

CHAPTER 1

In a village deep in the rich and peaceful lands that surrounded the river Nile, two boys tried their very best not to cry, but their father had gone to war and come back wrapped in linen, and certain tears carry an unbearable weight of their own.

Koshei did a better job of holding them back, but he had ten summers to his brother's seven, so that was to be expected. Tyfon, smaller than his brother in many ways besides just age, had less success in keeping the tears from beading over his eyelids. They dripped down his cheeks and splattered on the floor next to his feet. The boys did their best, but still they cried.

"He looks cold."

"Don't be stupid," Koshei said, this time not punctuating it with an elbow to Tyfon's side.

"Don't call me stupid."

"Then don't say stupid things. You can't even see him."

Tyfon didn't reply to that, and Koshei let him be. The great hot disk of *Atun*, the sun, *Ra's* golden chariot, dipped down to the western horizon, making the river shine like a ribbon of bronze. It was late enough in the Season of Growth for the wheat in the fields to be as tall as a grown man, for the day to warm the mud brick walls of their home throughout the night. Deep down, below his heart and souls, down where he'd never admit it to anyone, let alone his brother, Koshei agreed with Tyfon. They might not be able to see *him*, really, just the wide sheets of linen that wrapped his body like a package, and

smelled of natron and herbs. But still... he looked cold.

“It will be some time still before we can finish,” the Embalmer said. He was a man that made both boys think of a word he’d heard his parent use: “reedy,” thin like papyrus on the riverbank. “The field embalmers did a... well, a fine job, but it must be at least until the end of the month of *Pharmuti* before he will be completely prepared, and ready for the opening of the mouth, and his journey. The coffin will be prepared well before then, I have been assured. Very elegant, the finest carving—”

“No,” Mother interrupted him. Her voice had been flat for the entire day. She hadn’t even raised her voice when the boys’ usual fight had started that morning. She just asked for them to stop, quietly, and they had stopped.

“No, missus?”

“Just a simple coffin. We can’t afford a fine one.”

“Ah. No, my dear, do not worry about expense. The Great King Merneptah is providing.”

Mother looked at the Embalmer, that same blank look she’d had since the messenger arrived, the week before. “Pharaoh is paying for my husband’s coffin?”

“Pharaoh Merneptah is paying for the burials of all the heroes of the battle of Perire.”

“Oh.”

The boys had seen the Pharaoh, when the army had passed through on its way south, up the river, back to Iawnu, the city of the Two Pillars. Even at their age they knew it should have been a momentous occasion, something to fill their memories forever and bridge the distance between their souls and the universe. He’d stood above His people and told the tale of a glorious victory against foreign invaders from across the Great Green. Barbarians and raiders, smashed into the sands of Kemet by the majesty of Pharaoh’s army and his immense magic.

To Koshei, it was just an old man wheezing in the sun. To Tyfon, it was a confusing mishmash of names and unfamiliar words, “*Shekelesh*” and “*Teresht*” and “*Peleshet*.” To both of them, it was just a lot of words to *not* say the only thing that mattered: Their Father was dead.

It had been barely a month since their father had left. They’d cried then, too, and fought as usual, until Mother had put a stop to both with *that* look, and Father had beckoned them over with a smile. “Don’t coddle them, Akhon,” Mother had said. “They know better than to weep.”

“They’re not weeping, Isha,” Father had responded. “They’re being strong. Aren’t you, boys?”

He’d been wearing the kilt and hardened linen tunic of a soldier, with bronze medallions at his shoulders and waist. His wooden shield and spear had sat against the far wall, while he’d brought them both up close to see his *khopesh*, the bronze sickle-curved sword.

Koshei and Tyfon had played soldier many a time, and imagined the day when they could trade in their children’s loincloths for the clothes of a hero, give up the stiff reeds and sticks and palm for that exact sword. Father’s sword.

When he spun it with its point on the ground, for a moment the curved blade became the illusion of an oval, like the loop of the *anhk*, the symbol that meant Life.

“While you’re being my strong boys here, you do not have to worry about me. I will be down in the North, at the coast of the Great Green, with the strongest army in the world. Pharaoh’s army. Nothing can defeat us, you know that. But do you know why?” He had traced his finger along the bronze, glinting golden in the light from the house’s high windows. His finger had marked out figures etched into the blade, figures the boys knew but could not read: Falcons and bulls and the disk of the sun, a snake and tall flags and waves of water and medallions. Father spoke the words as his finger moved,

“Strong Bull who rejoices in Truth, Lord of fear and great of majesty, the Soul of *Ra*, beloved of the gods, beloved of *Ptah*, satisfier of *Ma’at*.” He stopped, looked at the boys to see that they’d followed. “The names of our Great King blesses this blade. His magic is channeled through the bronze. He keeps the blade sharp and strong and fast and powerful.” He had tapped the medallions on his linen tunic, and the bands on his arms. “The bronze here channels magic to protect me from harm, and to make me as swift as the wind.

“The bronze lets the magic flow, like a canal channels the Nile. It lets the power of the Living *Horuh* fill us, as His army, and delivers us victory. You need not worry about me, little ones. I have the gods with me. One day, you will both be grown and strong and ready to take up your own weapons and armor. You both will protect Kemet, the Black Land of the Riverbank, as I do. I, for one, cannot wait to see that wondrous day.”

The soldiers had brought his spear and *khopesh* home, along with the body. Both had been cleaned, the spear’s shaft and the sword’s hilt wrapped in new leather. Since the day the boys had first seen his *khet*, the cold, fragrant, quiet, empty house of their father’s souls, the weapons had sat leaned up against the wall of the house’s common room. Mother did not seem to see them, didn’t say anything any of the times she found the boys, one or the other or both, standing in the room staring at the weapons, distracted from the rest of the world by the glint of sunlight on the bronze.

On the morning of the funeral proper, she acted. The boys had both been awake since the first hour of the day, when the sun crept over the eastern shore. They’d washed, eaten stale bread, dressed in good kilts. Then ended up, once again, standing in the common room, staring at the spear and the sword.

“Boys,” Mother said to them. She wore a new kilt and linen tunic, dyed dark gray. She’d colored her eyes with *kohl*, and left

her short, dark hair uncovered. "Are you ready?"

Koshei turned, pulled his brother into place and said, "Yes, Mama."

"But—"

"Quiet, Tyfon."

"We were going to—"

"Quiet."

"What is it, Tyfon?" Mother's question stopped the nascent fight.

Tyfon motioned towards the weapons. "Should we take them with us?"

Her gaze touched on the weapons, but didn't linger. There was a layer of fine dust on them.

"Maybe Baba will need them," Tyfon said.

Voices slipped through the doorway from the courtyard outside to fill the silence in the house. Professional mourners, the priest, the embalmer's crew, all chatted genially. They stood by the coffin, imported cedar and painted gypsum and black resin, carved with crossed hands below the face that didn't look enough like Akhon. They would proceed across the sunlight-speckled waters of the Nile, to the western shore and the cemetery soon enough, with little Koshei and Tyfon and herself in the lead. She would walk proud and calm to inter her husband, and she would not sob. She would let the mourners do the wailing, so that the gods would know that a good man was entering the afterlife, but she had long ago told herself that she would not cry at the funeral. Akhon deserved her strength, and her children needed her example.

Tyfon's words, the looks of boys, how much they looked like Akhon, undid the control she had maintained for so long. Certain tears carry an unbearable weight of their own.

"Mama? I'm sorry, Mama."

She smiled through the tears escaping her eyes and dripping down her cheeks, and gave Tyfon a quick hug. The look

on his face brought a laugh to her lips. “No, my strong boys. It is fine. Your Father does not need these weapons now. The dead no longer need to fight.”

She stepped over to the weapons, motioned the boys to stand together. “Your father’s weapons were a part of him, as much as his arm or foot. So, they carry with them his *ba*, and his *sekhem*, and keep his *ren* safe and true.” The boys followed what she meant, even if they still sometimes forgot what each part of the soul meant. “He will rest in the fields of *Duat*, waiting for us, and has left these for us on this side of the gates. They are how you must keep his name in your hearts, always.”

She shifted the spear to one hand, took up the *khopesh* in her other. She held the spear out to Tyfon, and gave him the motherly “*do as I say*” stare that compelled obedience. Tyfon took the spear, and marveled for a moment at the feel of the leather-bound wood shaft in his hands, the weight of the bronze point. It was taller than he was. “You must grow strong and skilled, so that you can use his spear, and always be ready to destroy the enemies of the Two Lands.” The two lands—Black Land of the River and Red Land of the Desert, but also the Upper Land of the Cataracts and the Lower Land of the Marshes. All of them the same, one and both. *Kemet*. Home.

Koshei looked stunned, staring at his brother holding the forbidden spear. His shock expanded beyond measure when she held out the *khopesh* to him. He put both hands around the hilt and slowly, carefully, rotated the gleaming blade until it was upright. “You must grow strong and wise, so that you can use his *khopesh*, and always be ready to defend the honor of *Kemet*.”

She stood and took both brothers by the shoulder. She let the anger slip from the prison she had kept it trapped in, ever since she’d learned of his death. It filled her, replaced the grief, but it did not escape. It filled her with pride, and purpose, and determination to raise Akhon’s children as well as she

possibly could. She said to them, “Both of you, my strong sons, must always be ready to do whatever is needed. You must give your lives, and your souls, to avenge him. Remember him, and remember that most of all.”

Over a thousand miles to the north, across a sea of green and a sea of black, in a land of dense forest and snow-capped mountains, a young girl tried not to cry, for some tears carry a burden that she had been taught to fear. The land she and her tribe had traveled through for all of the fourteen winters of her life, and for so many lives before hers, would one day be called *Central Europe*, but had no name among her people other than *The Forest*, and no name at all among the palaces and cities of the *lands-surrounding-the-sea*, far to the distant south.

The girl held her tears in check as she dressed herself in wool and deer hide, and as she joined the gathering in the open clearing between the great forest trees. She did not cry, even as her mother’s body was placed upon the funeral pyre.

She had gathered the wood for the pyre alongside the rest of the tribe. Dry branches from the ground, given by Sister Oak and Brother Pine. The needles had pricked at her skin, numb with the chill of coming winter. Now the scent of the pine stung at her nose as the body settled and the weakest branches cracked.

The urn she’d chosen sat by the pyre, awaiting the ashes. She’d made it herself earlier in the season, long before this need, for the tribe’s general uses. The clay of a stream now long back in the tribe’s trail, well-fired, brown with striations of black along its broad sides. One of her mother’s favorites. Cleaned, now, and waiting for the ashes.

The girl hadn’t cried during any of those tasks, and not when she’d cleaned her mother’s body. She’d brushed her

mother's hair, and used a cloth of old wool to wipe away blood and dirt from what skin hadn't been torn, from the half of her mother's face that hadn't been rent by tooth and claw.

The girl did all the things that were necessary to ensure that her mother would be allowed to rest, and she did not cry. She had been taught, and taught well: to grieve before the fire was to invite the Old Trickster.

"Here, Doryah, be useful." The Grandmother handed her a baby, barely a whole month old, swaddled in furs, with a tuft of dark hair atop and bright little eyes that had yet to find their color. "Keep her quiet," the Grandmother told the girl, not having to say *and safe*. Not Doryah's grandmother, exactly, nor the little baby's, precisely. She was an Elder, hair tinged with spider silk and eyes framed with wrinkles, and thus she was everyone's Grandmother. So the girl, Doryah, obeyed without comment and held the baby close, as the Grandmother went off to lead the prayers.

"The meadow breathes. The storm returns to its mountain. The moon opens its eye and wakens the sun. Through all of the seasons, you remain. Sleep by the embers, sleep through the long deep of the night. Let the new sunrise warm your face as the hazel tree blossoms."

The girl did not pray, either. Had not, since her father had left to go south. Further south than the winter sun, across some green sea none of them had ever seen, to fight for the palace kings, against city dwellers and river people. To win riches and food and maybe a place of safety for their tribe, the People of the Earth, *Teresti*. Many tribes sent men south to raid, to fight, to provide, season after season, and he had said he'd be back before she was old enough to have her own children. Her mother had said they would never see him again.

The girl had given up on prayer. What was the use of talking to gods that let families shatter, left their people adrift in the darkness between the trees, frightened and alone?

The rest of the tribe continued the prayers, regardless.

“Take my eyes to watch over your grave. My arms to guard the way. My legs to carry out hope. My skin to bring warmth to the cold. My breath to speak your name. Take my heart for your journey, for it is yours. Father of Skies, and Mother of Earth, watch her on her journey, let her be untroubled by the cry of ulf or the claw of the Brown One, let her reach your meadow and bathe in your waters.”

The girl sniffed but said nothing. Brown One. *Bruin*. They wouldn't even say the proper name of the animal that had killed her mother: *Ahrktosh*. *Never say its name in your prayers, lest the Hill of Fur and Death hear your disrespect, and be angered*, went the usual lesson. Another of so many, all of them at their feet—just *Run, Hide, Pretend that the forest is a safe home*.

The little baby let out a *poot*, and a whiff of earthy stink, and the girl thought *Yes, that's it exactly*. It was not *Ahrktosh* that made the forests and the grasslands of the tribe's travels unsafe, unwell, unright. Not the Brown Ones that kept the tribe, all of the many tribes, constantly on the move, like rabbits chased by the smell of a hunter. It was not the packs of *ulf*, or the famine times when oak gave little and the ground even less, that made them rush to build a pyre whenever anyone died. That made them bury the ashes in the ground, in urns of well-fired clay.

They gave the *real* reason all sorts of fake names, too: *Spider's Web, The Looming, Old Trickster*, all just ways to give the fear between the trees a form and a shape and a weight. They prayed and made charms, built lessons to teach children, and never ever ever talked about what it was all really about. What they did all this *for*.

The lighting of the torch marked the end of the prayers, and the start of what would be her mother's last journey, or so it was usually said. The ritual that separated the living from the dead, and gave them all a light to see what had passed, and what would be for them all. *We all go to the fire, in the end*, the very eldest of the Elders so often said, and so often just before

they, themselves, would meet it. *Fire for the dead, so that they may light the way forward for the living.* In that, the girl found some amount of solace and truth. The only thing that ever worked, to keep the darkness back and to keep them away from *The Ones Who Come Back Wrong*, was fire. Both the light that kept the shadows of night at bay, and that which turned to ash those that had died.

A bland, thick boulder of a boy, near the same age as Doryah and undoubtedly expected to be a husband to her eventually, was given the honor of carrying the glowing torch to the pyre. Most boys seemed like felled tree trunks to Doryah, and most men only somewhat less thick and useless. The thought of making the grunts with any of them, that she was supposed to look forward to it... The baby in her arms let out a little *coo*, and the girl thought, *Sure, it's cute and all, but worth that?* She shook her head, stuffed as it was with doubt.

And then, as if on cue, the boy with the torch promptly squared up, stepped forward, and tripped. He doused the torch between the ground and his own gut, got a solid burn and let out a squeal of pain, and everyone else except the girl and the baby in her arms scrambled to help him, save him, finish the ritual. They shouted, the Grandmother loudest, *We have to get the pyre lit!*

The rush of it and the violence of the shouting startled the baby, set her to crying. The girl whispered, "Shhhh, I have you, little sprout. I'll protect you. Don't worry, little nut." The same words her own mother had used, over and over again. The words that filled her dreams when she was frightened, in the dark times when only her mother's voice would make everything right.

The words she would never hear in her mother's voice, ever again, outside of those dreams.

The girl hugged the little baby close. Comfort for them both, from the rush of fear around the pyre, and the rush of

emotion within. The sudden shock of opening within her chest, the realization that death had taken from her what could never be returned. Her mother was dead.

The feeling forced a tear to the edge of her eye, the unbearable weight brought more, and soon the tears were dropping to the forest floor no matter how hard she tried to hold them back. Through the tears that wouldn't stop, she stared past the unlit pyre, through the woods beyond, to the cloud-shrouded moon that gave its sullen light to the darkness.

So, unlike everyone else still scrambling to help the injured boy or get a new torch, or the baby in her arms, her gaze rested in just the right place to see when the body of her mother sat up. To see it turn towards Doryah, split both the whole and the ruined halves of its face with a smile. A look of malevolent glee, of promised horror.

At that moment, the girl no longer cried, but she did scream.