



Chapter 1

Journal Translation

ICE-COLD FINGERS DRAGGED ALONG my neck before shoving me forward into the fire-lit chamber of judgment. My eyes adjusted to the dim light, and the ghostly forms around me faded into the fog, leaving the smell of sickeningly sweet incense. Gold and red carpets that had stretched onward now ended. Fear wracked my trembling body.

I had entered the *Duat*—the Egyptian underworld.

I wore silky white robes that caressed my skin as I stood before Anubis, the towering god with the head of a jackal. My own heart sat in my open palms. The squishy flesh of the organ beat faster and louder, its contracting muscles vibrating my hands and carrying up my arms and into my chest. Its pounding radiated into my ears, and sticky blood streamed between my fingers.

Anubis reached out with a human hand three times the size of mine, and his fingers wrapped around my heart, squeezing. My chest burned, as if filled with fire. I nearly collapsed in pain. Golden eyes bored into mine, searching my soul. Saliva strung from his curled lips. The fog of my breath billowed from my mouth like smoke into the darkness. Anubis snarled and set my beating heart upon one of the massive scales.

The feather on the opposite scale fluttered in a breeze that I could not feel. Squawking, a baboon ran back and forth atop the scales, testing the wood and twine.

Shrouded in shadow at the far end of the room, the face of a man rested atop another giant being. His skin was deep green, and he sat atop a golden throne. Osiris himself. My hands shook. Small creatures with gangly limbs scuttled around his throne, squeaking and pointing at my waiting heart.

Then deathly silence.

Something squawked. I jumped in surprise. A falcon perched atop a stone pillar beside me, but its face was human, and young ... familiar.

It was my face. My *ba*—part of my soul—awaited our fate. I shivered in terror.

The scales tipped, and my heart descended, foretelling that my very existence was going to end right here and now. Seated in the audience surrounding the hall, robed humanoids with animal heads shouted and jeered, their voices pounding into my brain.

“You have not lived a balanced life,” a figure with the head of a falcon yelled through a parting beak as it stood, its voice screeching and ringing my ears. Its purple robe waved open to reveal a human chest, shaven and toned with thick muscle. “You have not listened to the god within you, and you have not cared deeply enough for your friends and family. Nor have you helped those who are less fortunate.”

“I have,” I screamed, attempting to deny all the accusations. The taste of salt filled my mouth. My *ba* shrieked as it took flight to escape. This would be the end, when everything, even a piece of my soul abandoned me ...

I quaked with fear, but something sparked in my mind. A memory.

Anubis glanced to the Devouring Monster’s platform. The creature would be waiting to consume any hearts tossed his way. I imagined that I could see the crocodile jaws gaping from the darkness, awaiting their next meal, though such a feast would never end its eternal hunger.

“Hail to you, gods in this Hall of Judgment,” I shouted, unable to control my words. My voice was soft at first, but it grew louder and echoed through the chamber. Spinning and facing Anubis and Osiris, I recalled the spell from the Book of the Dead—the one upon the walls of the tomb at Crocodilopolis. “I know you, and I know your names on this day of great reckoning. I was born in Rosetjau. I have given bread to the hungry and water to the thirsty. And your power was given to me.”

The contingent of humanoids in the audience didn’t budge. Their shining scepters sat frozen against colorful robes as they stared in silence.

I held my breath.

The scales wavered, and Anubis howled like a wild beast.

My legs tensed, telling me to run away and—

Then, the scales righted—my heart and the feather an even weight. Air rushed from my lungs in a burst of relief as I collapsed to my knees. My chest spasmed as I gasped for breath.

Anubis paced around the scales and scooped up my still-beating heart. He glanced back for the Devouring Monster, but it was gone. Akhenaten had somehow summoned the Devourer to the world of the living to consume souls of men there. Only a pile of dead hearts sat waiting beside the monster's platform.

Anubis sighed, as if he missed his horrid pet.

The scratch of a pen on papyrus made the roots of my teeth twinge with discomfort. Another bird-headed figure behind the scales wrote and nodded, the long, hooked beak of an ibis parting to speak.

The dark ceiling opened up and blinding light poured down, engulfing me. My ears rang.



Chapter 2

Journal Translation

WIND BLEW THROUGH MY short hair and whistled in my ears as I flapped mighty feather-covered wings at my side. Now I was a falcon with the head of a man, a *ba*, soaring through the sky. I was flying. Each flap of my wings came as naturally as taking a step. Land and river blurred by beneath me, the shining Aten descending for the western horizon.

A torrent of joy overcame me as the familiar comforting beat of my heart pounded inside my feathered chest, the organ back where it should be. Throwing my human head back into the gale, I smiled as I spread wings like sails. My body felt light, drifting on the air currents—a real bird. I'd passed judgment. Me, the cursed servant boy of Akhenaten ...

But how did a common man ever pass all of the tests before the *Duat* and cast all of the spells needed from the Book of the Dead? There'd been so many spells, and I only knew them by studying the book inside that tomb in Crocodilopolis. Were common men and women doomed to achieve the afterlife without the assistance of royalty? Everyone knew more about the next life than me—Akhenaten had purposely shielded me from any sacred knowledge for some reason I did not yet understand—but did others have to wait until someone else came through, someone who knew the secrets, or were they cursed to wander the darkness, like a Dark One, searching for the Hall of Judgment for eternity?

“Father, where are you?” I said into the gusting wind of the upper reaches of the sky. I should be able to find him now. And the son of Hapu ... was he also here, in the land of the dead? My heart froze. No, Father might not have a *ba* to find and speak with—his body and heart had been consumed

by fire, the work of my vile former master, Akhenaten, and his monstrous bodyguard, Suty.

Wind snagged my feathers and twisted my limbs—similar to when Suty had wrenched my arms. I plummeted. The black and red margins of the fertile and barren desert around the Nile raced up to me.

Whipping my arms, I fought the gust, as if swimming and fighting against the current of the Nile. It was no use. I couldn't overpower such force.

The ground neared.

Then, instead of fighting, I turned with the wind, reversing and giving in to the pressure. The feathers around my wings billowed like sails and I shot skyward, into the clouds, my stomach catching in my throat. I flapped my wings and steadied myself within the currents, my body feeling as if it had no weight at all. Angling myself, I flew on, racing over the kingdom of Egypt.

I was unsure what I was supposed to do now, since I'd been unsure that I'd even end up as a *ba*. All I'd known was that only someone who'd known death and the beauty of the dead—whatever that meant—could confront an immortal god-king and ever hope to defeat him. And because the magician was dead, I was hoping to find his soul so that he could teach me whatever it was that I needed to know.

People wandered below, toiling under the Aten. They appeared to be living humans. I shouted to them, diving lower by sucking my wings, which felt like my hands and arms, into my sides and buzzing so closely over one man's head that his stubby hair brushed my taloned feet. I flapped my wings before I hit the ground and rose back up into the air. The wind ruffled the feathers on my tail as I angled them and my body to steer myself and turn around.

The man didn't even look up, and no others responded to my cries. I screamed like my soul, and Nefertiti's and Father's, depended on it. Nothing. I gazed into the horizon, riding the gale.

Where were the deceased souls? Perhaps living people could not see the dead, but hopefully that meant that I now could.

A dark cloud took shape in the skies ahead, as if rain and thunder gathered together in one focus of anger. Black dots sailed into the cloud, building its size and blotting out the Aten. My wings stopped flapping,

but the gale carried me closer. I stuck my taloned feet into the air, as if to dig into something and stop. It did nothing to slow my momentum. Then I attempted to fly backward, but my feathers folded. No use. Wings didn't work that way.

A whispering chorus hummed over the wind. The cloud advanced, the whispers growing quickly and amplifying to shouts. My ears rattled and my head rang. Tucking my wings, I attempted to dive back for the earth. But it was too late.

Dark shapes assaulted the sky around me, diving against the wind with dark feathers. Their howling screams deafened me. The silhouette of an eagle, a heron, a duck . . . Human heads sat atop many of these birds, but the heads of other animals, beasts of all types, intermixed with them—in afterlives of their own. There must've been tens of thousands of them . . . One knocked into me as they flew past, sending pain—even in this life—across my chest. I tumbled and twirled into the fray, and something snapped. More pain.

The sky and earth spun. More fowl of all sorts shot past me for what felt like ten minutes.

Several of my broken feathers flapped against the wind as I righted myself, the horizon still tilting. I faced the gale that these creatures were flying into.

The cloud made up of these tightly gathered *ba* rose like smoke, funneled into a long tube, and raced up for the setting Aten. They paused. Fanning out, the *ba* and cloud dispersed. Black dots dived back to the earth but split up—each traveling their own separate way. The Aten was about to set, and *ba* could travel the world only by day or risk losing their soul to the chaos all around us.

I flapped my wings and chased after them. How would I find whom I was looking for—the magician, or Father, or my beloved cat, Croc—unless Croc was the beast that I'd seen before I'd drowned and still wandered the world of the living?

Tucking my wings, I dived and careened toward at the closest fleeing fowl. The bird flew for the western hills and landed upon a jutting cliff.

Turning, this *ba* walked into the face of the mountain and disappeared. I flapped again, trying to slow my momentum as I sailed at the cliff face. Where had *the ba* gone?

My talons collided with hard dirt and scraped against rock, but my bird body tumbled forward and smacked into the cliff face with a thud. Pain pounded my skull and exploded in my back. I tasted metal. Shaking my head, I fought to stand, using my wings like arms and the tips of my feathers like fingers. The hot rock beneath my feet was hard, but it also felt shaky. Shadows descended all around me.

The lower half of the disc of the Aten set behind the mountains. Soon, I would need to get inside.

I examined the cliff face, looking for an opening. Nothing. I stuck out the two broken feathers at the end of my wing and prodded the rock. Stabbing pain arose in what should have been my hands. The rock was solid. How had that *ba* disappeared? There must be a way inside—one I couldn't see.

Closing my eyes, I sucked in a breath and stepped into the cliff. Everything went dark. I was inside. Feeling along the inner walls, I followed a narrow passage. It spiraled downward, into the roots of the mountain.

I crept—

A deep voice boomed, shaking the air around me, "Who enters my home?"

I froze.

"This is *my* sanctuary," the voice yelled. "Find your own curse."

I swallowed in fear. What was a *ba* supposed to do? Find its mummified human body and its tomb to rest during the night? I didn't have one ...

"Come no closer." Feathers flapped in the darkness, swirling stagnant air. The smell of death and rot blew across my face as dust tickled my throat. I coughed, and the sound echoed into the depths of the mountain.

Two lights appeared—no, two eyes, green eyes reflecting whatever light reached into these depths.

"I am looking for someone," I whispered. "I need help."

"Do you know how many times I've heard that over the millennia?" The green lights flickered as the *ba* blinked. "How many recently deceased have tried to enter my home?"

"I need to find someone so that I may return to the world of the living."
Silence.

The eyes narrowed as the creature approached with stomping feet. Green light surrounded me, casting an eerie glow across the tunnel. Feathers from

the *ba*'s wings extended like fingers, making shadows like claws appear on the walls. "No one returns to the world of the living after arriving here. You shouldn't even want to go back there; the pain ..."

"I have left too much unfinished to—"

"You all say that in your first days." The *ba* stepped into the light—a white shore bird with long legs carrying the head of an elderly man with wrinkles so deep they appeared like trenches. Spider veins ran under his skin. "Within a week you'll forget, and then you'll live free here."

I gritted my teeth. "I will still seek freedom for myself and my loved ones in the world of the living. And I will for eternity."

The old man's lips parted slowly, as if they'd been mummified. "Find where your body was buried and be off." His upper lip rose into a snarl and revealed teeth like a predator's, which flashed green.

I stumbled back and fell, crashing into the dirt as I heaved for breath. Thick grit caked my bloody feathers like mud as they folded beneath me. I grunted and pushed myself to my taloned feet and faced the dead man. "I'm looking for the son of Hapu, the reincarnation of Imhotep."

The snarling face retracted back into the shadows. "You will not find him here; I am merely someone forgotten, erased from history. But I know of whom you speak. For which pharaoh are you seeking his assistance?"

Images of Akhenaten's elongated face and sunken cheeks formed in my mind, his black-painted eyes growing like sockets of a skull as they closed, his animosity directed at me. Rage ignited in my heart. My former master—the one who had taken Nefertiti from me and harmed her beyond my understanding, murdered my father, and thrown me into slavery. But this *ba* shouldn't know what I'd want to do to Akhenaten—if I was ever able to face him again.

"I am searching for answers that only the magician could know," I said. But what could even the magician do? I was already dead. "The son of Hapu was training me ... to help Egypt recover from its current leadership. Only he knew how to accomplish what needs to be done in the world of the living, and I was told that only someone who knew the dead could ever have a chance of achieving it."

Echoing laughter erupted, and the white feathers of the *ba*'s wings retracted back into darkness. "Perhaps you found me for a reason. Or

perhaps you are a fool. To die because someone told you to.” More laughter. “I once thought as you did.” His face appeared in the green light again, his eyes wandering over memories inside his head. “Have you ever heard of the intermediate periods?”

My lips pursed against my rising agitation. I tapped my talons against the rock wall, the scaly skin of my falcon’s feet scraping against the ground. “No.”

“Of course not,” the old man replied. “Because men like me have been erased. Men who overthrew the notion of pharaoh as the one god.”

“I’ve learned there are many gods.”

“But have you considered the possibility that Pharaoh is not immortal—only a man himself?” He fell into a brief silence. “I did, as did several others during my time. We tried but could not overthrow him. However, once his line ended, we brought about a time of shared leadership ... between ordinary men.”

“This ‘intermediate period’?” I asked. “It must’ve been a time filled with chaos and wars for power and dominion.”

He shook his shadowed head. “That is what the following pharaohs told their people—and history—but we and our children experienced a time of self-expression, knowledge, freedom, and economic advancement rarely seen during the rule of the god-king. Common man could achieve the afterlife, not only the privileged few.”

My forehead pulled back in surprise. This old man had at one time altered Egypt’s fate? As I was attempting to do? Images of el-Amarna—Pharaoh’s new capital city—ran through my mind. The artists had portrayed his chosen land upon walls and monuments as flourishing with life and abundance: gardens, birds, butterflies, happy citizens. But in reality, there was hunger, back-breaking work, and death—even for the free laborers.

“You must be a mighty king in the land of the deceased,” I said.

“It didn’t last.” His glowing green eyes closed. “Those who control power only desire more. In time, the tale of the legendary King Menes receiving the throne from the god Horus returned. And so did Pharaoh and his right for complete power. To know the past is to know the future ... Man’s desire to rise to power will always return. But now—here—we are all equals.” He spread his wings, as if to indicate the world of the dead all around us.

“But you were punished for your actions?” I asked. “To live here in this mountain alone, even though you passed Anubis’s judgment?”

“The reasons for my solitude are none of your business.” He raked his shore bird’s nails at the end of his three long toes along stone. The resulting screech made the roots of my teeth tingle and ache. “Everyone in the underworld could be an equal to anyone else, if they believed they deserved it. Still they toil, serving others who command such an illusion ...”

“Complacency is not my forte,” I whispered. “It is the reason I am here. Perhaps more could become equals in our world as well.” I pictured my companions; Nefertiti, my lost love; and Mutnedjmet, Nefertiti’s curious sister who’d befriended me before my banishment to slavery for defying my former master. *Father ... could I still save your soul if I return to the world of the living?*

“Complacency will help you if you return to the world of the living.” The slapping steps of his long bird toes faded as he strode deeper into the darkness. “The other path is one of great suffering. You’ve already seen much, but not as much as you will if you return. A memory for you: He who commands the sphinx rules Egypt, and no one has done so in millennia.”

The bridge of my nose furrowed in confusion. I’d heard that somewhere before, several times ... but what did it even mean?

“Be off; you will find no more answers here. The magician is dead, supposedly a product of his own hand. Dead, like the Dark Ones and your father ... and a power does not allow the magician to fly about the underworld.”

I gasped, air sucking through my open lips and into my bird lungs. “Do you know my father?”

“No more answers.”

Images of the curses I could face if I took the treasure from within the hidden tomb of Amenhotep—as the magician had suggested I do—popped into my head. “Tell me one last thing: Do the dead really need material possessions, ones from the world of the living?”

The footsteps of the *ba* paused. Then they pounded the soft ground, growing louder. The *ba* appeared from the darkness in a flash, rushing straight at me. He barreled into my face and neck with a smack that slammed me down to the hard ground. He grabbed my broken feathers between his

wings and dragged me—my back digging a line through the gritty dirt—to the entrance and tossed me outside. Sliding out of the mountain’s cliff face, I teetered on a ledge, the darkness of twilight all around me. I stepped again into the rock cliff but hit the hard surface with my nose. Dull pain spread across my face. The opening the other *ba* and I had passed through was gone, as if the darkness sealed the entrance.

I had no knowledge of the magic at work in this new world and didn’t have time to ponder my circumstances. As a *ba*, I needed to find shelter or suffer unknown consequences, possibly similar to the Dark Ones, whose souls had been consumed.

The wind gusted, catching my feathers. Flapping my wings, I leapt into the air, and the wind lifted me as if I were made of papyrus. I soared into the dusk, and something tugged at my heart, directing me northwest—as if I’d grown in instinct for migration. I flapped against the raging air currents with all my might, racing for the remaining Aten—the orange sliver of its crest, barely peeking over the mountains.

Screeching arose behind me.

I glanced back over the feathers of my back. Dark forms flooded the sky, glowing eyes of green darting about, hunting. They flew in packs, scouring the land below.

Were these dead birds searching for *ba* who remained out at night? Would they hunt down the lost souls? My chest felt like ice as it constricted, my breathing straining against my hollow ribs.

A pair of green eyes settled on me and a feathered form dived in my direction.

I flapped my wings as fast as I could, but wind shoved against me in pounding gusts. Screams from the dead birds with green eyes called out to me, sending shudders along my spine. Dark Ones or Hunters? Coming for me?

But soft whispers also called out to me under the fading light of the Aten, though I couldn’t see where they originated from. I followed the direction my heart was guiding me, and the whispers amplified.

Soaring over the Nile, I followed a lone branch to the west. Memories sprang into my mind. Crocodilopolis ... the dancing dwarf brothers from Nubia, collected as slaves for Egyptian royalty; Tia, the slave woman; my companions ...

The cries of my pursuers grew louder as they closed in. Beaks tore into the feathers on my tail, plucking and pecking. Pain jolted across my backside as my tail feathers were ripped out in clumps. Of all the sensations that I wished would have disappeared in the afterlife, pain might be it. I flapped harder, straining for breath.

Another beak sank into my flesh, and warm liquid rolled through rows of my feathers. I cried out for help, my heart racing.

Twinkling appeared below. The soft ripples of water—a lake stretched across the desert. I dived downward. A group of people stood along the shore.

The tip of the Aten sank below the western hills.

I drew closer to the earth, and the group of people below became clearer. One man lay alone, sprawled out across the sand beside the lake, his skin blue. Something receded into the water with waving ripples, as if it'd just flung the body onto the shore away from the others. The group ran over to him.

A red-headed man ran faster than the rest. His face was familiar—he was the former captain of the Egyptian army, Paramessu. A demure woman sprinted behind him, along with two dark-skinned dwarves. Tia, Harkhuf, and Seneb.

But Wahankh was not here ... Was the body his? Was he dead?

I flew closer, but the group of people reached the body and stopped, their heads hovering over the dead person's face.

The pursuing *ba*, these dead birds—or were they Dark Ones?—surrounded me, squawking. One veered and rammed against my right wing with a crunch. My wing collapsed against my body, and I spiraled downward.

Something emerged from the rippling water—a pale woman with skin like milk. Dragging herself along with her arms, she inched for the dead man on shore. Her lower half appeared between breaking waves. A fish-like lower body.

A gap in the hovering group opened up and I could see the body—a man, fit, as if he'd been conditioning himself for some time. He might be in his mid-thirties, with a wide face and short, stubbly hair—not much facial definition, resembling any average person ...

Recognition burst into my mind, as if waking from a long dream. The Extinct Ones who had dragged me under, who'd drowned me, were coming out of the lake. That was me. My body ... dead.

The whispers and pull inside my heart grew stronger, summoning me to the dead man. I flapped with my one good wing, angling myself for him.

Spiraling out of control, I barreled into the group at full speed. A clap sounded, and everything went dark.



Chapter 3

Journal Translation

LIPS PRESSED AGAINST MINE—soft, tender. Nefertiti? Air was blown, forced into my lungs, which expanded my chest. My eyes fluttered. Flashes of the pale woman in the lake appeared between blinking darkness ... Her face lifted from mine and her hand slipped away, my callused palm rubbing against hers, which felt as smooth as sea grass. Only our middle fingertips remained touching, hers lingering as she smiled. Then she winked and lowered her body, receding into the rolling waves of the lake outside Crocodilopolis.

I coughed and sputtered, my body spasming out of control. People surrounded me. Rolling over, I gagged as water spewed from my mouth. My body heaved again and again.

Minutes passed before I stopped coughing and sat up. My hands grasped my body. There were no feathers but skin across my chest, arms, and legs; the drenched kilt around my waist; and, as always, Father's bronze bracelet on my wrist.

I rolled onto my back and stared blankly into the distance.

Waning purple light outlined the summit of the hills on the horizon. A shadowy tree sat in the distance. A tamarisk tree, the kind Father and I used to sit and relax under when I was a small child, watching the soaring clouds dance in the wind and play with the sunlight. But this one sucked in the light like a bottomless hole, like Akhenaten's eyes. Petals covered its limbs—flowers of sheer blackness. I gasped and coughed, jerking onto my side.

The people around me spoke in whispers. Inhaling, I glanced up at my companions and reached out for them. They all shouted and patted my head and arms.

I fell to my back as my mind raced with images of *ba*. What'd happened? It seemed like I'd just awoken from some foggy dream. I recalled a humanoid woman with the lower half of a fish pulling me down into the lake. Then, a ferry had sailed across the night sky and I'd faced many trials before flying, being chased, talking to someone or something with green eyes and knowledge of the past. Had any of it been real, or only another nightmare? My eyes closed as I shut out the voices of my companions, and time slowed as if the time bender's magic was cast upon me again.

It seemed as though I'd been gone for weeks, but the twilight fading over the hills was the same as when I'd been pulled under the water, and my friends were still here. It must still be the same day ... I couldn't recall much detail of what had occurred in the underworld, but I didn't remember speaking to the magician or Father—the entire reason I'd subjected myself to the drowning.

My heart sank and my stomach cramped.

A vacillating hum sounded in my head, like overtones of far-off singing backset with soft music. Voices of the deceased? Could I hear them now that I had died?

“Stand him up,” a deep voice shouted, “before he gives up.”

Strong hands gripped my elbows and hoisted me to my feet. I wobbled, but someone's arms supported me. Tia's demure features narrowed, but a thin eyebrow pulled back onto her forehead. Her black hair floated in a gentle breeze.

“Your soul must've felt the need to hang on,” a gruff voice with a thick Nubian accent said as his hardened palm smacked my lower back—one of the dancing dwarf brothers, Harkhuf, who'd once been enslaved by Egyptians for their entertainment. His dark-skinned face looked me over as he tugged at his black beard. “What in all the gods' names were you trying to do?” he asked, his triceps contracting into a horseshoe of striated muscle. “They take you under water and drown you just to bring you back out and revive you?”

“I don't get it,” Seneb, the kind brother with the smooth, boyish face replied in a slighter Nubian accent, staring at the fading ripples on the lake lit with orange twilight. “She was beautiful but gave me the creeps ... like my ex-lover.”

“He needs to rest,” Paramessu, the former captain, said, his strong jaw clenching under his hooked nose and red hair. He eased me back onto the earth. “I almost died after being bitten by that cloaked beast with the crocodile jaws, and I don’t remember wanting to be forced to stand.”

Gritty sand dug into my back as I sprawled out. “I dreamt of things I could never explain.” Darkness crept around my vision, surrounding everything but a small tunnel of light in the center. The tree with the black petals lay at the center of the tunnel of light. My companions spoke to each other, but I could no longer make out their voices, only sounds. The tunnel of light started to fade into the darkness. But something soft brushed against my ankle. I glanced down. Orange and white fur. A cat—Croc, he was still alive! The encompassing darkness slowly withdrew, and my vision cleared. I scooped Croc up and clutched him to my chest, hugging the air from his lungs. Soft fur caressed my skin, and his deep purr vibrated through my muscles. Tears burned my eyes. I’d thought the Devouring Monster might have killed him—the only living thing I considered a sibling—before we’d sailed to Nubia, planning to return the dwarf brothers home.

But several of Croc’s toes on his rear left leg were missing. A twisting scar ran up over his ankle and leg, like the one I’d received from the hippopotamus. Gobs of thick pus drained from his wound. And he was emaciated, as if he hadn’t been able to take care of himself with the injury. My pet whom I’d saved as a kitten, who often disappeared for days or months at a time, but who also reappeared several times now in moments of crises to turn into a ferocious beast. Gray hair had grown in thick around his eyes and cheeks, and his face was sunken with age.

Tia knelt over me. “I thought we’d lost you for a second time.”

“You looked dead,” Paramessu said, peering over her shoulder.

I gazed deep into Croc’s stripes as I stroked along his bony back, my vision blurring. “I was.”

“What happened to you?” Harkhuf folded his arms across his chest.

“I—I saw the land of the dead,” I whispered as the rumble of Croc’s purr vibrated against my skin. “But I was unable to accomplish anything that I was supposed to. I couldn’t find and speak to the magician or Father.”

Tia laid a gentle hand across my forehead. “Well, we’re glad to have you back.”

Harkhuf sighed, as if disappointed.

Was I glad to be back? My head fell back into the coarse sand that gritted against the back of my scalp. What could we do from here ... what was I supposed to do now? Everything seemed lost. I'd failed even at death. My eyes clamped shut.

“Take him back to our accommodations,” Paramessu said. “He needs rest.”