

# I

“Tuya, you are alive!” Mother exclaimed as she rushed to my bed, pulled my head to her breasts and stroked my hair. Mother’s words surprised me. Save for a ravishing hunger and deep thirst I felt fine, indeed blissful, for I had been to a majestic and magical place.

“May I have something to eat and drink, Mother?” I asked.

“Bring my daughter bread and lamb and water, quickly,” Mother shouted to a servant in an adjacent room. “We were so worried about you, my child.”

“Why?”

“Don’t you know? Of course you wouldn’t,” Mother said. “For three days you lay in bed motionless as if in death. The first day we summoned a physician. He clapped his hands by your ears but you would not move. He waved a candle in front of your open eyes but you did not see the flame. The physician poured tonics into you but they did not help. The second day, a priestess anointed you with oils and chanted over you to drive away the demons, but you would not stir.”

“Demons? There were no demons.”

“We believed you would die,” Mother continued. “Your father was about to make arrangements with the embalmers to prepare your mummy for the tomb. I was about to notify the relatives so they might come to our home for a death vigil and pray for your soul. Now you have returned to us. The gods have blessed this family.”

“I wasn’t ill, Mother. I was in a wonderful place,” I said. “It was so peaceful and there were so many things to see. The houses and temples were beautiful and those who live there were kind to me. I even saw Sekhmet and Thoth and Isis.”

“What?” Mother asked. “You saw these divine beings?”

“Yes, and others, too. A man with the head of a crocodile played with me. He was so gentle, even though he could have snapped my head off.”

“You must have been imagining this, Tuya.”

“No Mother, I wasn’t imagining it. I was there.”

“Of course, my child,” Mother said as the servant brought my meal on a tray and set it on a table by my bedside. “Rush to the palace,” Mother told the servant. “Find a soldier and have him tell Raia his daughter has awakened and she is alert and in good health.”

Mother handed me the plate of bread and lamb. “Eat, then rest, Tuya.”

“I don’t need to rest. I want to find my friends at the riverbank and tell them where I’ve been.”

“No, my darling.” Mother said. “You’ll stay here. I want to make certain you’re well and strong. If you fall down by the Nile then a crocodile that’s not so gentle might truly snap your head off.”

“I won’t fall down,” I protested.

“You’ll do as I say,” Mother commanded. “For now, you’ll play with the cat here at home. You can play with your friends when I’m sure you are well.”

I ceased my protest, for I knew continuing it would do no good. Mother’s mind was made up.

After finishing my meal, I got out of bed to look for Neferaba, who was black with white paws and friendly. I found him sleeping behind a chest in the corner of the room. I petted Neferaba for a while, then got a wooden ball and rolled it across the floor. He chased it and hit it with his paw. We did this for quite some time, but eventually the cat tired of me and left, so I found my wooden dolls. At eight years old, and nearly nine, I was at an age when I was losing interest in them, but at least they would not leave me.

My dolls were special. Unlike my friends dolls, they had real hair attached to plugs that stuck into their heads. They made a small family just

like mine, with a father, a mother and their young girl child. The little girl had black hair, olive skin and high cheekbones, just like me. Before, when I played with the dolls, I always pretended I was the child. Now that I was older, I sometimes pretended I was the mother.

Within but a few years this would be so. My friends spoke with great excitement about marriage and motherhood and I looked forward to this time also; I longed for a husband and children with whom to share my love. Yet deep inside, I knew something else awaited me as well. I had no idea what this might be, and I spoke of this to no one, but I sensed my destiny would unfold far differently than the destinies of other Egyptian women.

My play was disrupted when Father walked through the door.

“Tuya my child,” he exclaimed. “It’s true. You have awakened.”

I ran to Father, who let out a grunt as he lifted me in his arms.

“You’re getting heavy, Tuya,” he said, smiling at me. “I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to pick you up.”

“For a long time Father. You’re so strong,” I said as I threw my arms around his neck.

Indeed, he was. As a high officer of chariotry in the Royal Guard he was expected to be strong and fit. He commanded soldiers at the palace in Memphis who protected the Pharaoh and those near to him. This was not a responsibility for the weak and infirm.

“Tuya looks wonderful, Ruia,” he said to Mother. “It is as if she had not been sick at all.”

“I wasn’t sick, Father. I don’t know why you were so worried. I was in such a beautiful place, with Sekhmet, and Isis and...”

“What?” Father said, looking at Mother.

“She told me the same thing,” Mother replied.

“Do not joke about this, Tuya,” Father said sternly as he set me down. “You are speaking of the Neters who must always be treated with respect.”

Father’s admonishment hurt me. “I’m not joking,” I said through a pout. “I was with them and they were kind to me.”

“I believe she’s telling the truth, or what she believes is the truth,” Mother said. “Tuya has always been a good girl who never tells lies.”

“Lies?” I shouted as tears formed in my eyes. “I’m not lying. Why won’t you believe me?”

“I do believe you, Tuya. I just said I did,” Mother responded, “but the story you tell is so fantastic. Did you really meet these Neters or did you just imagine you were with them?”

“I really met them.”

“She did seem near death for three days. It was as if she were not in her body,” Mother said to Father.

“This is beyond my understanding as a soldier,” Father replied. “Tomorrow we’ll talk to a priest. Surely he’ll know what happened.”

The next morning, Mother, Father and I rose early and prepared to set out for the great Temple of Ptah, the divine architect of the Cosmos from whose mummy-like form other gods arose. Ptah was the most revered god in Memphis, and his temple was not too distant from our home. Father dressed in a kilt and cloak and wore his sword. Mother wore a pleated dress and frock, a black wig and fine jewelry. I was reaching the age at which I could no longer go naked everywhere, so I wore a dress with straps and jewelry, too.

As we walked from the house, we came across a group of men toiling in a field. “Good morning. How are the crops?” Father said to the man watching over the others.

“The wheat crop will be very large, and the onion and barley crops quite sizable as well,” he answered. “The high flood this year was a great blessing.”

The man was an overseer employed by Father to tend to his substantial land holdings and direct the peasants as they worked. While Raia held an important military post, he was not of the exalted rank that would provide him with so much property. The lands he inherited from his father, who had inherited them from his. Mother also had inherited some fields farther to the north. Peasants worked Mother’s fields in exchange for a share of the crops. While our wealth paled in comparison to that of the Viziers and noblemen, we lived comfortably. Servants washed our clothes, prepared meals for us and kept our house neat and clean, so Mother and I never had to soil our hands with labor.

“I see that Tuya is up and about,” the overseer said.

“She seems quite healthy,” Mother replied.

“Everyone was worried about you, Tuya. Stay well.”

“I will,” I said as I skipped down the path behind Mother and Father.

As we approached the gate to the Temple of Ptah, a young man dressed in a loin cloth and shorn of hair from head to toe greeted us.

“May I be of assistance?” he inquired.

“We need to speak to someone about our daughter. She tells a strange story of encountering gods and goddesses and we need advice from a priest,” Father answered.

“You are a solider,” the young man observed.

“An officer of the Royal Guard.”

The young man’s posture straightened. My father’s duties apparently impressed him.

“I’m but a novice,” the young man said. “Wait here, and I’ll inquire about whether someone can meet with you.”

The novice disappeared through the temple gate. For a while we thought he had forgotten about us, but eventually he returned.

“The *Sem* Priest has agreed to see you,” the novice said. “It is he who has the authority to interpret messages from the divine.”

The young man escorted us through the gate into a rectangular courtyard where we were surrounded by walls covered with brightly colored paintings of gods and goddesses, of Pharaohs smiting enemies and leading grand processions, and of queens dressed in their finest raiment. Never had I seen such magnificent artistry. The novice led us through the courtyard to a passageway with columns adorned in breathtaking colors, and into a room where an old priest with a face as wrinkled as a date sat on a high-backed chair with feet carved in the form of lions’ paws. His long kilt stretched nearly to the floor, and he wore a leopard skin cloak to signify his stature. Frankincense burned in the corner of the room beneath a small statue of Ptah. The smell of frankincense came even from the walls. It must have been burned in this room each day for perhaps a thousand years.

“I’m told you have questions about your daughter,” the priest said to Father as we stood before him in a patch of sunlight that poured through an opening in the stone roof.

“Yes,” Father responded. “For three days Tuya lay in her bed in a death-

like state. Yesterday she awoke with tales that seemed unbelievable to us, yet she swears they are true.”

“What were these tales?” the priest asked.

“She told us of meeting Sekhmet, Isis and Thoth, and other gods and goddesses.”

The priest raised his eyebrows, or what would have been his eyebrows, for like his head they were shaven, too.

“Is this so, Tuya?” the priest inquired.

“Yes,” I answered. “I was in a very beautiful place.”

“What did these gods and goddesses look like?”

“Sekhmet had the head of a lioness and Thoth the head of a bird with a long beak, like the ones by the riverbank.”

“An ibis?” the priest asked.

“I think that’s what they’re called.”

“What else?”

“There was another man with a beak, but not as long. He looked like one of the birds that eat the other birds.”

“Horus, perhaps, with the head of a falcon. What did Isis look like?”

“She was beautiful and very kind. She had long horns and a circle on her head.”

“A crown of antelope horns holding the sun disk.”

“A man with the head of a crocodile played with me.”

“Sobek. He helps women to bear children.”

“There was another man with the head of a dog. He had a long nose and pointy ears.”

“Not a dog but a jackal, Tuya,” the priest said. “This was Anubis. He presides over the embalming of the dead.” The priest looked at Father. “Do you have statues of these gods and goddesses in your home?”

“We do of Thoth and Isis and Sekhmet, but not the others.”

“A beautiful woman with a great feather on her head talked to me, too,” I added. “She said her name was Maat.”

“What else did she say?” the priest asked.

“She told me never to allow evil into my heart. She said that someday my heart would be weighed against her feather and that it must not weigh more or it would be eaten by a demon.”

Surprise registered on the old priest's face. "Have you told Tuya of Osiris' Judgment?" he asked my parents.

"Not I," Father answered.

"Nor I," Mother said.

"Have your friends or their mothers and fathers ever spoken to you about The Judgment?" the priest asked me.

"The Judgment? What's that?"

The priest sat silently with his chin on his chest. After some moments, he raised his head and spoke. "These are more than the musings of a clever child. Tuya may have known about a few of the divine beings because of the statues in your home and visits with her young friends, but not of Maat and her role in The Judgment. Not at her age. How long did you say she lay as if in death?"

"For three days," Father answered.

"Was she strong and alert when she awoke?"

"It was as if nothing had happened to her."

"I believe your daughter's *ba* left her body and traveled to the realm of the Neters," the priest declared. "This is not unheard of. The souls of other people, some here at this temple, have done so as well but only after years of chanting, meditating and the casting of spells. Your daughter has been blessed."

"What should we do?" Father asked.

"We will take Tuya into the temple and teach her our ways. Your daughter should learn of the Neters and devote her life to them."

"You mean take her from our home?" Father inquired.

"Yes," the priest answered.

"No!" I shouted, as I turned to Mother, terrified at the thought of being torn from my parents.

Mother held me tightly. "Don't allow them to do this," she beseeched Father. "Tuya is our only child."

Father remained calm. "I agree with my wife. If we had other children, perhaps, but our daughter is our greatest treasure. We thank you for your offer but she'll remain with us."

"As you wish," the priest said, "but Tuya is a special child who should be taught about the gods and goddesses and how best to serve them."

"I'm not without means," Father said. "I'll see that this is done."

“Good. I’ll send a woman from the temple to your house to teach your daughter about the Neters.”

“We’ll be honored to have her in our presence. I’ll send food to the temple in gratitude.”

“I sense that Tuya is very special, indeed,” the priest continued. “Find a scribe as well to teach her hieroglyphs so she might read the sacred texts. Isis, Anubis, Thoth, Horus and Maat are all present at The Judgment. The Neters invited Tuya into their realm for a reason. Don’t neglect your duty to them or to your daughter.”

“We will not. I promise you,” Father said. “Ruia and I will make certain our daughter learns of the gods.”

I calmed down quickly from the fright that I might be snatched from my parents, and soon began thinking of the future. I always prayed with great devotion, and I relished the idea of learning more about the Neters. The prospect of learning how to read and write excited me as well for few girls were ever taught to do so.

As we followed the novice back through the courtyard to the temple gate my heart opened and I was flooded with joy; the destiny which would make me different from other women was beginning to unfold.