

Khufu and the Pharaoh's Penis

The Adventures of Khufu the Fixer in the Underworld
as told in the Papyrus of Meti



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"I'll show you how they killed me."

Uncle Djau opened his robe, freeing his great belly, an oiled and perfumed ball big as a ripe watermelon. He lifted a flap of skin on his side and a curved, crimson knife wound smiled at me. "There were two of them," he said, shifting in his chair toward the lamp so I could get a better look. "One pinned my arms from behind, exposing my chest. The other inserted the knife with an upward thrust between the fourth and fifth ribs then sliced along the bone. It was done with a blade polished to papyrus thinness. A professional job."

He tried to smile but his mouth didn't want to cooperate, the corners erratically jerking and twitching, struggling to find the proper angle to show amusement. New arrivals to Necropolis have to endure a few days of tomb lag. Symptoms vary. Most experience only minor embarrassments, like clumsily spilling a cup of beer just as it reaches their mouths, but for others, the effects can be severe, like forgetting how to walk. The rich ones hire servants to carry them in litters until they can trust their legs, but the rest wobble down streets, stumbling into vegetable carts, and tripping over curbs. Rich or poor, they're always fun to watch, especially since they have to relearn how to make their faces do what they want.

Uncle Djau's jaw levered his mouth open so he could laugh. "I was afraid my staff would steal the fee and get a street gang to do the job," he said. "It was a relief to discover they were loyal and hired the best." His smile spasmed into a grin. "I was worried about the pain, but there was only the initial stab of the blade. I was disoriented, then I got cold. Thankfully, my death was quick." I frowned; my death had been slow and painful.

Uncle Djau laced thick fingers over his stomach; his naval had been reduced to a brown smear by the stretched skin. "All went according to plan," he said. "The assassins were experienced and efficient. They were even courteous enough to allow me to settle my affairs before they struck."

“You wanted to be murdered?” I asked. He popped one eye wide. An instant later the other eye opened to match the first. They glittered like chopped dates in a plump millet cake. Was it amusement or was there something darker that caught the light? “It’s more accurate to say I chose to die,” he said. “The manner of it I left to the creativity of the assassins.”

I had to be patient. Uncle Djau was telling his story in the classic palace style—a slow unveiling of scraps of truth. I grew up in the palace, so I’m fluent in the conventions of royal speech; he’d get to the facts when it suited his purposes. He reached across the low table between us and plucked a leaf of red lettuce from a blue bowl that’d once been full but now was almost empty. I sighed, thinking of the cost of the vegetable; lettuce brings rebirth to even the most exhausted penis, and its price is pegged to the steady demand. Bes is always upset about the extravagance, but it’s unavoidable if you want to do business in Necropolis. Uncle Djau lifted the leaf to his mouth and squeezed the cut end of the stalk. Thick, white juice oozed out and coagulated into a small ball. He slid the stem it into his mouth, sucked, and leaned back, dropping the spent leaf to the floor. This time his smile came easier. “I’m surprised to find there’s sex in Necropolis,” he chuckled. “Of course, everyone knows there’s endless sex in the Fields of Peace. But in Necropolis? If I had known, I might have come here sooner.”

“There are many things in Necropolis that will surprise you, Uncle,” I said. But it was Uncle Djau who’d surprised me—he’d appeared out of nowhere, unexpected and unannounced. Bes had cleared away the remains of dinner and I was about to leave for my neighborhood gambling house. I was in a hurry to get there—I was sure tonight I was going to break my losing streak. Casual players call it *sen-net*, but to me it’s the Game. It’s my passion; there’s something about the snaky curve of holes on a waxed board that’s worked its way into my ka. It looks simple: be the first move your markers from the House of Rebirth to the Fields of Peace and you’re the winner. But it’s not so easy: you start in the House of Rebirth, then have to maneuver through the Houses of Happiness and Doubt, across the House of Water, down the

Curve in the Road, and into the House of Osiris before you're admitted to the Fields of Peace. Each step brings danger, and Oblivion is only one bad roll of the dice away. The challenges begin even before the dice are put in the cup; players have to agree on the rules and negotiations can take many days. Strategies are formed on an assessment of your opponent's personality as much as on the movement of markers. But strategies are useless if the gods play with your luck.

When was my last win? At least four seasons ago—a long time to watch my markers wander the board while my opponents raced ahead. I'd tried all the classic gambits: the Sokkwi attack was the latest, and even it had failed. Superstitions now controlled me: so many lucky stones dangled from my robe I shuffled instead of walked; a bag looped around my neck held magic fennel seed from the marshes of Buto; if I saw a one-eyed camel I'd bolt for home. In my robe was a reed box holding three knucklebone dice that'd been used by the divine Pharaoh Hesy, the inventor of the Game. How could I fail, the seller had insisted, with bones that'd been rolled by a god? I knew he was telling me just what I wanted to hear, but I'd figured that eventually something would work, so why not these old bones? And why not tonight?

I was about to leave—Bes had just finished spicing my wig—when I heard the rhythmic crashing of a parade. I live on the Street of Scribes and it's wide enough for several people to walk side by side, so it wasn't unusual for a parade to come by. I went to the door to watch the fun.

Every rich arrival wants to be acknowledged and assumes that the best way to get his deserved attention is to stage the biggest spectacle possible. Necropolis is ready to help. The Parade Director's Guild smooths the way by arranging for the necessary permits and making sure the route has been prepared. For a negotiated price, the Entertainer's Association will dance alongside the procession and sing songs of praise (spiced with a pinch of slander), and if the Flower Children have been hired, they'll carpet the parade's path with sweet-smelling blooms. The Merchant League always sends out roaming street vendors to sell

charms, souvenir pennants, and fried food to the crowds. The Enforcers watch from the shadows, and the enthusiastic *crunch* of a club on a pickpocket's skull is not unusual. Parades for the dead can be pretty lively.

I stepped out of my door, and sniffing a moist breeze, turned to the river. Beyond the sacred water, Ra's daily procession was just a molten slit on the edge of the desert. Later, Necropolis would flood with light when the living, burning orb entered the city down the Grand Canal. A thousand oars would steer the barge carrying the god into the Great Basin where the eternal battle between Light and Dark would be staged. A roar of devotion would rise from the grandstands, so loud it would make the city shake. Now, the water only reflected the infinite points of light hanging from Ma'at's night sky, and the stands were dark and empty except for huddled lovers dotting the endless rows of seats.

It was a moment of peace that lasted only a heartbeat—the parade swirled around the corner and down my street, a twisting snake of color, light, and sound. Dancers led the way, setting the beat with clay bells circling their wrists and ankles. Above them tottered stilt walkers depicting the nine gods of Necropolis; a feathered Horus three times taller than a man lurched at me, the light of a hundred torches splintering off rows of colored glass set into its wings. This parade would be a lavish one, and I laughed and clapped.

Then it stopped at my house, dancers, stilt-walkers, and musicians piling up at my doorstep like a dazzling flood that'd reached its peak and couldn't go any higher. I thought there'd been a mistake—had the parade taken a wrong turn, and if it not, then why stop here? The answer came on a gilded platform bobbing forward on the broad, black shoulders of the Nubian Brotherhood. Waving to the crowd was Uncle Djau. He turned to me and smiled. Suddenly, I tasted dinner again.

Odds were high he wasn't my real uncle. During Pepy's time, sex rules were relaxed, and unless you came straight from the Pharaoh's seed it was impossible to know who was related and how. A woman could be your sister, your niece, or even your

mother. Or she could be none of them. It would make your head hurt trying to puzzle it all out, so the kids called each other brother and sister, and adults became aunt or uncle. But no matter what you called him, Uncle Djau was trouble.

Life in the palace was easy if you obeyed the rules. But rules, especially those made for children, are easily broken, and ever since the day I'd opened a forbidden door and discovered Uncle Djau doing something strange to a goat he'd taken every opportunity to make my life miserable. He especially enjoyed sneaking up and clubbing me with his gold staff. He routinely blamed me for any mischief caused by the palace kids and because he was one of Pepy's ministers, no one questioned his word. Later, I grew to appreciate what he'd been doing with the goat, but by then it was too late—his revenge had been unending.

The Nubians lowered the platform and Uncle Djau stepped down to the street. Like all men of his rank, he was as fat as a well-fed hippo, and the bearers elaborately cracked their necks and shook their arms, glad to be free of the weight. Uncle Djau turned to the crowd, reached into his robe, and with a grand flourish swept up his hand, releasing a spray of jewels into the air. For a breath, everyone stared in awe at the twinkling colors, but when the stones arced down, knots of chaos erupted on the street.

No expense had been spared on his funeral. His burial robe was made of the finest linen with enough fabric to make a tent for a family of five. The great expanse of white was the perfect backdrop for a display of the symbols of power; amulets, charms, and ritual jewelry winked magic colors from the folds of cloth. From his neck hung a gold pectoral the size of a serving tray across which the vulture goddess Nekhbet protectively spread her turquoise and jasper wings. His fingers were heavy with rings and his hands trailed a sparkling rainbow when they reached for me.

There was more: white ostrich feathers framed a red, leather helmet that curved up, tapering to a sharp point high over his head. From its base, a gold cobra arched forward, ready to strike from a wide band of turquoise and ebony. The helmet had to be

heavy; if I were wearing it I'd be twisting like an eel trying to keep my head over my shoulders, but Uncle Djau stood straight and solemn, his back stiffened by the helmet's significance. It carried the divine authority of the Pharaoh; whoever wore it couldn't be delayed, debated, or denied.

Deep in my ba I felt the Worm of Panic stir; my former tormentor was at my door and had the power to decide my fate. Was this going to be his final revenge for the goat? *Maybe that's why he's smiling*, the Worm suggested. But the helmet meant something larger was going on, something political. When I was alive I'd been like most teenagers—politics had always been a boring drudge to be avoided like a cross-eyed spearman on a feast day. My life had been devoted to the pleasures of sex, drugs, and music (especially the throbbing beats of the Upper Kingdom), not the tuneless drone of politics. But I was an adult now, and I suspected Uncle Djau wasn't here because he wanted to discuss goats with Khufu the boy, but because events had brought him to Khufu the Fixer.

The slapping of flat, wet feet snapped me back to the moment. Bes came into the light carrying a plate of figs. As usual, his beard was slick with drool and his spade-like tongue flopped out of the corner of his mouth. I winced when I saw he was aroused. "*Gabble gabble oogle bey?*" he asked.

I took the plate from his webbed hands. "Ish kabibble," I answered. "Thanks Bes, that'll be fine."

Bes leaned close and inspected my robe. He unfurled his tongue and sponged up a few crumbs from my sleeve; he's very particular about my appearance and takes good care of me. His duty done, Bes turned away from the table and went back to the kitchen, his fat tail slithering behind him. He quickly disappeared into the shadows, which wasn't hard since he's only six hands high. Uncle Djau watched, eyes wide. "You speak its language?" he asked.

I smiled. It would take Uncle Djau a little time to get used to gods living among men. "I had to learn," I said. "He came with the house, and he wasn't about to leave just because I moved in. He insists he's part of the building, like one of the walls."

“Can he be trusted?”

“I hope so, because he reads minds. Besides, even if I wanted to it’d be impossible to get rid of him. Necropolis is filled with Besses—every house has at least one and they all look the same. I’m never sure if the one who served lunch is the one who served breakfast. It’s easier not to think about it.”

“Can *you* be trusted?”

The niceties of palace speak were over. Uncle Djau was about to unmask the facts, and I had a sinking feeling the face revealed wouldn’t be pleasant. I fought the urge to run from the room, but protocol kept me pinned to my stool. Or was it the stare of the gold cobra thrusting out from his helmet? After Meren-Re’s death, his queen, Nitocris, had taken the throne, and closer look at the snake confirmed that Uncle Djau now served a new master—a delicate, jasper tear had been inlaid beneath one of its round, onyx eyes.

I bowed. “Of course, Uncle. My business is built on trust.”

He leaned forward, the chair creaking with the shifting mass; I knew Bes was watching, worried about the furniture. “It was my honor to die so I could fulfill a royal command,” he said. “I have been ordered to find the Pharaoh Meren-Re. You will help me.”

The Worm of Panic had heard enough. “*Noooooo!*” it screamed.

He’d been part of my life since I was a baby—my first memory was Meren-Re braining me with a wooden toy; I’ve been told he was shouting “I love you!” each time he hit me. My last living memory was Meren-Re crushing my chest. Now it looked like he was going to be part of my afterlife.

Meren-Re was special. He’d sprouted from Pepy’s seed at a time when most people thought the Pharaoh had nothing left in him but dry husks. It was a miracle—at his age Pepy should’ve been taking long naps, not making sons. The gods marked

Meren-Re's divine birth by rolling a ball of fire across the night sky; the palace celebrated for a full season, the rest of the Kingdom cowered in terror.

I remember my first day at the palace school. As usual, the upperclassmen were having fun torturing the new students. But this year was different. Instead of the usual, random bullying, the jackals had been organized into a cohesive pack by Meren-Re. He'd grown into a tall block of veined flesh and flared nostrils, and his head sprouted out of a pyramid of muscle that'd stopped looking like a neck a long time ago. His chest was thrust out and his eyes squinted down on us lesser, pitiful mortals.

He was demonstrating a new trick to his gang. Choosing an underclass weakling, Meren-Re stepped from behind a tree, blocking the unfortunate's path. He crossed his arms and refused to move, demanding writing tablets, jewelry, and eventually clothing as the price of safe passage. When everything had been surrendered, Meren-Re threw the stolen items on the ground and pissed on them.

Meren-Re watched his victim slink off before turning to me. "Khufu, my friend," he said. "Come here and say hello." He held out his empty hands to show he meant no harm. The gesture didn't fool me; all of us had suffered because of those powerful hands. Later, he was the champion of the school wrestling club and was famous for his special grip called the Chaldean Skull Crusher. I once saw him strangle a cow.

Meren-Re came closer and I would've run but I was stuck to the ground like a rock. Master Meti (praise for his many virtues) always scolded me about hesitating when action was needed. But after shaming me with my weakness he'd told me that not making a decision was still a decision made, so maybe there was a plan after all.

I clutched my wooden lunch box to my chest. On the lid was a picture of the hero Sebi spearing a Hittite. Meren-Re leaned over me, oozing menace. "What's in the box, Khufu?" he asked. "A snack for me?"

"No," I said. I was just being honest, but it must've sounded defiant. Meren-Re grinned at his pals. "Looks like Khufu has

grown some stones," he said. "Let's see." His arm lashed out, reaching for my balls. I reacted instinctively, dropping my lunch box over my crotch. Box and hand arrived at the same place at the same time. The box disintegrated, splinters whirring past Meren-Re's face. Nobody moved. I listened to the insects buzzing, the breeze whispering, my heart thumping. Then, Meren-Re lifted the hand with the box stuck on it, leaned back, and bellowed a roar. That's when a bird shit in his mouth.

After I escaped, I sent prayers of thanks to Afnut, the goddess of rain. Although bird shit wasn't rain, it was wet and fell from the sky and I guessed it qualified as one of her responsibilities. I also vowed to stay far away from Meren-Re. Too bad that didn't happen.

Many seasons later I was at the opening of the great reservoir on the hill behind Heliopolis. I had no choice: Meren-Re had made sure the moment would be a tribute to his magnificence by commanding everyone to witness the big event. Obedient citizens wearing their best robes and jewels lined the main channel and the receiving pool was surrounded by a mob expectantly holding water jugs. Meren-Re and the royal engineer were elevated above the crowds on a platform near the lever that controlled the main gate. Living in the palace meant front row privileges, and I was at the foot of the platform.

Ra was at his highest point in his voyage across the sky and he'd sunk his teeth into the day like a hyena on a kill. We knelt to the glowing god with reverentially bowed heads, occasionally stealing hungry glances at the immense lake behind the gate. The water glittered with promises of green fields, bubbling fountains, and refreshing baths.

How much had we sacrificed in order to reach this day? Although the sacred river had been diverted and pumped up to this spot it hadn't been enough, and every pond, pool, and trough had been emptied. Even the water clocks had been drained.

A light breeze drifted across us, bringing with it the wet smell of hope. But it also brought the odor of death—Meren-Re had made the theft of water a capital crime, and the rows of impaled corpses ringing the reservoir demonstrated the zeal of

the law's enforcers. The priests finished their blessings and we held our breath, fearful that after so much misery our moment of release would somehow be denied. Even the smoke from the incense burners was apprehensive; instead of carrying our piety up to the gods it lay flat and lifeless on the altar. Meren-Re slowly raised his arms and opened his hands to receive the blessing of Osiris. His silhouette, black against the bronze sky, burned Meren-Re shaped holes in my eyes.

He had a lot of markers on the board that day. Meren-Re was divine, but despite his status he knew that even a god was subject to the whims of the mob. How many of his predecessors, no less divine than himself, had fallen to a sudden knife thrust or a bowl of poisoned leeks? The opening of the reservoir and the delivery of life-giving water would serve as a powerful reminder to everyone of his divinity; without him and the mercy of the gods this day would never have come. He gestured to the reservoir and a sudden wind riffled the water as if animated by his touch. "There it is," he boomed. "Take it!"

He pushed the lever, the thick gate lifted, and water roared through the opening. The crowd gasped, then cheered. After a while, the engineer edged up next to Meren-Re and whispered in his ear. Meren-Re then reversed the lever, intending to lower the gate and reduce the flow. At least that was the plan, but no matter how hard he pulled the lever, the gate wouldn't move. The engineer added his weight to Meren-Re's and together they strained against the force of the water that was now splashing over the sides of the chute. The crowd began to back away, worried about getting its finery wet.

I felt the rumble before I heard it. It began in the soles of my feet and quickly moved up my legs, making me sway like I was on a boat in a storm. There was an ominous growl, a deep grinding of stone accompanied by puffs of dust spurting from the walls around the reservoir. There was no time to react—in a shower of water, stone, and timber, the gate exploded.

The last thing I saw was the bottom of Meren-Re's sandals coming at me. I heard the cracking *snap* of my ribs and a white bolt of pain shot from my feet to my head. I couldn't move, even

when the panicked crowd trampled over me. It took a while for me to die, but thankfully, death stopped the pain.

And now Uncle Djau was telling me I had to help him find Meren-Re. My mind raced, searching for a way to escape. I tried stalling: "But Uncle," I said, "I heard the priests dismembered the Pharaoh and scattered his body in the desert. When Set did that to Osiris, it took Isis an eternity to put him back together. How could a Queen accomplish so quickly what a goddess found so hard?"

Uncle Djau glared at me—once again I saw the man who'd tortured me when I was a boy. "Queen Nitocris is now Pharaoh," he snorted. "All that remains are the final rites. Soon she will go through the Door of Eternity and will be a goddess—and a goddess can do anything." He reached into his robe and pulled out a small, white urn. It was polished alabaster and sparkled as he held it out to me. "Open it," he commanded.

It was in the shape of the god Min, his head and crown the lid, his naked body the container. I had a bad feeling about what was in it. When Isis had reassembled Osiris' dismembered body, the last part she found was his penis. It'd been missing forever and she was about to give up the search when Min had discovered it in the stomach of a river carp. Isis had thanked the fish by prohibiting anyone from eating it (although I've heard the lower classes like carp stewed with beans and garlic) and had rewarded Min by assigning him the job of eternally guarding the penises of gods and deceased pharaohs. I popped the top off the urn and looked inside. I saw what looked like a dry, shriveled cucumber. It had to be Meren-Re's mummified penis, although I'd expected it to be bigger.

"When the royal penis is delivered to the Pharaoh he will be whole and entitled to enter the Fields of Peace," Uncle Djau said. "Without it, his ba and ka cannot unite and he is doomed to wander the Underworld." His voice was filled with horror at the idea of an exalted bully like Meren-Re spending an eternity with common misfits like me. "Queen Nitocris made a sacred vow to the Pharaoh that he would be restored. All that remains is that for someone to deliver the last, most important piece. I am her

chosen envoy, and Meren-Re waits for me. Or should I say us, since you will guide me."

"Across the Underworld?" I gulped. "Maybe a priest could . . ."

"No priests!" Uncle Djau shouted, slamming a meaty palm on the table. Figs jumped from the plate and tumbled to the floor like tiny, purple acrobats. He leaned forward, the gold cobra on his helmet throwing a menacing shadow over me. "Many had the honor of preceding me, bringing together the other pieces of the Pharaoh who was murdered by priests!" he hissed. "I am entrusted with the final, most precious part, and *you will help me.*"

The Game has taught me you can't defeat passion with a direct attack; you must cool the fire before you can strike, and if ever there was a time for tamping down the flame, it was now. I lowered my voice like we were two friendly professionals sharing trade secrets. "You know, Meren-Re's not very popular in Necropolis," I said. "Remember how many died when Heliopolis flooded? They blame Meren-Re for their fate, and if they found out I'd helped him I'd lose a lot of clients."

Uncle Djau heaved his bulk up from his chair. "A Pharaoh requires your help and you are concerned about *business,*" he sneered.

He snatched the urn from my hand, shoved it into his robe, then crossed the room and positioned himself between the two columns that marked the passage to the kitchen. They look like they support the ceiling, but they're really there just to impress visitors; the salesman had assured me the symbols on them quoted the wisdom of the gods—I had to take him at his word because I could read about half of them. Like all politicians, Uncle Djau had chosen a dramatic setting for this moment, and he took a deep, significant breath, pausing like the snake that savors its superiority before killing its prey.

I don't get along well with people like Uncle Djau who use their authority to prop up their inadequacies. At least that's what my friend Kamenwati tells me. He has the fantastic notion that if he can look into your head he can figure out why you are what you are. One night after too much beer he concluded that my

problem with authority was because I was angry at my mother. That might be true if I knew who she was.

I lifted my head, hoping this would encourage Uncle Djau to get to the point. He obliged: "Is it true that you have crossed the Underworld?" he asked.

I knew where this was going. My trip across the Underworld keeps me in business; it's how I became a Fixer and without it I'd still be hustling for lotus chips. Uncle Djau had sneered at my worries about business, but he'd exposed my weakness. All he had to do was say that I was a fraud and I'd be ruined. Who would question his word? I had no choice—the Game was over, my strategies failed, my markers swept from the board. I'd lost again.

After I'd died it took a while to wake up. The first thing I noticed was a ghostly perfume mixing the sour smell of wood smoke, hot cooking oil, and the sweetness of rot. I heard distant shakers and cymbals beating a steady rhythm under a mix of squealing axles, the cries of donkeys and birds, the *thunk* of an ax on a log. Human voices emerged—sharp notes of laughter and shouts. I struggled to open my eyes—the lids were gummed shut—and when I did my ka filled with joy, because death was nothing like I'd expected.

It was night, but not the gloomy darkness I'd imagined would define death—instead, it blazed with life. A thousand torches threw cheerful orange sparks into the purple sky and I took a deep breath, savoring the sharp bite of a cool breeze that snapped flashes of color from pennants, flags, and banners. Rising above this revelation were hulking statues of Mihos, the warrior-lion of the Underworld, and the god of unending life, Heh, waving palm fronds high over his head. They glowed with colors taken from a god's palette.

The statues bordered a wide plaza filled with a milling, jostling mob of people dressed in white robes—I was wearing

white, too. The crowd was thickest where a wooden gate pierced a high wall. I took a step, my legs surprisingly bent like reeds, and I fell, painfully banging my shoulder on a cart. When I recovered my balance, I had another surprise: the cart was filled with stools, chests, statues, and bowls of gilded fruit. On top of the pile was a spear I recognized—it'd been a gift on my sixteenth birthday and was blessed with magic powers I'd need on my journey through the Underworld.

That's when it hit me: I was dead. The cart held the tomb goods prepared by the palace when I was buried—the spear was proof—and the white robes were the shrouds of death. The gate was the entrance to Necropolis, the city of the dead.

When you die your *ba* becomes a perishable vessel for your *ka* and only by traveling across the Underworld and being admitted to the Fields of Peace can you unite them for eternity. The dead who make this journey are called Seekers—they seek the approval of the gods by demonstrating their virtue and purity. If they do, they qualify for Paradise. If they don't, they're doomed.

The Seeker Road starts in Necropolis, and since I didn't want to waste any time getting to Paradise, I grabbed the handles of the cart and briskly headed for the gate. But before I got there I had to maneuver down a narrow lane crowded with shops and stalls catering to the needs of Seekers. Vendors plucked my sleeves, offering charms, amulets, and magic potions, all guaranteed to deliver me safely to the end of the Road. Wandering salesmen tempted me with maps of the Underworld. Rising over the crowd were platforms for speakers touting the services of spiritual advisers—a popular enticement was a free test-weighing of my heart. I edged past performers who did death-defying acts: a man pushed a thin rod into one ear and pulled it out the other; a child balanced a pyramid of limestone blocks on his head; a juggler spun cobras in the air.

The smell of cooking meat drifted my way. I was surprised I was hungry. It was a happy discovery—I'd never thought I'd be hungry when I was dead. I spotted a tent near the city gate with a sign advertising fried perch, one of my favorites, and I pushed

my cart toward it, eager to crunch down on a salty, crispy fish. That's when I got my first lesson about the rules of my new life.

When I was alive, getting food was a simple matter of demanding it. Because I was a Noble—a Chosen One—it was every citizen's duty to provide me with what I needed, so I confidently swaggered up to the fish-seller's stand. But when I insisted on receiving my due, the cook spat into the dust and turned back to his fire. I immediately puffed with indignant rage and promised punishment. The cook's answer was swift and decisive—he reached into a tub of fish, grabbed one by the tail, then whirled around, smacking me in the face with it.

I staggered back, spitting scales and slime. I reached for my cart, intending to grab my spear and gut the cook like one of his perch when I had another surprise—the cart was gone. I spun around and saw it being pushed toward the gate by two men. I started after them, my head filling with thoughts of murder, when a voice interrupted my pursuit. "Name?" it said.

A polished stone desk blocked my way, and sitting behind it was a man who had all the markings of an important official; his wig was sleek and glossy, and he wore a round badge stamped with the image of a flying goose. I know authority when I see it and immediately launched into a complaint, waving my hands at the men who were now removing all the goods from my cart.

"Thieves! Stop them!" I yelled.

The official raised his head and calmly looked up at me with bored eyes. He was as thin as a stalk of papyrus and had a nose that hooked down like the beak of an ibis. The skin on his forehead was patchy and torn—was that *bone* peeking out from under the ragged flesh? He repeated his question: "Name?"

I straightened, proud and confident. "I am Khufu, descended from the House of Uah-ka, twentieth cousin of the third attendant to the fifth aunt of—"

"Enough," the official interrupted, waving his hand like he was swatting a fly. He turned to the two thieves who were digging through my cart. "How much?" he asked.

The larger of the thieves shook his head. "Nothing much," he grunted. "The statues are the usual junk from Dendara and the

furniture is back alley knock-offs. Could be used for firewood but not much else."

"What?" I shouted. "That firewood is ebony and those statues are alabaster!"

The official wearily nodded to the men. "Show him," he said.

The large thief picked up an ebony stool and with a knife gouged a chip out of a leg. The exposed wood was a sickly yellow. He looked at me with a twinkle in his eye: "As you can see, Your Honor, what you think is ebony is really black paint." His partner grabbed a statue of Anubis and enthusiastically slammed it against a wall, the jackal god's head exploding into dust. "Not alabaster, Your Lordship," he giggled. "Paste is more like it."

I tried to talk, but my rage was so great I couldn't form sentences. Instead, words came out of my mouth in explosive fragments: "... but ... I ... you ... *not the spear!*"

The first thief had dropped the stool and was now holding my magic spear over his knee, about to snap it like a stick. I leaped past the desk and snatched it away. "What are you doing?" I yelled. "This was made by the royal armorer who's the fifth nephew of the tenth wife of—"

The thief's arm shot forward. He grabbed the spear's blade by the socket and twisted it free, pushing the headless shaft toward me. "Excuse me, Your Worshipness," he smirked. "Was the fourth wife of the sixth nephew a little *darker* than the rest of the clan?"

I looked at the end of the shaft. There was some tiny writing. I gasped: "Made in Nubia?" Son of a dung beetle! The palace had cheated out on my funeral!

"Here, take this," said the official. He tossed a small linen bag onto the desk. It clinked when it hit. "It's the maximum amount granted to you. The Council doesn't want Seekers wandering the streets begging without permission. You'd have to join the Beggars Guild and the waiting list is two hundred seasons long."

I picked up the bag and emptied several small, round tiles into my hand. I held one up to the light. "Issued by the House of Ka-Aper," it read. Under that was the mark of a flying goose, same as the one on the official's badge. I turned the tile over and read an inscription: "At our house no deal's too small. No need to beg, no need to crawl." "What's this?" I asked.

"That's a coin," said the official. "You'll need it if you wish to purchase goods or services."

"But I'm the twentieth cousin of—"

"Yes, yes, I heard you before," he said. "However, in Necropolis your rank in life doesn't matter. We're all dead, and what we were before is irrelevant—unless you have enough coins." He scratched his forehead and several flakes of skin drifted down. Then he looked up and saw the confusion on my face. He sighed; he'd done this countless times. "The facts are these," he stated. "The more you have, the better off you are. Have lots of coins, you'll have lots of friends, but without a doubt, nobody knows you when you're down and out."

I looked at the small pile of coins in my hand. The official read my thoughts: "If you feel your goods have been undervalued you're free to take them to another gate. But I guarantee Ka-Aper gives the best prices."

I understood. "No need to beg, no need to crawl," I muttered. Someone pushed me in the back. I turned and saw an old woman clutching an armful of statues, her wrinkled mouth clamped in a tight frown. "Can't you hurry up?" she moaned. "I know I'm dead, but my feet are starting to hurt!" Stretching behind her was a line of people carrying tomb goods.

I looked back at the official. "What if I choose not to accept any price on my goods and just take them with me?" I asked.

He shook his head. "Not allowed—can't have just anyone dragging furniture through the streets. It'd snarl traffic, which is already bad. Maybe if there weren't so many plagues the city wouldn't be so crowded."

"Looks like I have no choice," I sighed. I picked up the bag and tucked it in my robe.

The official pushed a wax tablet across the desk and held up a stylus. "Sign for the coins," he ordered. Then a sly smile creased his narrow face. "You do have one more option," he said. He lowered his voice to a whisper: "Your heart."

I touched the small ivory urn (probably a cheap copy) that hung on a cord around my neck. In it was my mummified heart. It was my ticket to the Fields of Peace—at least I hoped so.

"Take it to the House of Dancing Scarabs," the official said. Ask for Betuke. The heart of a Chosen One should be worth more than that of a commoner."

This was incredible news, but I was young and inexperienced and didn't know much about life, much less life after death. "I can exchange my heart for coins?" I asked. "You mean someone else will use it?"

"Why not?" the official said. "It's not like it has your name on it. Even if it did, it's doubtful that Osiris could stop farting and scratching long enough to inspect it. Besides, so many people have died and want to get into the Fields of Peace the Weighing has been reduced to a quick glance at the scales before one heart is scooped up and replaced by another." He winked. "These days it's all wham bam, thank you ma'am."

I didn't want to hear any more. It was all too new, too strange, and was happening too fast. I just wanted to get away, so without another word I slid the wax tablet to the official. The old woman shouldered me aside and held out her statues to be appraised. My interview was over and I walked around the desk, through the gate, and into my new life.

* * * * *

When the Game begins—after the time and place of the match has been set, after the rules have been debated, after the choice of bones has been made, after everyone has said their lucky prayers, there's one final ritual. It's simple and elegant: the players lean over the board and blow across the polished surface. Their breath wipes away the memory of past contests, erasing the

clutter of victories and humiliations, brilliant moves and foolish blunders, glorious luck and black misfortune. God-like, the players purify the board and the game is reborn, freed from the past. When you enter Necropolis, the gods blow on you and all the rules, responsibilities, and restrictions of your past life are gone. You're reborn. You're free. But freedom drives some people mad.

Past the city gate, everything was moving. The solid shapes of streets and buildings were hidden by a shifting, squirming *beast* that spun and jumped, danced and crawled, swung from rooftops, flopped like a fish, and staggered like its bones had turned to mush. Then, I saw that the beast was human: a woman somersaulted past me; a man dove out a window; children attacked each other with sticks.

And there were gods. In Heliopolis, the gods were drawings and statues animated by a priest. But here they were alive. And these weren't the benevolent gods of peace and harmony; instead, the agents of chaos—crocodile, snake, and jackal danced in the street, urging the dead into greater frenzy.

My senses were working in ways I'd never experienced; suddenly my eyes could touch, my ears could smell. I swirled a mouthful of a soup made from human desires and I could taste my emotions; sweet and bitter had been replaced by joy and rage, the salty bite of desire tickled my tongue. A girl with inviting eyes and welcoming arms was in front of me. She shimmered backwards into the street and began to dance, her fingers winking bright lights. She sang a love song, the words floating at me inside pink bubbles. She was irresistible.

I was one step into the street when a bony elbow popped me in the spine. The girl vanished, and I turned around and saw the old woman with the aching feet. When I'd last seen her on the other side of the gate her face had been sour and puckered. Now, it was puffed with wonder—the freedom of death had just dawned on her. She yelped and ran into the street, and spinning like a child's toy, was sucked into the chaos.

I forced my eyes to see beyond the madness. On the other side of the street was a bewildering puzzle of buildings jumbled

together in ways that didn't make sense; doors were jammed into tight corners and windows were cut in random shapes. Lanterns hung from every wall. They glowed with an inner light that flickered impossible colors: blues and purples were hot, reds and yellows were cool, and they pulsed to the beat of orchestras that played from balconies hanging over inns and pleasure houses. Reeds screeched and drums pounded, tempting everyone to enter.

Through the windows were glimpses of freedoms unavailable on the street. Naked forms twisted through colored lights and scented smoke in slow, purposeful movements that defied the chaos outside. Inside, the possibilities of eternal pleasure were channeled and controlled, measured out like a fruit dealer weighing a melon. And pleasure came with a price; everyone who went through the doors handed coins to scribes guarded by big men with clubs.

But not everyone had surrendered to temptation and madness. Nearby, a group of Seekers huddled behind a screen of soldiers who casually leaned on their spears. An officer was talking to an old man who listened, then turned and spoke to his companions. There were some grumbled complaints, but soon coins were pulled from robes and given to the officer who put them in a purse belted to his waist. He blew a shrill note on a tiny whistle and the soldiers briskly made a circle around the Seekers, adjusted the grip on their weapons, lifted their leather shields, and marched forward, shepherding their clients into the street.

The purpose of this arrangement quickly became clear. Skipping at the group was a fat man, his robe streaked with mud, his face bloated with mindless joy. A moment later he was halted in mid-skip by a soldier's spear rammed through his chest. The blade was ripped free and the man stumbled back, shocked by the sudden violence. Miraculously, he stayed on his feet, gaping at the jagged hole in him. I couldn't believe he was still alive, then I understood—he was already dead and the spear couldn't kill him. But killing wasn't the point; a threat to the group had been beaten back, and the soldiers marched on, hacking and stabbing a path across the street.

I ran after the soldiers, waving my bag of coins. "Here!" I screamed. "Wait for me!" Suddenly, a sword was thrust at my eyes—the soldiers saw me as just another madman and I had to keep my distance or else they'd cut me into pieces. But I had to stay close enough so that the surging mob couldn't block me from safety; the instant the soldiers cleared a path it was quickly refilled with shrieking, screaming maniacs. A woman stepped in front of me and lifted an ax over my head. A white froth bubbled from her mouth and although her eyes stared into mine I knew she didn't see me. Fortunately, before she could chop me down she was swept away by a wave of naked men beating gongs.

The convoy's goal was a gate in a plastered wall. Soldiers on a platform were raising it, and I saw a quiet, orderly city on the other side; if I could just get there I'd be safe. I'd almost made it when a girl's voice pierced the chaos. "Back off, you bastards," she snarled.

She was backed up against a wall near the gate, but three men had blocked her from safety, their leering faces leaving no doubt about what they wanted to do. They stayed close enough to cut off any escape but far enough back to avoid a knobbed bat that the girl held with a two-handed grip high over a shoulder. The weapon hypnotically waved back and forth, and she looked as dangerous as a coiled cobra.

One man, braver than the others, edged closer and pointed a knife at her. "You can't kill us," he laughed.

"Then come and get me," she taunted.

The man lifted his knife up into the strange, throbbing lights. The polished blade flashed purple then red, and he took a moment to admire the shifting colors. That's when the bat crushed his face—he crumpled like an old goatskin.

The girl did a slithering sidestep toward the gate, the weapon flicking out in the classic Nagada style. Her moves showed she'd had training, probably in the palace, but I didn't recognize her. Who was she? How'd she get here? Had she fought her way across the street? I liked what I saw: my age, tall and slender, large flashing eyes that dominated an oval face

framed by long, black hair, a slightly twisted front tooth that added a touch of vulnerability.

But at that moment she didn't look vulnerable. Backed against the wall and holding off evil with a stick, she reminded me of Isis defeating the monster snake Apep with only a reed. Every kid's bedroom has a picture of this battle. I could hear my nurse sing the lullaby of Isis in order to ease me into sleep:

Khonsu in the night sky shines clear,
I sing the invoking words, hear and appear
O Isis, protect me from all I fear.

A tangle of drunks stumbled into the standoff and the girl took advantage of the confusion to make a break for the gate, but when one of the drunks crashed into her she fell, and now the hunters moved in for the kill. I stared at the scene, hesitating as always. Then, a jackal fell on my head.

Had it fallen from a balcony or had it simply dropped from the sky? All I knew was that a snarling, bristling ball of black fur was chewing my face. My screams harmonized with the howls of the beast and I toppled into the girl's attackers. They reacted like they'd just put their hands in a fire, jerking back so fast I was surprised their spines didn't snap. The bat swished past me and the two men reeled away, grabbing shattered bones. When the jackal finally let go of my head, the girl was gone.

I staggered through the gate. I'd had a rough introduction to life in Necropolis: my tomb goods had turned out to be fakes, I'd been nearly hacked into pieces, and a jackal had clawed chunks out of my head. I'd even been slapped with a fish. Things couldn't have been much worse, except that for the first time in my young life (and death) I had a real purpose—I had to find that girl.