Unlike the pharaohs before her, your mother has no room for mistakes. You can’t imagine what she’s been through, from the vitriol she faced as a young woman to a painful marriage—”

“Why doesn’t she tell me this herself?” I slow my steps, curious.

Senenmut’s eyes soften, his voice turning tender. “Because she can’t afford to show weakness. It’s entirely possible she’s forgotten how.”

“Talking to her daughter is weakness?”

He shrugs. “She protects you in her own way. If it weren’t for the trials she survived when she was your age, I suspect she’d have followed the family tradition and married you off to your half brother years ago.”

The thought stops me in my tracks. I lean against my desk, steadying myself. “What a terrible custom.”

It's true, although the gods themselves invented it, of course. Every pharaoh is the embodiment of the god Horus, son of brother-sister duo Isis and Osiris. That doesn't mean I want to marry Thutmose. I don't even want to think about where I'd be if Mother hadn't put an end to the brother-sister marriages my ancestors survived. Thutmose and I are both past marriageable age. But if he were married to me—the only princess, daughter of two pharaohs, and the god's wife of Amun—he'd have an immediate link to the priesthood. Were I to give him a child, a future pharaoh, Thutmose's prestige would outshine even Mother's, which is, of course, the reason she put an end to the family tradition.

Senenmut turns pensive. "It kept power in the family, to be sure. But yes, it was an unfortunate custom."

I'm tempted to ask what he thought of my father, a subject we generally avoid. But before I form the words, Senenmut stops brooding and leans forward.

"I know it looks gloomy, dear one. But it has been a long time since you and Thutmose spent time together. You're both older now. Perhaps it's not as bad as it seems and word from the nobles is just silly gossip. Maybe the two of you can find a way to work together. He is a pharaoh. And as you say, he won't be powerless forever. In spite of his recent activities, I'd advise you to try and make peace. He might surprise you." Senenmut rubs his chin, signaling that he's about to impart some riddled wisdom. "Remember what the great wise man Ptahhotep said: No one can be born wise."

And some who are born never become wise, I think. But my tutor wants to cheer me, and I don't want to let him down. So I swallow the words, offer him a smile, and hold out a palm to receive today's scroll.



Iset's brown eyes sparkle with delight as she runs her fingers over the gossamer fabric of my newest gown. "The linen is so thin. And all these pleats. It's perfect." She drapes the diaphanous material over my arms, fastening it just under my breasts, which, to my horror, seem extra plump today.

She spins in a circle. Her eyes roam over my large bedroom like it's the first time she's seen it. Iset has always been one to marvel at pretty things, and the lavishness of the palace inspires awe even in those of us who were born to it. I glance around at the painted scenes of Kemet's plants and wildlife on my walls, the eight marble pillars stretching from my floor, drenched in rich carpets, to the ceiling, spotted with golden stars, wondering what Iset's old house was like.

Most royal handmaids are old noblewomen. But Iset, presented to me by Senenmut on my fifteenth birthday, is common. Her mother, a peasant, died birthing her second child, a brother Iset only knew for a day, and her father is an artisan who works at Djoser-Djeseru, Mother's mortuary temple. How Senenmut convinced Mother to let Iset serve me has been a mystery since the day she arrived. But my tutor insisted I have a handmaid my own age. I suspect he chose a girl who was raised far from court for personal reasons. Our esteemed steward was lowborn; he has a soft spot for commoners.

"Let's try the new wig," Iset squeals, fingering a delicate diadem with rosette inlays and a golden uraeus designed to sit on my brow. The birds playing in the pool, just outside my open wall, erupt in song, as if they're as excited about my new clothes as she is.

I plop into the chair facing my large, polished bronze mirror with a stony stare. I'm brewing over Thutmose's imminent arrival. Iset's small talk doesn't help my mood. The truth is, I'm only truly comfortable when alone in my study or, better, surrounded by the temple's stillness. I'm calmed by the cool stone walls, the sounds of chanting, the low cries of sacred cows, the smells of incense. Senenmut claims I didn't spend enough time with kids my age as a child, so I'm not used to it. Mother says the royal blood running through my veins makes me better than others, rendering me as haughty as her, even if I don't want to admit it.

I think the truth is much simpler. I just like being alone more than being with people, which might say something about the people I'm too often stuck with. The god is silent, but he's also reliable and predictable, unlike the vipers who fill the court. Not that Iset is one of them—she's nice to everyone, even me when I'm at my worst. But if Mother saw the familiar way my handmaid speaks to me, Iset would be carted away with no chance of return. And while I've never admitted it aloud, I'd miss her if she were gone.

"We should redo your braids tonight." Iset ignores my pursed-lipped scowl. Finished rubbing perfumed oil into my scalp, she pulls a heavy black wig with long, full tresses over my braids. Two long curtains of hair frame my face, falling to my breasts, while the back of the wig laps at my shoulder blades. "I once knew a woman who gave her hair to the wigmakers. She had beautiful, long locks. Then one day, she was bald." Iset giggles. "Wouldn't it be amazing if her hair was in this very wig?"

I grunt. Iset knows I prefer silence. She just can't seem to stop herself from chattering.

"You're like a goddess in the flesh." Iset pats my perfectly situated wig.

“More like a hippo dressed for festival,” I mumble, inspecting our reflections in the mirror. Iset’s heart-shaped face and plump lips look so elegant next to my sharp cheeks and hawkish nose. I imagine swapping places with her, letting her try on my wigs and jewels and feel the soft fabrics against her flesh.

“Stop that.” She tugs a lock of hair. “You’re so cute. And I’m not the only one who thinks so. One very handsome palace guard notices you too. Kamut—”

Panic seizes through me. “Don’t say that.” It comes out like a hiss.

Her smile in the mirror is wide and happy, her eyes curious. “Why not? He’s—”

“No!” I spin around and grab her wrists, pupils darting across the room, desperate to confirm we’re alone. We are. But Iset’s joke is dangerous, even between the two of us. “Never say that again. Do you hear me?”

Her pretty face crumples in confusion.

“Iset.” I breathe deeply, determined to make her understand. “I’m chosen by the god himself. My loyalty to Amun must be absolute or...or...” I can’t say exactly what would happen if I was unfaithful to the god, but surely his punishment would be severe, and it wouldn’t fall on me alone but on the country I love. “Surely you understand that?”

She nods, but I can tell she’s not getting the point.

“That means I can never be touched by a man. The very idea of...of...” I stutter, scared to repeat Kamut’s name. “Amun is my partner. My only partner. I must devote myself to him so he can be reborn each day. The perpetual re-creation of the cosmos depends on it. So do the people of Kemet. You know how many people depend on my estate for food to feed their families, for their very livelihoods. The idea of me with anyone but the god, even something as

innocent as your joke, puts all that at risk. It's dangerous. If a man was interested in me...in touching me"—I swallow hard—"his life would be forfeit."

Her eyes, which have grown wider as I've talked, fill with tears. She shifts her hands so she's holding on to mine. The intimacy is uncomfortable. I want to pull away, but I need to drive my point home.

"Never joke like that again. Promise me?"

She snuffles. "I'm sorry—"

"You didn't know." I squirm my hands out of her grip and turn back to the mirror, heartbeat slowing to normal. I consider telling her the timing is especially bad for such talk since Thutmose is drawing closer, whispering lies with his forked tongue. With a rumor about my fidelity in the wind, even our fiercest allies might listen to Thutmose. But Iset is my handmaid, not my confidant. She has never understood how tenuous and vital the relationship between the nobles and my family is. Mother empowers the nobles, it's true, but mostly because she has to—she takes her power from them and could lose it to them if they united against her.

"You're right. I didn't know that." Iset shakes her head. "I mean I knew it, but not really. I didn't understand what your relationship with Amun means to you. Or for you. That's the thing." Our eyes meet in the mirror. "I mean I'm sorry you can never be with a man."

I scoff. "There are worse fates than that." It's a thought I've turned over in my heart a thousand times, but I've never voiced it aloud. Mother's unconventional path to power led to me not only stepping into the role of high priestess as a child but also stepping out of the role most princesses play. I'm not chattel to be married off to enrich the royal coffers or solidify a power base like the princesses before me, or worse, to be married to a blood relative so there are no

pesky in-laws competing for my family's power. Indeed, Mother used my ritual position to justify not marrying me off at all.

It's irrational—she was a married god's wife herself not so long ago. The estate came to power when the rulers of Waset drove the Heka Khasut from Kemet's borders, securing rule over the country. The estate has always been managed by a queen, a move cleverly designed to ensure the royal family wields control over the powerful priesthood of Amun. Of course these women were married. But the gods speak through Mother, and she claims Amun now insists on a virgin god's wife. Who can argue with the commands of gods and pharaohs?

Of course, the justification also means I'll be single for life. Mother says that just makes me like her. She never mentions the fact that she has a partner, a perk I'll never enjoy. I am a young woman—I'm not uninterested in romance and passion. It stings a bit to know I'll never be with a man, not in the way Iset and virtually every other woman in Kemet will be.

"There are worse fates than a life of chastity," I repeat, although I'm not sure which one of us I'm trying to convince.

"Of course there are worse fates. A woman was fished out of the river half-eaten just yesterday. That doesn't mean you don't deserve love. I mean, I haven't done it yet, but it does sound fun, doesn't it?" She giggles and I relax, searching for a change of subject.

I brush my already clean shift dress, finding a stray hair to pluck off. "I'm not the one attracting the palace boys." I force my voice to jest, my tone light. "You have more than your fair share of charm, Iset. And you don't need piles of gold to accent it." I push away the large jasper eye of Horus amulet a prestigious local jeweler dropped off this morning. "In fact, that bracelet you wear is lovely. I don't think I've ever seen you without it. Does it mean something to you?"

Iset bats her eyes prettily, and I swallow my envy.

“It’s nothing compared to your jewels. But...” She pauses, dropping her eyes. “It was my mother’s.”

“Oh.” I squirm, embarrassed that my attempts to lead our conversation into safe territory have landed us on another painful topic. “I see. Well, the blue of that turquoise is unique. And the amulet dangling from it. It’s a...?”

“Scorpion.”

“It’s sweet,” I lie. In truth, a scorpion is a deadly thing to dangle from a wrist, but that hardly matters. “It’s perfect on you.”

“My mother was perfect.” Iset’s voice is low. “She was kind and thoughtful and powerful.” Iset’s eyes dart to mine and she shakes her head, sending her braids wriggling. “Not powerful like your mother is, of course. But in her own way. She was free and open. And she was like you—she lived to help people, to make a difference in the lives of everyone she touched. It’s not the kind of power you and your mother and tutor wield, of course. But it’s equally potent, in its own way. You know?”

Is it? I’ve never imagined a peasant woman with power before. Is that even possible? How potent could the power of the powerless be?

“How about these?” Iset holds up soft leather sandals, adorned with a lapis lazuli djed pillar, for my consideration, effectively ending the conversation.

I watch them swing back and forth, dangling from her fingertip, and manage a small grin, just wide enough to let her know I’m ready to discuss the pros and cons of festooned footwear if it means we never have to revisit the topic of my sex life—or the eternal lack thereof—again. “They’re perfect,” I lie.

Her smile is wide and knowing as she leans down to shove them on my feet.