

Nefertiti

Michelle Moran

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Extract

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

It has been a long journey for me into Nefertiti's ancient world, a journey that began with a visit to the Altes Museum in Berlin, where her iconic bust is housed. The bust itself has a long and detailed history, beginning with its creation in the city of Amarna and continuing to its arrival in Germany, where it became an instant draw in its first exhibition in 1923.

Even three thousand years after her death, Nefertiti's allure still captivates tens of thousands of visitors each year. Encased in glass, it was her mysterious smile and powerful gaze that attracted me, making me wonder who she had been and how she'd become such a dominant figure in ancient Egypt.

Now the time is 1351 BCE. The great Pharaohs of Egypt have included Khufu, Ahmose, and the female Pharaoh Hatshepsut, while Ramses and Cleopatra are yet to come. Nefertiti is fifteen years old. Her sister is thirteen, and all of Egypt lies before them.

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PROLOGUE

To speak the name of the dead is to make them live again.

— EGYPTIAN PROVERB

If you are to believe what the viziers say, then Amunhotep killed his brother for the crown of Egypt.

In the third month of Akhet, Crown Prince Tuthmosis lay in his room in Malkata Palace. A warm wind stirred the curtains of his chamber, carrying with it the desert scents of zaatar and myrrh. With each breeze the long linens danced, wrapping themselves around the columns of the palace, brushing the sun-dappled tiles on the floor. But while the twenty-year-old Prince of Egypt should have been riding to victory at the head of Pharaoh's charioteers, he was lying in his bedchamber, his right leg supported by cushions, swollen and crushed. The chariot that had failed him had immediately been burned, but the damage was done. His fever was high and his shoulders slumped. And while the jackal-headed god of death crept closer, Amunhotep sat across the room on a gilded chair, not even flinching when his older brother spat up the wine-colored phlegm that spelled possible death to the viziers.

When Amunhotep couldn't stand any more of his brother's sickness, he stalked from the chamber and stood on a balcony overlooking Thebes. He crossed his arms over his golden pectoral, watching the farmers with their emmer wheat, harvesting in the heavy heat of the day. Their silhouettes moved across the temples of Amun, his father's greatest contributions to the land. He stood above the city, thinking of the message that had summoned him from Memphis to his brother's side, and as the sun sank lower, he grew besieged by visions of what now might be.

Amunhotep the Great. Amunhotep the Builder. Amunhotep the Magnificent. He could imagine it all, and it was only when a new moon had risen over the horizon that the sound of sandals slapping against tile made him turn.

‘Your brother has called you back into his chamber.’

‘*Now?*’

‘Yes.’ Queen Tiye turned her back on her son, and he followed her sharp footfalls into Tuthmosis’s chamber. Inside, the viziers of Egypt had gathered.

Amunhotep swept the room with a glance. These were old men loyal to his father, men who had always loved his older brother more than him. ‘You may leave,’ he announced, and the viziers turned to the queen in shock.

‘You may go,’ she repeated. But when the old men were gone, she warned her son sharply, ‘You will *not* treat the wise men of Egypt like slaves.’

‘They *are* slaves! Slaves to the priests of Amun who control more land and gold than we do. If Tuthmosis had lived to be crowned, he would have bowed to the priests like every Pharaoh that came—’

Queen Tiye’s slap reverberated across the chamber. ‘You *will not* speak that way while your brother is still alive!’

Amunhotep inhaled sharply and watched his mother move to Tuthmosis’s side.

The queen caressed the prince’s cheek with her hand. Her favorite son, the one who was courageous in battle as well as life. They were so much alike, even sharing the same auburn hair and light eyes. ‘Amunhotep is here to see you,’ she whispered, the braids from her wig brushing his face. Tuthmosis struggled to sit and the queen moved to help him, but he waved her away.

‘Leave us. We will talk alone.’

Tiye hesitated.

‘It’s fine,’ Tuthmosis promised.

The two princes of Egypt watched their mother go, and only Anubis, who weighs the heart of the dead against the feather of truth, knows for certain what happened after the queen left that

chamber. But there are many viziers who believe that when judgment comes, Amunhotep's heart will outweigh the feather. They think it has been made heavy with evil deeds, and that Ammit, the crocodile god, will devour it, condemning him to oblivion for eternity. Whatever the truth, that night the crown prince, Tuthmosis, died, and a new crown prince rose to take his place.

CHAPTER ONE

1351 BCE

Peret, Season of Growing

When the sun set over Thebes, splaying its last rays over the limestone cliffs, we walked in a long procession across the sand. In a twisting line that threaded between the hills, the viziers of Upper and Lower Egypt came first, then the priests of Amun, followed by hundreds of mourners. The sand cooled rapidly in the shadows. I could feel the grains between the toes of my sandals, and when the wind blew under my thin linen robe, I shivered. I stepped out of line so I could see the sarcophagus, carried on a sledge by a team of oxen so the people of Egypt would know how wealthy and great our crown prince had been. Nefertiti would be jealous that she'd had to miss this.

I will tell her all about it when I get home, I thought. If *she is being nice to me*.

The bald-headed priests walked behind our family, for we were even more important than the representatives of the gods. The incense they swung from golden balls made me think of giant beetles, stinking up the air whichever way they went. When the funeral procession reached the mouth of the valley, the rattling of the sistrums stopped and the mourners went silent. On every cliff, families had gathered to see the prince, and now they looked down as the High Priest of Amun performed the Opening of the Mouth, to give Tuthmosis back his senses in the Afterlife. The priest was younger than the viziers of Egypt, but even so, men like my father stood back, deferring to his power when he touched a golden ankh to the mouth of the figure on the sarcophagus and announced, 'The royal falcon has flown to heaven. Amunhotep the Younger is arisen in his place.'

A wind echoed between the cliffs, and I thought I could hear

the rush of the falcon's wings as the crown prince was freed from his body and ascended to the sky. There was a great amount of shuffling, children looking around the legs of their parents to see the new prince. I, too, craned my neck.

'Where is he?' I whispered. 'Where is Amunhotep the Younger?'

'In the tomb,' my father replied. His bald head shone dully in the setting sun, and in the deepening of the shadows his face appeared hawkish.

'But doesn't he want the people to see him?' I asked.

'No, *senit*.' His word for *little girl*. 'Not until he's been given what his brother was promised.'

I frowned. 'And what is that?'

He clenched his jaw. 'The coregency,' he replied.

When the ceremony was finished, soldiers spread out to stop commoners from following us into the valley, and our small party was expected to walk on alone. Behind us, the team of oxen heaved, pulling their golden cargo across the sand. Around us, cliffs rose against the darkening sky.

'We will be climbing,' my father warned, and my mother paled slightly. We were cats, she and I, frightened of places we couldn't understand, valleys whose sleeping Pharaohs watched from secret chambers. Nefertiti would have crossed this valley without pause, a falcon in her fearlessness, just like our father.

We walked to the eerie rattle of the sistrums, and I watched my golden sandals reflect the dying light. As we ascended the cliffs, I stopped to look down over the land.

'Don't stop,' my father cautioned. 'Keep going.'

We trudged onward through the hills while the animals snorted their way up the rocks. The priests went before us now, carrying torches to light our way as we walked. Then the High Priest hesitated, and I wondered if he'd lost his bearing in the night.

'Untie the sarcophagus and free the oxen,' he commanded, and I saw, carved into the face of the cliff, the entrance to the tomb. Children shifted in their beads and women's bangles

clinked together as they passed each other looks. Then I saw the narrow staircase leading down into the earth and understood their fear.

‘I don’t like this,’ my mother whispered.

The priests relieved the oxen of their burden, heaving the gilded sarcophagus onto their backs. Then my father squeezed my hand to give me courage and we followed our dead prince into his chamber, out of the dying sun and into total darkness.

Carefully, so as not to slip on the rocks, we descended into the slick bowels of the earth, staying close to the priests and their reed-dipped torches. Inside the tomb, the light cast shadows across the painted scenes of Tuthmosis’s twenty years in Egypt. There were women dancing, wealthy noblemen hunting, Queen Tiye serving her eldest son honeyed lotus and wine. I pressed my mother’s hand for comfort, and when she said nothing, I knew she was offering up silent prayers to Amun.

Below us, the heavy air grew dank and the smell of the tomb became that of shifted earth. Images appeared and disappeared in the torchlight: yellow painted women and laughing men, children floating lotus blossoms along the River Nile. But most fearsome was the blue-faced god of the underworld, holding the crook and flail of Egypt. ‘Osiris,’ I whispered, but no one heard.

We kept walking, into the most secretive chambers of the earth, then we entered a vaulted room and I gasped. This was where all the prince’s earthly treasures were gathered: painted barges, golden chariots, sandals trimmed in leopard fur. We passed through this room to the innermost burial chamber, and my father leaned close to me and whispered, ‘Remember what I told you.’

Inside the empty chamber, Pharaoh and his queen stood side by side. In the light of the torches, it was impossible to see anything but their shadowy figures and the long sarcophagus of the departed prince. I stretched out my arms in obeisance and my aunt nodded solemnly at me, remembering my face from her infrequent visits to our family in Akhmim. My father never took Nefertiti or me into Thebes. He kept us away from the palace,

from the intrigues and ostentation of the court. Now, in the flickering light of the tomb, I saw that the queen hadn't changed in the six years since I had last seen her. She was still small and pale. Her light eyes appraised me as I held out my arms, and I wondered what she thought of my dark skin and unusual height. I straightened, and the High Priest of Amun opened the Book of the Dead, his voice intoning the words of dying mortals to the gods.

'Let my soul come to me from wherever it is. Come for my soul, O you Guardians of the heavens. May my soul see my corpse, may it rest on my mummified body which will never be destroyed or perish...'

I searched the chamber for Amunhotep the Younger. He was standing away from the sarcophagus and the canopic jars that would carry Tuthmosis's organs to the Afterlife. He was taller than I was, handsome despite his light curling hair, and I wondered if we could expect great things from him when it was his brother who had always been meant to reign. He shifted toward a statue of the goddess Mut, and I remembered that Tuthmosis had been a cat lover in his life. With him would go his beloved Ta-Miw, wrapped inside her own miniature sarcophagus of gold. I touched my mother's arm gently and she turned.

'Did they kill her?' I whispered, and she followed my eyes to the little coffin beside the prince.

My mother shook her head, and as the priests took up the sistrums she replied, 'They said she stopped eating once the crown prince was dead.'

The High Priest began chanting the Song to the Soul, a lament to Osiris and the jackal god, Anubis. Then he snapped shut the Book of the Dead and announced, 'The blessing of the organs.'

Queen Tiye stepped forward. She knelt in the dirt, kissing each of the canopic jars in turn. Then Pharaoh did the same, and I saw him turn sharply, searching for his younger son in the darkness. 'Come,' he commanded.

His youngest son didn't move.

'Come!' he shouted, and his voice was magnified a hundred times in the chamber.

No one breathed. I looked at my father, and he shook his head sternly.

‘Why should I bow to him in obeisance?’ Amunhotep demanded. ‘He would have handed Egypt over to the Amun priests like every king that came before him!’

I covered my mouth, and for a moment I thought the Elder would move across the burial chamber to kill him. But Amunhotep was his only surviving son, the only legitimate heir to Egypt’s throne, and like every seventeen-year-old crown prince in our history, the people would expect to see him enthroned as coregent. The Elder would be Pharaoh of Upper Egypt and Thebes, and Amunhotep would rule Lower Egypt from Memphis. If this son also died, the Elder’s line would be finished. The queen walked swiftly to where her youngest son stood. ‘You will bless your brother’s organs,’ she commanded.

‘Why?’

‘Because he is a Prince of Egypt!’

‘And so am I!’ Amunhotep said wildly.

Queen Tiye’s eyes narrowed. ‘Your brother served this kingdom by joining Egypt’s army. He was a High Priest of Amun, *dedicated* to the gods.’

Amunhotep laughed. ‘So you loved him better because he could butcher what he blessed?’

Queen Tiye inhaled angrily. ‘Go to your father. Ask him to make a soldier of you. Then we will see what kind of Pharaoh you shall become.’

Amunhotep turned, stooping rashly before Pharaoh in the midst of his brother’s funeral. ‘I will become a warrior like my brother,’ he swore. The hem of his white cloak trailed in the dirt, and the viziers shook their heads. ‘Together, you and I can raise Aten above Amun,’ he promised. ‘We can rule the way your father once envisioned.’

Pharaoh held on to his walking stick, as if it could support his ebbing life. ‘It was a mistake to raise you in Memphis,’ he pronounced. ‘You should have been raised with your brother. Here. In Thebes.’

Amunhotep stood swiftly and his shoulders straightened. 'You only have me, Father.' He offered his hand to the old man who had conquered a dozen lands. 'Take it. I may not be a warrior, but I will build a kingdom that will stand for eternity.'

When it was clear that Pharaoh would not take Amunhotep's hand, my father moved forward to save the prince from embarrassment.

'Let your brother be buried,' he suggested quietly.

The look Amunhotep gave his father would have turned Anubis cold.

It was only when we returned on barges across the Nile, with the waves to drown our voices, that anyone dared to speak.

'He is unstable,' my father declared on our way back to Akhmim. 'For three generations, our family has given women to the Pharaohs of Egypt. But I will not give one of my daughters to that man.'

I wrapped my wool cloak around my shoulders. It wasn't me he was talking about. It was my sister, Nefertiti.

'If Amunhotep is to be made coregent with his father, he will need a Chief Wife,' my mother said. 'It will be Nefertiti or Kiya. And if it is Kiya...'

She left the words unspoken, but we all knew what she had meant to say. If it was Kiya, then Vizier Panahesi would have sway in Egypt. It would be easy and logical to make his daughter queen: Kiya was already married to Amunhotep and nearly three months pregnant with his child. But if she became Chief Wife, our family would bow to Panahesi's, and that would be an unthinkable thing.

My father shifted his weight on his cushion, brooding while the servants rowed north.

'Nefertiti has been told she will be a royal wife,' my mother added. 'You told her that.'

'When Tuthmosis was alive! When there was stability and it looked as if Egypt would be ruled by...' My father closed his eyes.

I watched as the moon rose over the barge, and when enough time had passed, I thought it safe to ask, 'Father, what is Aten?'

He opened his eyes. 'The sun,' he replied, staring at my mother. There were thoughts passing between them, but no words.

'But Amun-Ra is god of the sun.'

'And Aten is the sun itself,' he said.

I didn't understand. 'But why would Amunhotep want to build temples to a sun god that no one has heard of?'

'Because if he builds temples to Aten, there will be no need for the priests of Amun.'

I was shocked. 'He wants to be rid of them?'

'Yes.' My father nodded. 'And go against all the laws of Ma'at.'

I sucked in my breath. No one went against the goddess of truth. 'But why?'

'Because the crown prince is weak,' my father explained. 'Because he is weak and shallow, and you should learn to recognize men who are afraid of others with power, Mutnodjmet.'

My mother threw a sharp glance at him. It was treason, what my father just said, but there was no one to hear it above the splash of the oars.

Nefertiti was waiting for us. She was recovering from fever, but even so she was sitting in the garden, reclining by the lotus pool, the moonlight reflecting off her slender arms. She stood up as soon as she saw us, and I felt a sort of triumph that I had seen the prince's funeral and she'd been too sick to go. Guilt swept this feeling away, however, when I saw the longing in her face.

'Well, how was it?'

I'd planned on having the information drawn out of me, but I couldn't be cruel the way she could be. 'Absolutely magnificent,' I gushed. 'And the sarcophagus—'

'What are you doing out of bed?' my mother scolded. She was not Nefertiti's mother. She was only mine. Nefertiti's mother had died when her daughter was two; she'd been a princess from

Mitanni and my father's first wife. She was the one who gave Nefertiti her name, which meant *the Beautiful One Has Come*. And though we were related, there was no comparing us: Nefertiti was small and bronze, with black hair, dark eyes, and cheekbones you could cup in the palm of your hand, whereas I am dark, with a narrow face that would never be picked out of a crowd. At birth, my mother didn't name me for beauty. She called me Mutnodjmet, meaning *Sweet Child of Goddess Mut*.

'Nefertiti should be in bed,' my father said. 'She's not feeling well.' And although it was my sister he should have been reprimanding, it was me to whom he spoke.

'I'll be fine,' Nefertiti promised. 'See, I'm better already.' She smiled for him, and I turned to see my father's reaction. Like always, he had a soft look for her.

'Nevertheless,' my mother cut in, 'you were hot with fever and you will go back to bed.'

We let ourselves be herded inside, and when we lay on our reed mats, Nefertiti rolled over, her profile sharp in the light of the moon. 'So, what was it like?'

'Frightening,' I admitted. 'The tomb was huge. And dark.'

'And the people? How many people were there?'

'Oh, hundreds. Maybe even thousands.'

She sighed. She had missed a chance to be seen. 'And the new crown prince?'

I hesitated. 'He...'

She sat up on her pallet, nodding for me to go on.

'He is strange,' I whispered.

In the moonlight, Nefertiti's dark eyes glittered. 'How do you mean?'

'He is obsessed with Aten.'

'With *what*?'

'With an image of the sun,' I explained. 'How can you honor an image of the sun and not Amun-Ra, who controls it?'

She was quiet. 'That's it?'

'He's also tall.'

'Well, he can't be that much taller than you.'

I ignored her criticism. 'He's much taller. Two heads over Father.'

She wrapped her arms around her knees and replied, 'This should be interesting, then.'

I frowned. 'What?'

She didn't explain.

'What should be interesting, then?' I repeated.

'Marriage,' she said lightly, lying back down and pulling the linen cover over her chest. 'With a coronation so close, Amunhotep will need to pick a Chief Wife, and why not me?'

Why not her? She was beautiful, educated, the daughter of a Mitanni princess. I felt a sharp stab of jealousy, but also fear. I had never known a time without Nefertiti.

'Of course, you'll come with me,' she said, yawning. 'Until you're old enough to be married, you'll be my Chief Lady.'

'Mother wouldn't allow me to go to the palace alone.'

'You wouldn't be alone. She'd come, too.'

'To the palace!' I exclaimed.

'Mutny, when you're Chief Wife, your family comes with you. Our father is the greatest vizier in the land. Our aunt is the queen. Who would dare to say no?'

In the middle of the night, a long shadow lingered outside our room, then a servant entered, holding an oil lamp above Nefertiti's head. I awoke at the brightness and saw my sister's face in the golden light, perfect even in her sleep.

'My lady?' our servant called, but Nefertiti didn't stir. 'My lady?' she called louder. She looked at me, and I shook Nefertiti awake. 'My lady, the Vizier Ay would like to speak with you.'

I sat up quickly. 'Is something wrong?'

But Nefertiti didn't say a word. She stepped into her robe, taking an oil lamp down from the wall and sheltering the sputtering flame with her hand. 'What's happening?' I asked, but she didn't reply.

The door simply whispered shut in her wake. I waited up for my sister's return, and by the time she came back, the moon was

a yellow disk high in the sky. 'Where *were* you?' I scrambled up on my pallet.

'Father wanted to speak with me.'

'Alone?' I challenged her. 'And at night?'

'When else are all the nosy servants asleep?'

Then I knew at once. 'He doesn't want you to marry Amunhotep,' I said.

Nefertiti rolled her shoulders, playing coy. 'I'm not afraid of Kiya.'

'It's Vizier Panahesi he's concerned about.'

'I want to be Chief Wife, Mutnodjmet. I want to be Queen of Egypt the way my grandmother was Queen of Mitanni.'

She sat down on her pallet and we were silent, illuminated only by the flame of the lamp she'd brought in.

'And what did Father say?'

She shrugged again.

'Did he tell you what happened in the tombs?'

'So he refused to kiss the jars,' she said dismissively. 'What does that matter if in the end I'm sitting on the Horus throne? Amunhotep is going to be the Pharaoh of Egypt,' she added, as if this settled the matter. 'And Father has already said yes.'

'He said *yes*?' I threw off my linen cover. 'But he couldn't have said yes. He said the prince was unstable. He swore he would never give a daughter to that man!'

'And he changed his mind.' In the flickering candlelight, I saw her lie down and draw up the covers. 'Will you find me some juice in the kitchens?' she asked.

'It's night,' I retorted, my voice tight with disapproval.

'But I'm sick,' she reminded. 'I have fever.'

I hesitated.

'Please, Mutny. *Please*.'

I would go, but only because she had fever.

The next morning, the tutors ended our lessons early. There was no sign of illness on Nefertiti. 'But we shouldn't tax her,' my father said.

My mother disagreed. 'These are all the lessons she will ever have if she's to be married soon. She should learn what she can.'

My mother, who had not been raised among nobility like my father's first wife, knew the importance of an education, for she'd had to fight for hers when she was young and the daughter of a simple village priest. But my father turned his palm over.

'What else is there for her to learn? She excels at languages, and she's more proficient than the palace scribes at writing.'

'She doesn't know the healing herbs like Mutny,' my mother pointed out.

I raised my chin, but my father only replied, 'That is Mutnodjmet's gift. Nefertiti has other skills.'

We all looked at my sister, the center of attention in her short white sheath, her feet dangling in the lotus pools. Ranofer, the son of a local physician, had brought her flowers, a bunch of white lilies bound with twine. He was supposed to be my tutor, teaching me the secrets of medicine and herbs, but he spent more time watching my sister.

'Nefertiti charms people,' my father said approvingly, 'and the people she doesn't charm she can easily outwit. What does she need with herbs and medicine when she wants to be a leader of the people?'

My mother furrowed her brows. '*If* the queen approves.'

'The queen is my sister,' my father said simply. 'She will approve of Nefertiti as Chief Wife.' But I could see the concern in his eyes. A crown prince who defiled his brother's burial chamber, a man who couldn't control his own emotions? What kind of Pharaoh would he make? What kind of husband?

We stood and looked at Nefertiti until she saw the three of us watching her. She beckoned me over with her finger. I went to where they were laughing by the pools, my sister and my tutor.

'Good afternoon, Mutnodjmet.' Ranofer smiled up at me, and for a moment I forgot what I had wanted to tell him.

'I tried the aloe today,' I said at last. 'It healed our servant's burns.'

'Really?' Ranofer sat up. 'What else?'

‘I mixed it with lavender and there was less swelling.’

He smiled wider at me. ‘You are surpassing even my teaching, my lady.’

I grinned, proud of my ingenuity. ‘Next, I think I want to try—’

‘Talking about something interesting?’ Nefertiti sighed and leaned back in the sunshine. ‘Tell me, what was Father saying just now?’

‘Right now?’ I am a terrible liar.

‘Yes. While you were standing there spying on me.’

I flushed. ‘He spoke of your future.’

She sat up, the ends of her black hair brushing her chin. ‘And?’

I paused, wondering if I should tell her the rest. She waited. ‘And that the queen might be coming,’ I said at last.

Immediately, Ranofer’s smile vanished. ‘But if she comes’ – his voice rose – ‘you will leave Akhmim.’

Nefertiti frowned over Ranofer’s head at me. ‘Don’t worry,’ she promised lightly. ‘Nothing will come of it.’

There was a moment between them, then Ranofer took her hand and they both stood up.

‘Where are you going?’ I cried, but Nefertiti didn’t answer, so I called after my tutor. ‘What about our lesson?’

‘Later.’ He grinned, but it was only my sister he really had eyes for.

Word arrived that the queen would pay a visit to our villa in Akhmim. In our family shrine, this was what Nefertiti had been secretly praying for, laying down bowls of our best honeyed wine at the feet of Amun and promising all sorts of wild things if he would only send the queen to our city. Now that Amun seemed to have granted her request, Nefertiti was unbearable in her excitement. While my sister preened, my mother rushed around the house, snapping at slaves and servants alike.

‘Mutny, make sure the towels are clean. Nefertiti, the bowls please. Make sure the servants have washed them. *All* of them.’

Our servants dusted the fringed wall hangings while my mother arranged our best inlaid chairs around the Audience Chamber, which would be the first room the queen would enter. Queen Tiye was my father's sister; she was a hard woman and would not approve of sloppy housekeeping. The tiles in the kitchen were scrubbed to gleaming, even though the queen would go nowhere near them, and the lotus pool was stocked with orange fish. Even Nefertiti did some work, actually inspecting the bowls instead of pretending she had. In six days, Amunhotep the Younger would be crowned at Karnak and made coregent with his father. Even I knew what this visit meant. The queen had not come all the way to Akhmim for over six years. The only reason to visit now would be for a marriage.

'Mutny, go help your sister get dressed,' my mother said.

In our room, Nefertiti stood in front of the mirror. She pushed her dark hair from her face, imagining herself with the crown of Egypt. 'This is it,' she whispered. 'I will be the greatest queen Egypt has ever known.'

I scoffed. 'No queen will ever be greater than our aunt.'

She whirled around. 'There was Hatshepsut. And our aunt doesn't wear the pschent crown.'

'Only a Pharaoh can wear it.'

'So while she commands the army and meets with foreign leaders, what does she get? *Nothing*. It is her husband who reaps the glory. When I am queen, it will be my name that lives in eternity.'

I knew better than to argue with Nefertiti when she was like this. I mixed the kohl and handed it to her in a jar, then watched her apply it. She rimmed her eyes and darkened her brows, and the paint made her look older than her fifteen years.

'Do you really think you will become Chief Wife?' I asked.

'Who would our aunt rather see give birth to an heir? A commoner' – she wrinkled her nose – 'or her niece?'

I was a commoner, but it wasn't me she was slighting. It was Panahesi's daughter, Kiya, who was the child of a noblewoman, whereas Nefertiti was the granddaughter of a queen.

‘Can you find my linen dress and gold belt?’ she said.

I narrowed my eyes. ‘Just because you’re about to make a marriage doesn’t make me your slave.’

She smiled widely. ‘*Please*, Mutny. You know I can’t do this without you.’ She watched in the mirror while I rummaged through her chests, looking for the gown she wore only to festivals. I pulled out her golden belt and she protested, ‘The one with onyx, not turquoise.’

‘Don’t you have servants for this?’ I demanded.

She ignored me and held out her hand for the belt. Personally, I liked the turquoise better. There was a knock on the door, and then my mother’s servant appeared, her face bright with excitement.

‘Your mother says to be quick!’ the girl cried. ‘The caravan has been spotted.’

Nefertiti looked at me. ‘Think of it, Mutny. You will be sister to the Queen of Egypt!’

‘*If* she likes you,’ I said flatly.

‘Of course she will.’ She glanced in the mirror at her own reflection, her small honeyed shoulders and rich black hair. ‘I’ll be charming and sweet, and when we’ve moved into the palace, just think of all the things we can do!’

‘We do plenty of things here,’ I protested. ‘What’s wrong with Akhmim?’

She took the brush and finished her hair. ‘Don’t you want to see Karnak and Memphis and be a part of the palace?’

‘Father’s part of the palace. He says it makes him tired, so much talk of politics.’

‘Well, that’s Father. He gets to go to the palace every day. What do we ever get to do here?’ she complained. ‘Nothing but wait for a prince to die so that we can go out and see the world.’

I sucked in my breath. ‘*Nefertiti!*’

She laughed merrily. Then my mother appeared in the doorway, breathless. She had put on her good jewels and heavy new bangles I’d never seen before. ‘Are you ready?’

Nefertiti stood up. Her dress was sheer, and I felt a wave of

pure envy at the way the material tightened across her thighs and emphasized the slenderness of her waist.

‘Wait.’ My mother put her hand in the air. ‘We must have a necklace. Mutny, go and fetch the gold collar.’

I gasped. ‘*Your* collar?’

‘Of course. Now hurry! The guard will let you into the treasury.’

I was shocked that my mother would let Nefertiti wear the collar my father had given her on their wedding day. I had underestimated how important my aunt’s visit was to her, then. To us all. I hurried to the treasury in the back of the house, and the sentry looked up at me with a smile. I was taller than him by a head. I blushed.

‘My mother wants the collar for my sister.’

‘The gold collar?’

‘What other collar is there?’

He snapped his head back. ‘*Well*. Must be for something very important. I hear the queen is arriving today.’

I placed my hands on my hips so that he knew that I was waiting.

‘All right, all right.’ He descended into the underground chamber and reappeared with my mother’s treasure, which would be mine someday. ‘So your sister must be getting married,’ he said.

I held out my hand. ‘The collar.’

‘She would make a fine queen.’

‘So everybody says.’

He smiled like he knew my thoughts on the matter, the prying old donkey, then he held out the collar and I snatched it. I ran back to my room and held up the heavy jewel like a prize. Nefertiti looked to my mother.

‘Are you sure?’ She looked at the gold, and her eyes reflected its light.

My mother nodded. She fastened it around my sister’s neck, then we both stood back. The gold began at my sister’s throat in a lotus pattern, dipping between her breasts in droplets of

various lengths. I was glad she was two years older than me. If I had been the one to marry first, no man would have chosen me over her. 'Now we are ready,' my mother said. She led the way to the Audience Chamber, where the queen was waiting. We could hear her speaking with my father, her voice low and grating and full of command.

'Come when you are called,' my mother said quickly. 'There are gifts on the table from our treasury. Bring them when you enter. The larger one is for Nefertiti to carry.'

Then she disappeared inside, and we stood in the tiled hall to wait for our summons.

Nefertiti paced. 'Why *wouldn't* she choose me to marry her son? I'm her brother's child, and our father has the highest position in the land.'

'Of course she'll choose you.'

'But for Chief Wife? I won't be anything less, Mutny. I won't be some lesser wife thrown into a palace that Pharaoh comes to visit only every two seasons. I'd rather marry a vizier's son.'

'She'll want you.'

'Of course, it's really up to Amunhotep.' She stopped pacing, and I realized that she was talking to herself. 'In the end, he'll be the one who chooses. He's the one who has to get a son on me, not her.'

I winced at her crassness.

'But I'll never get to see him without charming his mother.'

'You'll do well.'

She looked at me, as if noticing that I was there for the first time. 'Really?'

'Yes.' I sat down in my father's ebony chair and called one of the household cats to me. 'But how do you know that you will love him?' I asked.

Nefertiti looked at me sharply. 'Because he's about to become the Pharaoh of Egypt,' she said. 'And I am tired of Akhmim.'

I thought of Ranofer with his handsome smile and wondered if she was tired of him, too. Then my mother's servant came through the doors of the Audience Chamber and the cat slipped away.

‘Are we to come?’ Nefertiti asked anxiously.

‘Yes, my lady.’

Nefertiti looked at me. Her cheeks were flushed. ‘Walk behind me, Mutny. She has to see me first and fall in love.’

We entered into the Audience Chamber with the gifts from our treasury, and the room seemed bigger than I remembered. The painted marshes on the wall and blue river tiles on the ground looked brighter. The servants had done well, even washing out the stain on the hanging above my mother’s head. The queen looked the same as she had at the tombs. An austere face surrounded by a large Nubian wig. If Nefertiti ever became queen, she would wear such a wig. We approached the dais, where the queen sat in a large, feather-stuffed cushion on the chair with the widest arms in our house. A black cat rested on her lap. Her hand was on its back, and its collar was lapis and gold.

The queen’s herald stepped forward and flung out his arm in a sweeping gesture. ‘Your Majesty, your niece, the Lady Nefertiti.’

My sister held out her gift and a servant took the gilt bowl. My aunt touched an empty seat to her left, indicating that Nefertiti should sit next to her. As my sister ascended the dais, my aunt’s eyes never moved from her face. Nefertiti was beautiful in a way that made even queens stare.

‘Your Majesty, your niece, the Lady Mutnodjmet.’

I stepped forward and my aunt blinked in surprise. She looked at the turquoise box I held out for her and smiled, a concession that in Nefertiti’s presence she’d forgotten about me. ‘You’ve grown tall,’ she commented.

‘Yes, but not as graceful as Nefertiti, Your Majesty.’

My mother nodded approvingly. I had turned the conversation to the reason the queen had come to Akhmim, and we all looked to my sister, who tried not to glow.

‘She is beautiful, Ay. More of her mother, I think, than you.’

My father laughed. ‘And gifted. She can sing. And dance.’

‘But is she clever?’

‘Of course. And she has strength.’ His voice lowered meaningfully. ‘She will be able to guide his passions and control him.’

My aunt looked at Nefertiti again, wondering if this was true.

‘But she must be Chief Wife if she is to marry him,’ he added. ‘Then she will direct his interests away from Aten, back to Amun and to politics that are less dangerous.’

The queen turned directly to my sister. ‘What do you say to all this?’ she asked.

‘I will do what is commanded of me, Your Majesty. I will entertain the prince and give him children. And I will be an obedient servant of Amun.’ Her eyes met mine, and I lowered my head to keep from smiling.

‘Of Amun,’ the queen repeated thoughtfully. ‘If only my son had so much sense.’

‘She is the strongest willed of my two children,’ my father said. ‘If anyone can sway him, it would be her.’

‘And Kiya is weak,’ the queen conceded. ‘She cannot do the job. He wanted to make her Chief Wife, but I wouldn’t allow it.’

My father promised, ‘Once he sees Nefertiti, he will forget about Kiya.’

‘Kiya’s father is a vizier,’ my aunt said warningly. ‘He will be displeased that I chose your daughter over his.’

My father shrugged. ‘It’s to be expected. We are family.’

There was a moment’s hesitation, then the queen stood up. ‘So the matter is settled.’

I heard Nefertiti’s delighted intake of breath. It was over as quickly as it had begun. The queen walked down the dais, a small but indomitable figure, and the cat followed her on the end of a golden leash. ‘I hope she lives up to your promise, Ay. It is the future of Egypt that is at stake,’ she warned darkly.

For three days servants rushed from room to room, packing linens and clothes and small jewelry into baskets. There were half-empty chests lying open everywhere, with vessels of alabaster, glass, and pottery waiting to be wrapped and put inside. My father supervised the move with visible pleasure. Nefertiti’s marriage meant we would all move to live in Malkata Palace in Thebes with him, and he would get to see more of us now.

‘Mutny, stop standing around,’ my mother admonished. ‘Find something to do.’

‘Nefertiti’s standing around,’ I tattled. My sister was at the other end of the room, trying on clothes and holding up pieces of glass jewelry.

‘Nefertiti,’ my mother snapped, ‘there will be enough time to stand in front of the mirror at Malkata.’

Nefertiti heaved dramatically, then took an armful of gowns and tumbled them into a basket. My mother shook her head, and my sister went out to supervise the loading of her seventeen chests. We could hear her in the courtyard, telling a slave to be careful, that her baskets were worth more than we’d paid for him. I looked over at my mother, who sighed. It hadn’t become real that my sister would be queen.

It would change everything.

We would leave Akhmim behind. We’d keep the villa, but who knew if we’d ever see it again. ‘Do you think we’ll ever come back?’ I asked.

My mother straightened. I saw her look at the pools that my sister and I had played in as children, then out at our family’s shrine to Amun. ‘I hope so,’ she answered. ‘We’ve been a family here. It’s our home.’

‘But now Thebes will be our home.’

She drew a heavy breath. ‘Yes. It’s what your father wants. And your sister.’

‘Is it what you want?’ I asked quietly.

Her eyes turned to the room she shared with my father. She missed him terribly when he was gone. Now she would be near him. ‘I want to be with my husband,’ she admitted, ‘and I want opportunities for my children.’ We both looked at Nefertiti, commanding the servants in the courtyard. ‘She will be monarch of Egypt,’ my mother said, a little in awe. ‘Our Nefertiti, only fifteen years old.’

‘And me?’

My mother smiled, the lines on her face coming together. ‘And you will be Sister of the King’s Chief Wife. That’s no small thing.’

‘But who will I marry?’

‘You’re only thirteen!’ she exclaimed, and a shadow crossed her face. I was the only child the goddess Tawaret had given her. Once I was married, she’d have no one. Immediately, I felt sorry I’d said anything.

‘Perhaps I won’t marry,’ I said quickly. ‘Perhaps I will be a priestess.’

She nodded, but I could see that she was thinking of a time when she would be all alone.