

PROLOGUE

Eighteenth Dynasty

From her palace in the City of the Globe, Queen Tiye summoned her elder brother, Ay, to inform him of her decision. She received him at midday in the water garden, dismissing her youngest child, the boy whose coronation name would be Tutankhamun.

“I am guided by the divine light of Aten,” she said when they were alone. A desert breeze riffled the ponds, and Aten’s face reflected in a thousand sparkling smiles upon the lotus flowers, the papyrus stalks, the red colonnade surrounding her tranquility. “My tomb shall be in Nubia, at a secret location in the land of our fathers.”

Trembling, Ay knelt before her.

She knew his fear but did not share it. For the Sun Globe steered her course. “When my time is come, you will bury me in a bath of restorative oils. It will be done while the breath of life is still in me.”

He raised his face, eyes pleading.

Tiye touched his shoulder. “Beloved brother, I have spoken.”

CHAPTER 1

1977

As daylight broke above Eritrea's eastern peaks, Rika Teferi wrestled the steering wheel of a Zil stake-bed truck and scanned the sky for MiGs. This was the most dangerous time of day, low sun angle, long shadows easily spotted from the air. She and her squad should have laid up under cover half an hour ago. But they were so proud of their catch they'd voted to press on. Now they were almost home.

Bouncing over rocks, she led the small convoy of captured Ethiopian military vehicles along a dry riverbed flanked by gray limestone cliffs. The truck's cab stank of cheap cigarettes, and the muscles in her arms ached with fatigue. But soon she'd be able to bed down in her own little corner of the caves.

To signal the sentries who no doubt had her in their sights, she held her sniper rifle out the window, shaking it triumphantly in the cold mountain air. A kilometer farther on, she trundled up onto the bank, halted under a patch of thorn trees, and hit her horn.

Like a dam bursting, the cliff face erupted, pouring out village members from a dozen camouflaged openings. With whoops and cheers, men and women swarmed over the two Zils. Children banged the sides of the armored personnel carrier and clambered up to dance on the

prize trophy, a Soviet-built T-55 tank.

“Rika,” Alem cried. Out of the melee, her younger brother surfaced at her window, sporting the perpetual grin that endeared him to everyone, especially the teenage girls. The week-old wound where a bullet had grazed his neck still showed pink against his ebony skin. “We got a Zil, also. And forty cases of rocket-propelled grenades.”

“Excellent.” Captured arms were the lifeblood of Eritrea’s battle against enslavement.

“But a tank.” Alem stepped back to look it over, then opened her door. “How many soldiers?”

“One. And six wounded.” She hated taking a life. Her stomach for it had never developed after the first time, when at age ten in their old village she’d had to use a wood-splitting hatchet to stop an Ethiopian soldier about to dash little Alem’s head against a boulder. Now a sharpshooter, she usually aimed for the thigh or shoulder where destroyed bones guaranteed permanent retirement from battle, thanks to the miserable medical care most Ethiopians received.

Climbing down from the cab, she saw a ragged girl, maybe six years old, poking her finger into the shiny bullet holes that snaked across the truck’s door and driver’s-side mirror. As always, when they had to move vehicles in daylight, the exterior mirrors — even if shattered like this one — were folded in to prevent reflections that might attract Ethiopian MiGs.

“Stand back, watch your hands,” she told the child before slamming the door.

“Come on, they’re calling for you.” Alem pulled Rika into the crowd around the tank, where her second-in-command stood in the driver’s hatch telling their story.

Cries of “Well done” and “Good job” swelled Rika’s heart. So, too, did the beaming face of Faven, the pretty subordinate she’d been training to be a marksman and who last night had lamed her first Ethiopian.

Now a young man renowned for his poetry climbed up to stand among the children atop

the tank. Eyes blazing, he launched into a proclamation of imminent victory over the Soviet puppets in Addis Ababa. Faven gazed at him with undisguised adoration.

But they'd already been out here too long. The sun was climbing, warming the crisp African air and threatening them with exposure to the enemy.

Although their narrow canyon was well-protected from Ethiopian land troops, it remained vulnerable to air attack. So rebel forces here, as elsewhere in the highlands, lived their daylight hours in subterranean towns hewn from rock.

Cutting off the poet, Rika shouted, "Let's continue this inside."

She and the other drivers returned to their vehicles. Starting her engine, she glanced up at the crystalline sky. Another beautiful day — to be spent underground.

It was then she noticed the little girl studying herself in a triangular piece of glass. It matched a chunk missing from the Zil's mirror, probably dislodged when Rika slammed the door. *Oh, no.* The girl sat on a rock, her back to the sun. How long had she been sitting like that?

With a chill, Rika searched the sky for aircraft. Clear. She hopped down from the cab and jogged to the child. "No, you can't use that out here."

"It's mine." The girl clutched it to her chest. "I found it."

"Take it inside." Rika turned the girl toward the caves.

As the child scampered off, someone yelled, "MiGs!"

Rika looked up to see two specks aligned with the river bed and diving fast. *The mirror.* In a sprint, she caught the girl, snatched her in her arms, and dashed for the nearest entrance. "Run to your classroom."

Pushing past others who were crowding into the caves, Rika rushed back to the Zil. No time to move it now. She heard the tank's engine turn over and saw black diesel smoke billow up from its exhaust vent. Faven shouted at a crying boy trying to crawl down from the turret.

Rika vaulted onto the tank, grabbed the boy, and handed him down. “Quick! Get him inside.”

The turret started rotating. Downstream, the MiGs leveled out barely two hundred meters above the ground. A strafing run, she thought, until she saw the bombs hanging under each wing. *No!* People were still scrambling for the caves.

She ducked under the tank’s 100-millimeter cannon as it rose toward the oncoming jets. A million-to-one chance, if it was even loaded. But she knew the 7.62-millimeter turret-mounted machinegun was loaded. She climbed up behind the machinegun, swung it around, and ratcheted back the cocking arm. With the gunner’s hatch closed, she had to slide her legs along either side of the stubby gun mount and lie on her back.

Gripping both handles, she picked a spot several hundred meters in front of the MiGs and opened fire, spraying back and forth in their flight path. The heavy gun rattled in her hands, spewing hot brass out the top as it sucked the ammo belt in one side and flopped it out the other at ten rounds per second.

One MiG leapt upward to the right, its wings rocking erratically. The pilot ejected. But in that same moment, the second MiG released its bombs.

For a heartbeat, Rika couldn’t tear her eyes away. Like two fat sharks, the bombs came at her, undulating slightly as they closed for the kill.

Sheer terror broke the spell. She pushed out from under the machinegun, rolled off the lee side of the tank, and dived between the treads of the armored personnel carrier.

Rifle shots. Rika twisted around to see Faven tracking the MiG on full automatic as the last villagers veered around her. “No, Faven! Run!”

With a deafening roar, the bomb-dropper streaked past. An instant later the ground shook. From the point of impact, flaming napalm arced out in a tidal wave of liquid fire, flooding earth and sky.

Instinctively, Rika covered her head. Between the steel treads, she felt the searing heat

and smelled the sickening sweetness of jellified gasoline. She gulped a lungful of air against the threat of asphyxiation.

Then she heard the screams.

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In the quiet efficiency of their underground hospital, where survivors barely moaned, those first screams still rang in Rika's ears.

Forced out of the operating room by two nurses in white facemasks, she watched stubbornly through a window in the double doors, willing herself not to cry. Her khaki shorts and shirt were stiff with dried blood from victims she'd helped carry. The three who might yet live lay on canvas-draped wooden tables as doctors peeled away charred skin and applied salve under bright lights powered by a generator droning somewhere in the distance.

Faven was not among them. What remained of her lay in a different room, with the four others who had burned to death. Her name meant "light," but her blackened body had only been recognizable by the rifle still clutched in one hand.

Eight casualties. Rika's stomach wrenched with guilt. She slunk back through cold, brick-lined corridors to the cubbyhole that served as her room. For the next few hours, she sat on her cot, head in hands, the stink of incinerated flesh clinging to her. Had Faven tried to emulate her? Would the eager understudy have done something so foolish if she, Rika, hadn't fired on the MiGs with a lowly machinegun?

Five dead, three horribly disfigured. And the blame lay not in her slamming the Zil's door and dislodging the piece of mirror, or the little girl's sitting with her back to the sun. Both of those were accidents. The root cause lay in her own leadership. None of this would have happened if she'd waited until next evening to bring her squad home. It didn't matter that they'd

voted. She was in charge, and she should have known better.

Alem called to her through the curtain covering her doorway, then stepped inside with a plate of freshly fried injera pancakes, the sourdough staple of Eritrean meals. “Have you eaten anything?”

Not since yesterday evening. But the rich, yeasty aroma she normally loved brought a knot to her throat. She waved away his offering.

“I have a plan,” he said, setting the enameled metal plate on the floor.

She eyed him guardedly. No longer the pudgy little boy who loved being tickled, Alem had become a rebel’s rebel. He often infuriated his commanders by striking out on unauthorized missions with a few of his friends. But tales of his daredevil exploits delighted the children, and she’d seen more than one elder nod approval.

“Their forward airbase.” With a wicked grin, Alem knelt in front of her. “It would take us only a week to get there. The MiGs never fly at night. Two of my friends are expert with rocket-propelled grenades, and you and I can pick off anyone who tries to save the planes. In ten minutes we can destroy the entire squadron.”

Worse than reckless, Alem’s plan verged on suicidal. She was about to reject it outright and forbid him to go when redemption flashed in her mind.

She sat up straight, her pulse quickening. If successful, the strike could deal a crippling blow to enemy morale. It would show the generals in Addis Ababa that their most expensive equipment was vulnerable. It might even be enough to bring them to the negotiating table. If that were the outcome — and she helped achieve it — she could stand at the foot of the five new graves and feel something akin to peace.

Faven’s face came to her in a mist. *Do it for us.*

Rika gripped Alem’s shoulders. “We’ll do it.”

Adrenalin surged through her. She pictured the hated jets exploding on the tarmac,

soldiers dropping under the unerring fire of her German sniper rifle.

“Rika.” Grim-faced, their elder brother, Efrem, towered in her doorway. “Come with me.”

Efrem, head of the family since their father died under Ethiopian interrogation, was a senior commander in the Eritrean People’s Liberation Army. His orders were obeyed.

Expecting a humiliating reprimand from her superiors for not hiding the captured vehicles until nightfall, she stood, tucked her blood-stained shirt into her shorts, and followed Efrem to the operational command center.

At a steel table surrounded by wall maps sat two gray-haired members of the Politburo. And her mother.

A shiver swept up Rika’s back. Was she in deeper trouble than she’d thought?

“Sit down,” one of the parliamentarians said, gesturing with the stump where his right hand had once been. Rika didn’t know his name but did know he was Party chief in a town about fifty kilometers away. When she’d seated herself on the folding chair facing them, he leaned forward. “We have taken a decision. Tomorrow you will leave Eritrea.”

Her muscles tensed. How was this possible? No one had ever been banished from—

“We have enrolled you in the spring term at University College in London.”

“What?” She jumped up. Efrem put a hand on her shoulder, but she slapped it away. “That’s insane. I won’t go.”

The man with one hand sat back. “This is not a request. You are not free to refuse. It’s an assignment, to prepare you for a higher purpose.”

Confused now, as well as shocked, she turned to her mother.

Once beautiful, her mother had become as haggard and thin as most other Eritreans, thanks to Ethiopian confiscation of food relief. She was blacker than Rika, without the admixture of Italian blood that came from Rika’s paternal grandfather. Head draped in a green

shawl, her mother nodded stoically.

Rika threw up her hands. "I don't understand."

"Sit," the man with one hand told her. When she complied, he said, "This is an honor. You and six others have been selected to obtain university degrees. In preparation for forming the nucleus of a new government that will rule Eritrea once we've gained our freedom."

It took several seconds for her to digest this. The war had been going on for sixteen years, the first shot fired on the day she'd turned five. So far as she was aware, they were no closer to independence now than back then. "Have there been victories I don't know about?"

"No." The second Politburo member, a paunchy fellow she knew only as The Professor, rubbed bloodshot eyes behind his thick glasses. "But we *will* win. And when we do, we will not have a government run by military officers. It will be run by trained intellectuals. If you succeed in your studies, you will be one of them."

"Minister of Culture," Efrem said from behind her.

"Culture? What do I know about culture? I'm a fighter."

"That has not gone unnoticed, especially today." For a moment, the man with the stump looked wistful, as though he'd really prefer to keep her here, in the field. Then his eyes hardened. "But you are capable of more."

"You have uncommon intelligence," her mother said. "Rare aptitude. And you have read every book we have on African history, from the pharaohs up to this genocide we face today."

"So what?" Rika demanded.

Her mother bestowed a sympathetic smile. "History is vital. When we win, we will leave our caves and rebuild our country. The foundation of any worthy society is an appreciation of its heritage. It will be your job, my daughter, to bring that knowledge to our people. To give them pride in something other than armed victory." She paused, then added, "If it is any

consolation, I am leaving, also. To bolster our aid efforts in Oslo.”

That, Rika could understand. Her mother, although too old to fight, had a preacher’s way with words. And Scandinavians were major contributors of medical supplies to Eritrea’s cause.

But she, Rika, was not too old. As a warrior, she was in her prime. Yet no matter how rationally Rika pleaded, her mother and the one-handed man took turns in a maddeningly logical, double-barreled assault that destroyed her every argument.

Close to tears, she tried appealing to her mother’s heart. “Don’t my wishes matter?”

“From each according to his ability,” Efrem recited.

Rika whirled on him. “Ability? Where was your consideration of my ability when you promoted a less-capable *man* to squad leader before me? Twice!”

“That was different.”

Bastard. She turned again to her mother. “I won’t do it. I couldn’t stand to be away for four years.”

“At least six.” The Professor scraped back his chair and stood, weighing in with a frown that said he’d had enough. “Once you achieve your baccalaureate, you will proceed to a doctorate, preferably in another European country to gain broader exposure.”

Her fingers went cold.

“Only doctoral degrees are globally respected,” he said. “For the new government to be accepted among the community of nations, respect will be essential.”

She felt like an insect being sucked dry by spiders.

“We must all make sacrifices,” her mother said.

“But this—”

“This,” hissed the man with the stump, “is far less of a sacrifice than eight other people made today.”

CHAPTER 2

Six Years Later - 1983

Something was wrong. Sliding the papyrus aside, Rika stood from her desk, the only surface she'd bothered to clean in this tiny office on the second floor of the Cairo Museum. Crowded with wooden cabinets, dusty crates, and glass-fronted bookcases, the office smelled of mouse droppings and old paper, more like an attic storeroom in some English country school than a workplace for serious research. But at least she had one large window. If only it would illuminate the deeper meaning of this document on which she'd staked her future.

She stretched to relieve the tension in her back. Honking traffic outside her window, usually background noise, suddenly grated like biting into tinfoil. Why couldn't Egyptians drive without honking?

And why did Tiye's writing seem so utterly banal?

The Sorbonne would never grant a doctorate for a mere translation of third-rate literature. If that's all she could tease out of this papyrus, she'd have only two choices: find another thesis topic, or quit. The former meant at least two more years of homesickness, made worse by having to work on a subject not nearly so dear to her heart as Queen Tiye. The latter meant she would return to Eritrea a failure, one more casualty of the never-ending war for nationhood. Both meant defeat.

A knock interrupted her thoughts. Probably the tea boy on his three o'clock rounds. He'd let himself in.

She ran a finger over the margin of the baffling document. A foot wide, two feet long, and as smooth as vellum, Queen Tiye's last and longest papyrus was unadorned with the colorful figures common to most royal papyri. Even the Sun Globe at the top, with its hand-tipped rays blessing the text, was penned entirely in black, like the columns of hieroglyphs below. From

this style alone, she felt it could not have been recorded by a court scribe. Yet it was addressed to Tiye's youngest son, King Tutankhamun.

In Paris, she'd come across a 1936 translation. Inept, in her view, but sufficiently intriguing to convince her the flowery language was allegorical and, in studying the original, she would find justification of her passion for the queen, proof of her contention that Tiye, a black African of humble origin, had given birth to one of the greatest revolutions in history.

But even in her own translation, too many passages seemed pointless, almost contrived. Glancing at her stack of notes, she felt, surely, Tiye's final message to her last son had to be more profound than a mixture of poetry and standard praise formulas.

The knock came again. She turned. Obviously not the tea boy. And none of the museum staff ever called on her, a lowly graduate student. Curious, she crossed to the door and opened it.

A European man blinked, then grinned. No, not European. American, to judge from the full cut of his sport coat and his typically American, perfect teeth. A head taller than she, he was handsome in a rugged sort of way, with sun-streaked hair and brown eyes that looked pleased at what they saw.

"May I help you?" she asked, mildly flattered by his reaction.

His hand went to his neck, as if to straighten a tie, although he wasn't wearing one. "I was looking for something, and one of the guards sent me here."

A guard would. They knew if they disturbed any member of the regular staff, they'd get their heads bitten off. But she was temporary, a foreigner, and a woman. Opening the door a little wider, she shifted her weight to the other foot. "What are you looking for?"

"The Narmer Palette."

Interesting. Not a usual item on the tourist agenda, which seemed to entail a headlong dash through the Tutankhamun exhibits and little else. She felt half-inclined to simply give directions. But a break would be welcome. She'd reached an impasse with the papyrus, and only

forty-five minutes remained until the closing bell. Besides, Narmer's Pallet was one of her favorite pieces, a landmark in African history. "Come with me."

At a brisk pace, she led him down the Grand Staircase to the main floor. Skirting the Great Hall with its monumental statuary, she took a side corridor, passing two dimly lit display rooms before turning into a third, where she stopped at the tall glass case in the center. There, among a jumble of minor pieces, stood a slate tablet the size and shape of a small arm-shield. She swallowed her disappointment at how little regard the museum seemed to have for some of its finest treasures. "Here it is."

He scrutinized it through the glass, then walked around to peer at the other side. "It's more impressive than its photos."

"You've studied it?"

"Only in a history class. I understand it symbolizes the first union of Upper and Lower Egypt." Turning to her, he smiled and extended his hand. "I'm David Chamberlain."

"Rika Teferi." His grip was cool and firm, his calluses as hard as hers had been in Eritrea. The kind of hands that could be strong and gentle at the same time. Summoning her best English, she said, "Yes, it records Narmer's victory over the kingdom in the Nile Delta. But that's not the main reason it's important. Its greatest significance is that it marks the beginning of the god-kings. Narmer's claim that Pharaoh was a god formed the basis of a political system so powerful it lasted almost three thousand years."

David Chamberlain let out a low whistle, then furrowed his brow. "But the Sun King, that pot-bellied fellow out there in the main hall, he didn't claim to be a god, did he?"

"Akhenaten?" She narrowed her eyes, surprised a tourist would know such a thing. Perhaps he wasn't a tourist. If not, then what? "You must have paid close attention in your history class, Mr. Chamberlain."

"Please, call me David."

Yes, American. First names already. “You’re right. Akhenaten’s reign was a short break in the tradition. But it was the closest Egypt ever came to utopia.”

“Utopia?” He arched an eyebrow, as if disputing her assertion.

Rika straightened to full height. “More utopian than most countries today. Under him, class boundaries disappeared. Human rights flourished. Government became more open. Official documents were written in the spoken language, instead of the old courtly formulas. Even art was more honest, as you saw in Akhenaten’s statue. What did you say ... ‘pot-bellied?’ Effeminate is a better word, with his wide hips and narrow shoulders. No other pharaoh dared to have himself portrayed so truthfully. Or to create such a free society.”

“A visionary,” David said, the challenge now gone from his face.

“Not him. His mother, Queen Tiye, was the revolution’s architect. At least that’s what *I* believe.” A belief still based on circumstantial evidence — no thanks to the papyrus — and on what disparagers in Paris belittled as wishful thinking. “I may be the only person who thinks so.”

David stepped closer. “Is that what you’re working on, here at the museum?”

“Trying to.” She caught a whiff of male perspiration, unnervingly provocative after months of social drought. “It’s my research for a doctorate at the Sorbonne.”

“You sound like it isn’t going well.”

The understatement brought a sour taste to her mouth. She should wrap this up and quit for the day. But his look of concern seemed to tap a need inside her, the need to talk to someone who cared, even if his care was superficial.

“It’s more difficult than I expected. I came to Cairo four weeks ago, thinking Tiye’s last papyrus would be the key, especially since she wrote it to Tutankhamun.” Rika lowered her eyes to the Narmer Pallet, buried among lesser artifacts like the wisdom she’d hoped to find within the inconsequential prose. “Now I’m not so sure.”

“You’re working on a message to Tutankhamun?”

“He was Tiye’s son. The one who became pharaoh after Akhenaten. The papyrus was found in his tomb.”

“That’s fantastic.”

She couldn’t help smiling. Nobody in France, and certainly no one here, had ever acted so excited about her work. Was he really interested, or just chatting her up as a prelude to asking for a date? The intensity in his eyes suggested the latter. But that might not be all bad. On impulse she asked, “Would you like to see it?”

“The papyrus? I’d love to.”

With a new lightness in her step, Rika led him out of the room and down the corridor. “I think Tiye is the most underrated woman in history.”

“How do you prove such a thing?” He strode beside her, his heel falls echoing off the stone walls. “I don’t mean to pry, but I’m a scientist, and I have some experience promoting contentious theories.”

She stopped. “What kind of scientist?”

“Remote sensing. Gaining information about the earth with various airborne sensors. I’m here to fly a survey for an oil company. I got in this morning, and when my meetings finished early, I decided to come here.” He brushed aside a lock of hair that had fallen across his forehead. “I’ve always loved archaeology.”

Briefly she wondered if there might be oil in Eritrea. So far as she knew, no one had ever looked. But then who would take the risk with a war going on?

“Anyhow,” David continued, “if I have my way, we’ll be using a technology that took me two years to get people to accept.”

“That’s how long I’ve been working on *my* theory.” Ever since her studies of Eritrean history took her back to ancient Egypt, its commerce with black Africa, and the African commoner who married Pharaoh and revolutionized an empire.

Feeling encouraged by David's triumph through persistence, maybe even a faint bond, she took him back up the stairs and into her office. The papyrus lay on her desk, her notes to one side, a cup and saucer from the tea boy on the other. That boy. How many times—

“Jesus,” David said. “They let you just leave it out like that?”

She almost laughed. “The staff works with artifacts every day.”

He shook his head, then leaned forward. “It's beautiful.”

“Here, let me move this out of the way.” She reached in front of him for the tea cup.

“I'll get it.” His hand shot out, bumping hers into the cup. The cup upended in a clatter of china on china.

“Oh, no!” She snatched up the papyrus by its two top corners. A puddle of tea ran down, turning to rivulets dripping onto her desk. “Quick, get something to wipe it.”

Frantically he searched the desk drawers, then tried brushing the papyrus with his sleeve. “Lay it down so I can get it better.”

“No! There's tea everywhere.”

Shoving away the cup and saucer, he mopped his sleeve over the desktop. “Lay it down now.” As she did, he yanked his shirt front out of his trousers and pressed it into the wettest areas, crowding her aside as he blotted. Then he stood there, speechless.

Rika pushed him away and bent to examine the precious document. Near the bottom she stopped. So did her breathing. Five characters smeared. No, six. A wave of nausea swept over her.

“How bad is it?” he asked.

“Ruined.” Along with her life. She braced herself against the desk.

“Rika, I'm so sorry.”

All her work, the years away from home, her one great chance to earn the respect of everyone who mattered, devastated by a single careless act. Not to mention the papyrus. Its

smudged hieroglyphs stared up at her like the bewildered faces of wrongfully punished children. Then a tiny red W caught her eye. Red? The characters were black. Jerking open a desk drawer, she pulled out her magnifying glass. “Oh, my god.”

“What is it?”

“Look at this snake,” she said, handing him the glass.

He leaned down. “It’s different on the right. Zigzag, instead of undulating. Like a symbol for mountains.”

“Not mountains. It means water.”

The closing bell rang. Fifteen minutes.

“And this bird,” he said. “The smeared side looks more like a shepherd’s staff.”

She grabbed back the glass. “It does.” But were they just mistakes, errors the scribe made and later corrected? She looked again. No, the overwritten characters were next to each other, in different columns. Too much of a coincidence. And they were dark red and much finer than the black ones.

Hardly able to believe it, she sank into her chair. “There’s writing under the writing.”