

Part One: Death



Chapter One:

Isis took the stairs at a run, frowning in frustration at her close-fitting linen gown. She wished more than anything to get to the roof. From there she could see beyond the palace enclosure to the green, tree-shaded riverbank where she would glimpse her husband's approach. She would spy him, no doubt, amid a crowd of adoring subjects on the western bank of the Nile.

Isis thrilled at his unexpected homecoming. She missed his laughter and energy; they were food to her, his body a sweet dessert. Only dreams of his touch had kept her from melancholy through the long months of his absence. The promise of that touch drew a sigh past her lips.

She should return to her rooms, she thought as she paced the edge of the roof, but she could not depart without catching sight of him. Heedless of the four priestess-retainers who had followed her from below, she fixed her mind and heart on her husband, the king and god of this great city. It was so like him to arrive from the west, from the mouth of the hungry desert. That act was a gift to his people, and first of all to the poor. Wherever his journeys had taken him, the river would have made for a quicker return, and a safer one than walking the dunes. Quicker and safer, yes, but few would have witnessed their sovereign's homecoming. Where was the gift in that? Now the farmers, brick makers and shopkeepers of Abydos had greeted their king before even their lords on the Nile's eastern bank. They had no doubt mobbed him in their joy, had offered him gifts of beer, water, and gritty bread, treasures with which they could ill afford to part.

In the face of such adulation, how could a goddess do less, even one blessed as the very definition of life, love and beauty? Isis chuckled at the thought. The naked erotic force of her godhood was too small a welcome for Osiris, she thought. She should ... augment things a bit. A bath, perhaps scented with oils? And the softest of linens upon her bed. Something done with her hair, yes, and the eye paint that so destroyed him. She rarely stooped to such tricks of beguilement, but this was a special occasion.

"He comes, my goddess!" the high priestess Merferet called. She pointed a wrinkled, liver-spotted hand toward a barge crossing from the river's west bank. "There! Osiris approaches!"

The boat aimed for the quay where Amnet, high priest of the Grand Temple, waited with dozens of chanters.

"I love you," Isis whispered toward her husband. She squinted through the bright sunlight, hoping to pick him out on the barge, but Ra, her grandfather, blazed above, overwhelming her physical eyes. She blinked, lowered her gaze to the temple, and instantly went cold.

The priests chanted toward the barge. But some turned their heads toward a figure ambling onto the quay.

Set, Isis realized, and her lips tightened.

Isis couldn't say why Set affected her so. He was her brother, after all, and also brother to Osiris. He had never done any harm to her, though he presumed much with lascivious leers. Still, he hadn't acted on his desire, nor in any other way blackened the godhead of his origin.

He hadn't done much to polish it, either. He now strutted in among the priests, stealing another god's moment. Set had no business there, but neither was he likely to leave. He wanted his brother's fame. He wanted his brother's power. He also wanted his brother's wife, Isis knew without doubt. He hated his brother for having won such a wife, was jealous of all that Osiris had achieved. Set desired to act on his jealousies, and some day he probably would.

Even in the hot sun, she shivered at the thought. Osiris was her love, but certainly not a fighter. Could he stand against Set if challenged for ascendancy? Ma'at protect him from treachery!

All things knew balance, Isis reasoned. Good was not good unless balanced by evil, prosperity suspect unless balanced by need. Ma'at encompassed balance. She steered the universe far shy of chaos, granting life its natural equilibrium. A diligent overseer, that stony-faced goddess, entirely impartial. But she only influenced; she was never in command. Set would one day twist her to anarchy; it was his way in all things. Osiris, who balanced Set's wanton vileness, would suffer the consequences of that folly. Isis shivered again, trying to shrug off dread.

She peered once more toward the barge, which turned broadside to the quay. She thought she saw her husband then. Unlike his men, whose body-sheathing linen uniforms were stained from months of sweat, Osiris wore a linen kilt that covered from waist to knees, a white linen headpiece like a wig, and little else beyond a few trinkets of glass and stone. He moved with characteristic energy, slapping a shoulder here, laughing there. Her husband, all right. He seemed so weak against the threat of Set...

Isis shut her eyes for a moment, her blood rushing hot with the shame of doubt. Her husband was king in Abydos. Set could not touch him here. She repeated that thought, hoping it played out true.

Then she turned away toward the stairs. She had much to do before welcoming Osiris. Fear was a distraction best turned away.



The ritual guard of Osiris were few, more entourage than soldiers, and smartly appointed for their role. Their identical uniforms were designed for the wild extremes of the deep desert, exposing only hands, eyes, and sandaled feet to the elements. Sweat-stained leather belts gathered the material at each man's waist. Each belt held a flint knife and a sword of bronze. The swords were a wonder, for few people knew of the hard, glinting metal; few knew of metal at all. The men making up the guard of Osiris emerged from an era built on stone; none could guess the wonders of the new age to come.

Twenty men had roamed with Osiris in the desert. Now they accompanied him from the workers' quarter on the western bank to his temple amid the villas of the rich.

A guardsman threw a line to a loinclotted dockworker at the temple quay, who tied the barge to a sturdy post. Osiris leapt to land before a ramp could be extended to the ship's deck. The priests prostrated themselves, all but Amnet who, as high priest, was obliged to stand while greeting his god. He led the others to a chanting crescendo, then cut them off respectfully.

"Set!" Osiris called before Amnet could offer him the ritual greeting. He marched toward his brother, arms outstretched. "How nice of you to welcome me! And on my own temple grounds, at that!" He grasped his brother by the shoulders.

"There are no boundaries between us," Set said, his voice like oil. "What's mine is yours, and yours mine."

"Well said, but I doubt my priests agree. How does one pay homage to a god while yet another stands at one's shoulder, eh, Amnet?"

"I would not presume to opine, my lord," Amnet said. He bowed his shaven head against linen robes so white and gauzy they seemed close to glowing in the sun.

"Priests." Set made a dismissive sound. "They are men, my brother. Half the time they don't know whether to pray or fornicate."

Osiris let loose a hearty peal of laughter, as much at the high priest's chagrin as at the other god's jibe. "Come now, Set. Manners, manners. Yes, they are men. Though not gods, they display special gifts, which we can only envy. Charity, if you'll notice, is something men know from experience and we gods could wisely learn."

Set stared at him, his eyes darkening. He was a god of storms, always forbidding, so Osiris counted the mood for little. The two looked remarkably alike. They wore similar kilts, but Set walked in sandals and was given more to jewelry. They claimed the same muscular build, the same hard but narrow face, with short-cropped black hair and rich brown eyes. Without Osiris's easy mirth and Set's smoldering brow, telling them apart would have proven a difficult task.

"So, O king," Set said in a mocking voice, "what have you brought us this time? The natives so adore your gifts."

Osiris slapped his brother's shoulder. He grinned as he turned to the barge. His men had enacted a spectacular chaos as they offloaded their sovereign's most extraordinary treasures. The priests so cringed in their prostrate poses that Osiris asked Amnet to command them erect. "I give you," he said while the religious backed to the limits of the quay, "I give you the future of Abydos!"

"The future of Abydos" was an animal, a black mass of muscle and energy. It stood taller than a man, though it danced around so nervously and reared so much that it couldn't honestly be said to merely stand. Its four mobile legs were lean, sinewy sticks. A long tail of hair whipped the beast's flanks, complementing an ample mane along the animal's thick neck. The head was conical, with alert, twitching ears, flaring nostrils, and intelligent, appraising eyes. It awed the priests, and terrified them. It was all they could do to stand their ground when three more monsters were forced from the barge.

Qebera, who captained Osiris's guard, directed his men as they wrestled the animals along by ropes. "Hold tight there!" he shouted, and "Brace there on the right!" and "Watch those hooves!"

"Eh?" Osiris asked his brother. "What do you think?"

"How much will they eat?" Set said without expression.

Osiris burst into laughter again. He stepped toward the nearest of his four black cyclones and gripped its harness. The animal settled as if enchanted. "You never travel," the king admonished Set. "Believe me, brother, there is more to this world than the banks of the Nile or your wild, killing desert." He glanced around to Amnet, who watched the silenced beast with suspicion. "High priest, come closer."

"As you command, my god and king," but Amnet approached by only a fraction of a step.

"Come on, it won't bite. Or, I *think* it won't bite. Qebera, did they say if it would bite?"

The soldier stood more relaxed than Amnet. He had suffered the animal's company for many long months, far too long to give it much notice. He pulled back the cloak and scarf arrangement that protected his face from the sun, revealing gray hair and a hard-edged face. "They said it might bite if threatened or annoyed, but it's not given to bite as a habit."

"That's right. Thank you, Qebera. So, Amnet, will you threaten or annoy my prize?"

"Never, sire," the high priest proclaimed.

"Good. Then give him a pet. Right there, on the neck. Go ahead, I'll vouch for his behavior."

The priest offered a shaky smile. He put out his hand to arm's length and barely touched the animal. The beast flinched, and muttered through fluttering lips. It watched Osiris with eyes that at once trusted and questioned, eyes more frank than a man's. The priest gathered his courage, then pressed his hand along the animal's neck. "He is warm, sire. I can feel his strength."

"Yes." Osiris nodded. "He *is* strong. How about you, Set? Care to welcome my newest friend?"

"No, thanks." Set folded his arms over his chest.

This prompted a chuckle from Osiris, and, inappropriately, from Qebera. Set marked the soldier with cutting eyes.

Osiris raised his voice to include the gathered crowd. "This fine animal and its like are gifts from Ur, a kingdom far to the east. They call the beast a 'horse' and it offers its masters far more than beauty, spirit, and strength. The people of Ur use these 'horses' as pack animals, to pull plows, even carts filled with people and possessions. The nobles of Ur actually ride the animals, for transportation and for sport!"

"Ride?" Set scoffed. "With those skinny legs and that hard back? Please, brother, you exaggerate!"

"The mortal animals of this earth still hold surprises for gods," Osiris intoned with mock gravity. "We gods are what we are, yet mortals strive to whatever they might be. This horse does the work of oxen, camels, and whole teams of men. Yet it isn't as dim-witted as an ox, as obstreperous as a camel, or as free-minded as a man. It could be a great companion—no, a comrade—to Abydians and..." He returned his attention to the full assembly. "...that is why I brought one male and three females, that we might breed these animals to give some ease to our people!"

The assembled men whistled and cheered. The soldiers drew their flint knives and shook them high overhead.

"But, that isn't all we bring," Osiris called, quieting the crowd. "No, if all we brought were animals prone to devouring hay, then we would do no chore worth praising. We also bring food, seeds of the most succulent marvels of Ur. Juicy orbs called oranges, like honey plucked from trees, and red fruits of the vine like bags of meat and water. We also bring you cousins to our emmer that we can cross for variety." He paused, pleased with his bounty. "Well? Have we served Abydos, my people?"

Their acclaim was deafening. Osiris grabbed Amnet and Qebera in a brusque hug. "My friends," he shouted through the din, "let's store it all in the temple and head into the city. I've been away from my queen too long."



The procession lacked splendor considering the king at its heart. Osiris walked the river promenade with a wooden smile and a randomly waving arm, the obligatory monarch on parade. The high priest and two assistants forged ahead, clearing the crowd from the street and tossing out flower petals by the handful. Qebera walked to Osiris's left and a slight pace behind. Set strolled to his brother's right, paying the humans as much mind as he would to weeds on the roadside. Eight of Qebera's men followed, restraining the four horses. Osiris had opted to stable the beasts at the palace, where he could visit them at a whim. They made quite a stir among the noble spectators.

The east bank was reserved for temples, the king's residence, and the homes and pleasure gardens of the rich. No staples grew on the bank. Palm and acacia branches waved overhead while grass, reeds, and flowers colored the brown earth. The mudbrick outer wall of the temple, and then the royal residence, displayed monumental paintings of Osiris and his triumphs. There was Osiris bringing emmer to the people, Osiris organizing the first city government, Osiris presiding over the creation of law. Before those colossal works of devotion the nobles pressed, welcoming their king. The upper crust of Abydan society shone even brighter than the artwork behind them, displayed as they were in their finest linens. They cheered, shouted and prayed as feverishly as the poor, their shouts rising to such a cacophony that their voices became a muddled roar.

"The year's harvest was good, I see," Osiris said to Qebera. "Fat Unas the architect needs to loosen the tucks in his tunic."

"Unas needs to tighten his resolve against snacks," Qebera said with a huff.

"Oh, I forgot," the king continued, and squeezed Qebera's shoulder. "You aren't of this bunch, old friend. Well, the torture lasts only a few minutes more, then it's across to the west bank and your family. You'll take my launch. I'll have it prepared as soon as we reach the gate."

"My thanks, lord. I miss my family greatly."

Set groaned against the sentiment. "Rubbish. Animals with family."

"It's family that sustains them," Osiris chided. "Without family, they *would* be animals. Without that and the balance of Ma'at."

"And without agriculture, government and science, which you brought them. You coddle them, brother. They're like dogs dressed in robes. I liked it better when they cowered in caves."

Osiris maintained his frozen smile, but sighed at Set's hostility. "Respect them, brother. They're reflections of us. They're the fallen tears of Ra, after all."

"They're vermin," Set insisted, then grunted dismissal. "But, I don't want to argue. You're newly home, and you're *my* ... family."

"Ah! See, you're catching on."

"I'll need to apprise you of the state of your kingdom. When might we meet for business?"

"My business is only with Isis for now. Perhaps in a day or two..."

"I'll put something together, maybe a mix of business and pleasure..." Set's voice trailed off and he came to a stop.

Osiris faltered and dropped his smile. He had been watching the crowd to his left, and was surprised by his brother's distraction and the sudden collapse of the nobles' adulation. He turned to follow their discomfited stares.

A man blocked the road ahead. He sat atop a mangy camel, cud juice greasing its jowls. Pans, poles, and bags hung at the animal's flanks, and its rider sat astride a thick saddle sheathed in black. He hunched within careworn brown and black wools, as hidden from the sun as any in Qebera's guard. He gripped the reins in a casual manner, an ivory and wood longbow held loosely in his free hand. He stared at Osiris, but gave no greeting.

For a moment, no one moved. Then Osiris stepped forward, pressing through the vanguard of priests to reach the lone rider. He grasped the camel's rope harness and ignored the beast's bellicose mutter.

"Djafa Seniram, what brings you to Abydos? All is well with your Bedouin brothers, I hope?"

The man nodded. His eyes cut through a slit in his layered clothing. "All is well," he said in the thick accent of his nomadic people. His arm jerked, holding out the bow. "A gift. A payment. We are indebted to your lady."

Osiris took the bow, and examined it. "Very fine work, Djafa Seniram. It's also very old. A family relic, I assume." He sought the rider's eyes. "My queen has earned this gift?"

"Yes. We Bedouin worship no gods, but we pay our debts."

"You are welcome into our fold, Djafa Seniram."

The rider snorted, then looked down the road as if ready to leave. "Your god Ra, the one of the sun, he kills our people. We await our own god, the one and true."

Osiris watched the man's chiseled profile. He was glad Set had not approached. This nomad would have incensed the god of storms, not a good move for one who wandered the vast, wild desert, the very cradle of storms. After a moment, Osiris nodded, tapped the camel's head, and released its harness.

"Thank-you for the gift, Djafa Seniram. It will find a place of honor in my home."

The Bedouin said nothing. He snapped his camel's reins, turning it to amble up the road. The assembled masses watched him leave. After a while, far past the palace wall, he turned off the road, and vanished between two buildings.



The king's retainers met him at the palace gate. They deluged him with reports on household affairs, requests for audiences, and prayers for divine intercessions. Osiris ignored them except for ordering the launch for Qebera and directing accommodations for the horses. He wanted no part of bureaucrats just then; they weren't his impression of home. He marched away from them, across the wide courtyard, past bowing servants, and through the main hall with its lofty stone ceiling and the double row of palm columns holding it up. He left this public chamber for the interior gardens, then turned left along the path to the queen's apartments. There the retainers broke off their pursuit, finally getting the point.

Osiris flung open the cedar doors to the queen's suite and stepped into a large central hall, modestly furnished. A few divans of woven rushes stood upon the hard gypsum floor along with a plethora of rugs,

tables, and a brazier unused in the summer heat. Light filtered in through narrow barred rectangles near the high ceiling, dimly illuminating yellow walls painted with a graceful floral decor. Several dark doorways interrupted those walls, all openings bare but for their bordering blue frames. A single lamp augmented the windows, a clay bowl containing a linen wick steeped in oil. It flickered near the back of the hall, close to the private rooms. Together, windows and lamp revealed a deserted chamber.

Osiris smiled, and closed the doors behind him. He dropped the Bedouin bow on a low, ornate table, then took up the oil lamp and marched through one of the doorways back toward his wife's bedchamber.

No one met him there.

Nonplussed, he returned to the main hall. He checked a few guest rooms on the way, and found them unused. "Isis!" he called. "Where are you, goddess? Your husband is home!"

No answer.

He poked his head into the spinning room. Except for the loom, the spinning wheel, and the queen's collection of ivory and ebony flax cards, the room stood empty. He walked back to the pantry, but found it bare, as always. Gods required no food; they ate only for pleasure, their treats brought in from the palace kitchen. Osiris pursed his lips, no longer wondering at his wife's coy game. He wondered instead if she were home at all.

And where were the servants, those priestesses who followed Isis everywhere?

"Oh, don't give up so easily," a voice whispered from within his head.

Osiris cocked an ear to follow that tug in his mind, and smiled when he realized where it coaxed him. He moved across the central hall and stopped at the alcove into the queen's bath chamber, that spacious enclosure with the smooth bed of stone surrounded by magnificent murals of the residing earth goddess. Along those walls, she reveled in her command of the forces of life, growth and procreation. The bath chamber was a room as much for seduction as for hygiene.

"I love you," Osiris heard in his head. He stepped as if compelled into the bath chamber, the lamp held up away from his eyes.

The goddess knelt on the bathing stone, her long black hair bundled high and held in place by bone pins, the only thing she wore. A linen-draped priestess stood just beside the stone, holding a towel as an offering to her queen. About the stone stood the bath water jars and the sponges used to reverently cleanse the most perfect body in Ra's universe. Oil lamps flickered in the corners, illuminating the posed scene in golden, wavering light.

Isis looked her husband up and down, her eyes sparking with mirth and watery light. Her voice, however, was distant.

"Impertinence," she said. "Has no one taught you to knock?"

Osiris said nothing. His breath had escaped him.

In a fluid movement, Isis rose to her feet. She turned to her retainer. "Leave us," she commanded. "This impertinent slave will serve me."

The woman left unnoticed. Osiris saw only the splendid, unblemished perfection of his wife. He ached to touch her brown skin, to feel the hint of muscle that showed beneath her softness, to caress her full, proudly firm breasts. His eyes traced the flowing curves of her hips, the slight—again, perfect—roundness of her belly. It contoured toward that arousing black triangle from which beads of water sparkled like jewels. A body of power, Osiris thought, full of sensual promise.

Then he realized he stood close to her, and blinked. She had mesmerized him again, this goddess, with her consuming, seductive presence. Osiris reached for her, wanting to explore that wonderful flesh.

She stopped him with a glance to his hand, then slowly raised her eyes to his. "Towel me," she ordered.

Osiris stooped for the towel the priestess had dropped. "Yes, my love and queen," he intoned with mock reverence. "Whatever you desire, I must provide."

Isis stepped down from the stone and onto the gypsum floor. "I hear impertinence even now, you slave. Why do you mock me? Do you not realize I am your goddess and queen?"

Osiris eased the towel against her neck and shoulders, moving steadily lower. "Oh, yes," he said. "You are my goddess; I certainly realize that." He moved the towel slowly about the mounds of her

breasts, squeezing gently. After a few moments of such teasing strokes, he attended her nipples, but only with the barest touch of linen. She lost her pretense at majesty then, and moaned. Her nipples strained erect. Well, Osiris thought, his mouth dry for her, how better to arouse the mother goddess if not through her life-giving breasts?

"I've missed you so much," Isis said in ecstatic snatches of breath.

"But no more," her husband promised. He dropped the towel, and took her in his arms. She found no difficulty disposing of his kilt.



Qebera returned home to the animated welcomes of four naked daughters. They accosted him with such delight that they almost toppled him into the sand. His only son, Hordedev, stood with Sanni back from the melee, just outside the door of the family's tiny hovel. All present bore the mark of their land: dark skin, lean bodies, and hollowed, tired eyes. Even the little ones showed wear in their hands and eyes.

"Ah, you rascals!" Qebera roared, and snatched a giggling child by the waist. "You're a delaying force, sent to keep me from my sovereign's side! Off with you, then! Don't you know I'm a great battle lord?" He plopped his prisoner to the ground, then shooed the bunch away in a herd. They didn't go far, but stayed giggling out of reach.

Qebera approached the doorstep of his home with an air of shy penitence. Eight months was a long time, long enough to let things go in the house, to miss the planting after the annual floods, even to miss the harvest. Mainly, though, it was plenty of time to vex—even to alienate—the wife he so respected and loved. She stood before the three-room hovel she made so warm, a woman never beautiful, cheated even of youth by hard years as a farmer's wife. Her face sagged from adversity, and her waistline was ruined by five chancy birthings. But her eyes showed intelligence from within their wrinkled cavities and her lips were a line of strength. To Qebera, such qualities blessed her with beauty beyond that of goddesses. His wife stood a champion upon the earth.

"Sanni," he said in a voice approaching reverence, standing before her as a pilgrim stands at the altar of his journeys. "Sanni, I've been a poor husband, away far too long. Will you take me back?"

The woman raised one eyebrow. "It depends. Is this a triumphant homecoming, or a pause between adventures?"

"Who can say?" Qebera sighed. "Can a mortal know the ways of gods? I'm home, and gladly so. But if Osiris sends for me in an hour, I would surely go."

Sanni huffed. "Well, you're honest enough. Come in, then. I'll get you bread and beer." She turned, shoving aside the rough linen curtain that served as their front door. In an instant, Qebera stood alone outside with his son. The girls had scattered throughout the yard. Nefera, the oldest at only eight years, ensured the men a bit of peace.

"Hordedev," Qebera said, slapping the boy's shoulder. His son stood almost as tall as he. "You grow faster than rushes, young man. What news of the land?"

"The river looked after us in your absence," Hordedev replied. He looked the credible farmer in his dirty loincloth, the telltale grime of backbreaking labor packed under his fingernails. Qebera smiled at the boy's apparent competence. Hordedev was new to authority. His child's sidelock was only recently cut. "We brought in more emmer than we could store, and almost as much barley. Most of the barley is fermented to beer. We worked with the neighbors to build a new granary, finished a month after harvest. We hold the contents in partnership against taxes." He held the curtain open for his father, then ducked into the house behind him.

"You've done well," Qebera said as his eyes adjusted to the interior dark. "You'll own this land some day, Hordedev, and no better manager could ever be found. You didn't let your neighbors get the better of you where that granary's concerned?"

"Old Negev witnessed the arrangements and committed them to memory. While he lives, there will be no arguments, and it's just until taxes."

They occupied a small home, though larger than many. The front room measured five paces square and housed the farm tools and the family's two goats. Its only light came through the door. Beyond stood the family space, a chamber ten paces deep and five wide, lit by two barred rectangular openings high up on the walls. In larger dwellings, a staircase to one side would lead to the roof, a place of comfort during broiling summers. But this house claimed no such luxury, just a third room in the back, a kitchen.

Sanni sat cross-legged on the family room's dirt floor, leaning over a low, rough table. She hacked at crumbly bread with a flint knife. Two bowls of beer stood at her elbow, awaiting thirsty throats.

"Beer!" Qebera cheered. "I'm hallucinating, I tell you, mad in the desert beneath the broiling sun." Sanni glanced up, her face chastening.

"Hordedev tells me we're rich," Qebera said as he lowered himself to the floor beside his wife. He handed one bowl to his son and claimed the other for himself.

"As rich as we'll ever be," Sanni said. "It was Isis's doing. She came one day at the seeding. She said hello, and asked after you."

"The goddess-queen, asking after me?"

"An excuse. She looked very casual, but she came to bless your crops."

Qebera accepted this as easily as the sand in his clothes. The goddess would make such a simple, private gesture. But, he saw fun in the news. "I don't know. Perhaps she finds me handsome, and wishes to tempt me away from you."

Sanni looked at him sidewise, then burst into laughter. "You?" she croaked, handing him his bread. "Not even I find you handsome!"

Qebera looked insulted. "Well, I admit, I could use some cleaning up—"

"The Nile would run dry trying to clean you up!"

Qebera feigned a hurt expression, and his wife laughed all the harder. The soldier-farmer relished that sound as he relished the dry bread he tore with his teeth. The food was old, heavy, and rough with grain and embedded sand, but after months of lizards and stringy hares, it settled in his stomach like the richest dessert. He washed it down with the warm beer, a full-bodied drink and one of a farmer's few luxuries.

After a moment, Sanni regained control. She shook her head as she smiled down at the table, wiping away tears. "Oh, Qebera," she said, "you're a lousy farmer and an absentee husband, but you so lift my heart with joy."

Qebera leaned over to kiss her on the temple.

For a moment, the three sat quietly in the gloom, then Sanni shrugged. "So, what adventures this time? We saw you with those fidgeting beasts. You looked rather foolish, dancing about to avoid getting kicked."

"Those 'fidgeting beasts' are horses, a gift from Ur, in Sumer. That was the only sizable kingdom we encountered on this trip, and they nearly wouldn't receive us. The king there is a high priest of something or other, and knows nothing of Osiris."

"So, what magic did our lord and god use to lessen the rudeness of your reception?" She prepared him another slice of bread, this one spread with honey from a jar at her knee. She did not fix one for Hordedev.

"Well, these Urians or whatever they're called are river people, like us. But they don't quite have our level of skill. Osiris noticed some farmers hauling water in jars to their gardens. They struggled up and down the banks like donkeys, so he left the city's locked gate and taught those men how to build a proper irrigation ditch fed by a shaduf. They didn't know what a shaduf was! When Osiris showed them how to build its frame, then use a counterweighted arm with a bucket on one end to lift their water from the river and so save hours of labor, they were amazed. We stayed with those farmers seven days. When their king noticed the irrigation system and saw that it worked, he welcomed us straightaway."

Hordedev grunted understanding. The people of Osiris were preeminent farmers.

"So, Set is in town," Qebera said after a pause. "He walked with us from the temple quay." He didn't mention the storm god's poor opinion of humans. *They're like dogs dressed in robes.*

Hordedev frowned, but covered his expression with a sip of beer. "He's been here three days, he and the goddess Nephthys. I guess he tired of the dead earth of his desert." He flinched at his own words. It was unwise to speak ill of gods.

Qebera froze, and noticed Sanni doing the same. He had hoped for usable gossip on the storm god's intentions. True, Set was brother to the king and queen, but he rarely came to Abydos unless Osiris was already home. To do otherwise was a challenge to Ma'at, sure to end in trouble. What did he want? Qebera no longer felt it safe to ask. He tried to resume a more natural disposition, and searched his thoughts for safer words to speak.

He cringed as Hordedev, incautious in youth, drove the subject on.

"You've met his queen, haven't you, father? How does she put up with him?"

Mostly, Qebera knew, she didn't. As captain of Osiris's guard, he had often stood duty in the royal residence while the gods ignored him as if he were a dog. He had heard much from their mouths, and had always pretended not to. He had heard that Nephthys despised her husband, that she avoided her home in Upper Egypt while Set was in residence. She wanted children, but the god of the desert was as barren as his kingdom, so her needs went unfulfilled. Nephthys told Isis everything—they were friends as well as sisters. What Isis heard, Qebera often heard as well. Still, none of it was his business, less so Hordedev's. Qebera squirmed before speaking.

"The trials of the goddess Nephthys are great, but not the business of humans. Let's not speak of them again." His son seemed to accept the rebuke; he shrugged from behind his bowl. Satisfied, Qebera continued. "Instead, if our presently available goddess could refill these drinks, and perhaps fill one for herself..."

Sanni fluttered a hand in dismissal. "I'm not a drunkard like you. I'll have my beer at dinner."

"I insist," Qebera said. "It's a special occasion."

Sanni huffed the ages-old complaint of the set-upon woman, but she had only to reach behind her for one of several bowls placed against the wall. In a moment, all three adults held full bowls of beer.

"A toast," Qebera announced, raising his drink. "To Osiris, who brings us the wonders of this world, and to Isis, who makes them work."

They drank in agreement with the truth of his words.



The queen's bed was huge, its mattress stuffed with soft, beaten flax and covered in layers of linen. There she renewed her marital union with vigor enough to kill a mere human. But, these were gods, with all the capacity that birthright implied. And they were, after all, in love.

Osiris lay on his back, his fingers intertwined behind his head. He trained his eyes on a section of ceiling. He was satisfied for now, so he avoided looking at his wife, the sight of whom stoked a hot desire. Isis lay on her side, propped up on an elbow. She ran teasing fingertips along her husband's flank.

"Your thoughts?" she asked. "Affairs of state, or the state of your affairs?" She grinned at her perceived cleverness.

Osiris groaned at the remark, looked at her sidewise, and corrected that mistake. He wanted to talk. "You're insatiable." He laughed, and watched the ceiling. "So, what keeps you busy the long months I'm absent? Is there another happy god in Egypt? Is that why Set is around?"

She pinched him. "How dare you! You know that if I were pleasuring Set, his mood would surely improve. Do you think me so incompetent?"

"Oh no," Osiris said with mock gravity. "You were created for lovemaking; that's undeniable. So, I wonder why Set is always so sour. Is Nephthys less skilled than you? Perhaps I should find out."

"You rascal!" She pinched him again.

"Ouch! I surrender. No, really. Set should be a happy, smiling boy. You and Nephthys are such miraculous twins—"

"The body is not the essence, my happy, smiling boy."

"No, the body is not the essence. Poor Nephthys. Only I share in your essence. Here. In this bed."
"And I yours."

He gave up. They kissed, and for hours he was lost.



Later, he tried again, this time with his eyes closed. Isis snuggled against his chest, sighing happily.

"Yesterday, as we came up from the temple, a strange thing happened: a visit from Djafa Seniram."

"And who is Djafa Seniram? A long-lost cousin from before the fall of Nun?"

"Djafa Seniram. You know, of the Bedouins."

"Ah." She tapped a finger against his chest. "Yes, the Bedouins. A stiff-necked people who refuse to enter the service of the gods."

"They're independent, yes, but good people regardless."

"They believe we are only shadows of greater gods to come."

"*One* greater god, if I recall."

"They refer to Ra, to grandfather. They just don't know it."

Osiris furrowed his brow. "Perhaps. Who knows? I think we've digressed. I was talking about Djafa Seniram. He showed up during the procession, blocked the whole road. He carried a gift, which he surrendered rather grudgingly."

"Oh? Perhaps he likes you." Her fingers made circles against his shoulder.

"The gift was for you."

The circles stopped.

"He said his people owed you a debt."

Isis pulled away from her husband. "Interesting. I wonder what he meant."

Osiris opened his eyes to a squint. His wife leaned on one elbow, her rich black hair framing her face. Her beauty wrenched him once again, but this time he fought the urge for her. "You're toying with me, aren't you? You've no idea what you did? This was *very* important to him."

Isis looked away into the room. Her brow furrowed. Osiris admired the long curve of her neck. He whimpered inwardly.

"These humans are easily impressed." The goddess released a luxuriant shrug. "Perhaps it rained and they ascribed it to—Oh, now I remember."

Osiris awaited the explanation, taking her in through short, careful glances.

"It was months ago, just after the harvest. A woman was brought into town, to the workers' quarter, desperately in need of a midwife. I was there to bless the harvest, just walking around and making conversation, really. The woman made such a fuss. She was having a difficult time. I knew she was not one of ours. She wore that sheep's material, and spoke a gritty language." Isis sat up, then drew a knee close to her bosom and hugged it. "The humans made such a terrible fuss, as if the world might end. Anyone could see her child was breech. I went to her, turned the child, and made the woman's pain recede." She shrugged again. "It was more to stop her shrieking than anything else."

Osiris considered her story, then erupted in a roar of laughter. He laughed until his sides ached, and kept on laughing.

Isis addressed him with an air of icy haughtiness. "Something amusing, O god and king?"

"Oh, you could say that," Osiris squeezed between guffaws. "You and your detached godhood, now *that's* amusing!" He wrestled his humor into rough submission and risked a look at her. "Oh my," he breathed, wiping away tears. "I'm reminded of why I love you, goddess, aside from your more obvious assets."

She watched him, her attitude unchanged. Curled up as she was, she might have been that cat goddess, Bastet. But Bastet was attitude and not much else; she needed more meat on her bones. "You could easily have departed," Osiris tried to explain. "You could have turned into a falcon, and simply

flown away. You helped that woman because she suffered. Because you felt her pain." He sighed. "That's why everyone loves you, Isis."

The goddess huffed, then slowly lowered herself to stretch along his side. "So, I'm soft," she challenged. "I can't stand suffering? I'll make you suffer, my insolent slave."

Uh-oh, Osiris thought, and felt her hands in familiar, sensitive places.



No one cared when Set took over the palace carpenter's shop. Osiris's man was smart enough not to complain, and worked in the yard to avoid the storm god's business. He had few projects pending anyway, just tool repair and small furniture jobs, and they weren't worth the ire of a moody immortal. Set had brought his own carpenter, and he, at least, was busy.

Just then, he was busy avoiding a violent death.

Set stood in the dusty shop, his carpenter cringing prostrate at his feet. The god drew his fingers across the long box laid on the bench before him, a marvelous work of smooth imported cedar with stunning ebony inlay. The craftsmanship shone in the afternoon sun that streamed through the shop's open doorway. That light also revealed the work as unfinished. Thin bits of wood cluttered the box's surface along with tools to work them. Intricate designs had been chiseled into the lid, looking like artful scars.

"This is good," Set said, "but you are behind. I need this finished in two days. Will you meet your schedule?"

The carpenter trembled against the packed earth floor. "Forgive me, lord, king of the desert lands, lord of the upper regions, but I am just a man, frail, old, and unwise. I—"

"Get to the point, human. My patience has limits."

"Forgive me, lord," the man continued. "The trip down river from Abu Simbel. The barge was unsteady. I could not work. I have since labored greatly to catch up—"

"None of this answers my question." Set's menace darkened the shop. He swept tools and chips off the box. They clattered across the room.

"No, lord, forgive a poor, stupid man. You *will* have your work on schedule, even if I die of overwork and sleeplessness."

Set drew himself up. "Understand, human, that you'll suffer worse than sleeplessness if you fail in this commission. The sand under your face will strip the flesh from your bones."

"Yes, lord, I understand fully!"

Set snorted doubt at those words. He eyed the man a moment, his face hot with disgust. Then, with no further word, he turned and stalked from the shop.

The carpenter remained prostrate a long time afterward, terrified the god might return. But, when no such misfortune came to him, he relaxed and rolled onto his back. His face and chest were coated in dust.

What was *that* all about? he wondered, though he wasn't at all surprised. Set possessed an infamous temper, lavishly dispensed. The carpenter had seen it before and would see it again before he died. But that was another time; with Set, one lived in the moment.

He tried to calm his heart enough to move, to think, to get to the work on which his life depended. Bringing himself by stages to his feet, he leaned against the object of Set's annoyance. A great piece of craftsmanship, the carpenter allowed himself, and therefore not to be hurried. It was a gift, after all. Would it not be better to delay its giving? Why deliver a sloppy present? But, the carpenter knew better than to question the plans of gods aloud. So, hurry he would. He didn't understand, but he didn't have to. All he needed was to work, and live.

He looked around for his tools, found them scattered in the dust. He reclaimed a wood chisel, a hammer, a knife, and his bowl of glue, now spilt. Well, there was yet enough to work through the night, then he'd borrow from the local man who normally worked this space.

The carpenter picked up his chips of wood. He shouldn't have to do this, he complained silently. If speed was so important, then why disrupt the craftsman's work? If Set wanted the job on time, then he should encourage, not terrorize.

Coming to Abydos had delayed the work.

The god's tantrums delayed it further.

And anyway, what did Osiris need of a coffin?