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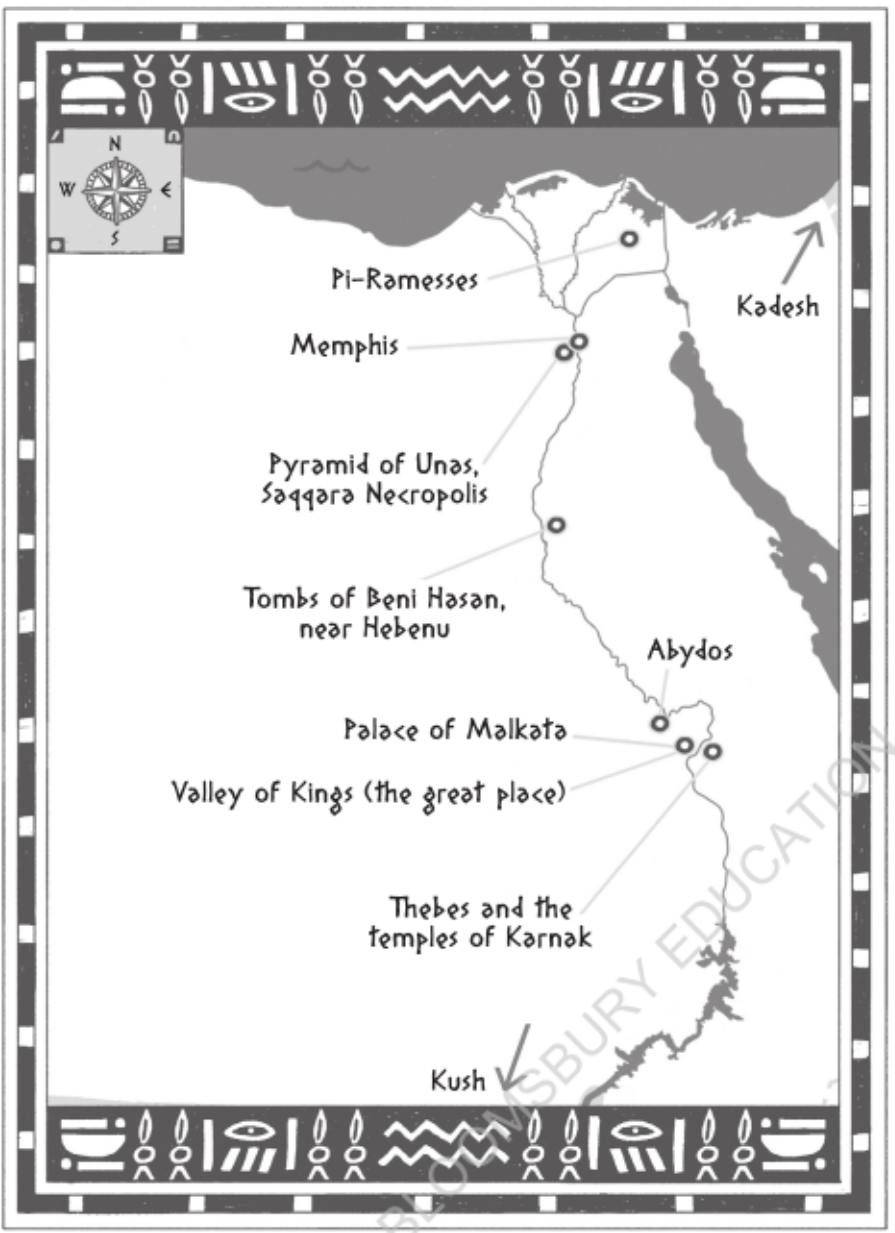
To Skyla

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ANCIENT EGYPT



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Henut took the cows away from the city, down to the fields to graze. Forty head of mottled brown and black cattle followed her along the path towards the canal, their long horns bobbing as though they were dancing. The ground was baked smooth like tiles. She stepped confidently onward, looking out over the green fields of wheat rippling in the breeze.

The cattle snorted. Something was wrong.

A jackal was following them. It circled them, leaving the high, dry path to trot down into the flooded fields below. Henut could hear the small splashes and rustling as it scampered through the wheat. Then it was back on the path and sitting

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confidently in front of them. The cattle stopped. They stamped anxiously. Their hooves thumped like a heartbeat on the dry earth. A jackal was too small to pose a threat to a cow, but Henut understood why they were nervous. Jackals were scavengers. They followed death. She clapped her hands and tried to shoo it away, but its long ears only flicked in amusement.

It was then she noticed the water. It was rising up silently out of the field. Red with mud, it crept up the shallow bank onto the path and over her feet. She froze. Where was this water coming from? She didn't understand.

The cattle backed away, their splashing hooves sounding like beating wings. She wanted to follow but couldn't move her feet. The red water crept up her legs and she looked again to the jackal. It just sat there as the liquid swirled up around its shoulders.

'You've got to run!' she shouted at the jackal.

The fields were turning into a lake. The water reached the jackal's neck. It still sat quietly as though waiting for her to do something.

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'Move!'

The water was rising up over its mouth, its face. The jackal stared at her, blinking slowly. It blinked again, before the water consumed its eyes, then its ears… It was gone, hidden under the clay-red liquid.

And then she realised she couldn't breathe.

Henut opened her eyes and sat up, gasping. Her heart was hammering.

Stars peeked through the reed canopy above. The moon hung low over the flat roofs of the neighbours' houses, casting a fine shadow. She could make out the shapes of the cats and her cousin, Tjay, all asleep on the roof and laid out in a neat line, like drying dates. Morning was close; the faint calls of geese honked in the distance.

It had been a dream.

She heard the sound again, the sound of cattle splashing through the water. It was coming from the room below. It wasn't water, it was a fluttering of wings. It stopped. Then a sharp noise like a pot smashing. More fluttering. Then nothing again. A bird must be trapped inside the house.

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She carefully tiptoed around the sleeping felines. The steps down from the roof were still warm from the day before, unlike the chill of the ground in the garden below. There were faint clouds visible now. Not that she worried it would rain; it usually only drizzled a few times a year. But every now and then, if it was heavy or lasted too long, the rain would wreak havoc. The passage outside their house would turn into a stream and the garden would flood. Even if they did their best to protect the clay oven in the yard, the fire pit would get waterlogged and they would have no bread for days while it dried out.

The house sat in the middle of the walled garden with a duck pond and vegetable plot on one side and ordered courtyard, raised water feature, ornamental flowers and trees on the other. The kitchen and outbuildings were to the rear, with a gateway that led down to the canal. The grand entrance was at the front, with a path that led to the courtyard and main building. She walked down the length of the house. The ducks were silhouetted against the garden wall. With no

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feed bowl in her hand, they didn't bother to waddle over and instead stayed folded, keeping their beaks warm under their wings.

Henut headed to the kitchen at the back of the house. She heard the noise again. The kitchen was open to the garden and she could imagine how a pigeon or ibis, attracted by crumbs or the warm embers in the oven, could have found its way in. The drying linen might have fallen and covered the kitchen doorway, trapping it inside. However, the noise wasn't coming from the kitchen. It was coming from the centre of the building. The main room of the house. The sound of wings, angry, beating against the walls. Then silence, as though it had never been there.

She ran to the other side of the building and unlatched the door to the main room. She gently pushed it and squinted into the cool darkness.

It smelt of yesterday's incense. It was too dark to see clearly. Tiny strips of twilight were visible below through the high, grated bricks that allowed in air and sunlight. The brightly painted walls looked grey. Yet she could see enough to

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know something was wrong. Things were strewn over the floor. The objects by the shrine had fallen and the ink box that rested on the chest had been smashed on the floor. Its contents had splattered against the painting on the wall. The jewellery box had been upturned, and loose beads were scattered over the floor. The cloth that hung over the door that led to her father's sleeping chamber had been torn down.

She stepped one foot inside.

A ball of panic launched itself at her. Feathers and claws engulfed her face, catching in her hair and scratching her cheek. Henut shrieked, inhaling a cloud of musky dust. She staggered backwards into the garden, coughing, and tripped on the fig tree roots. She landed painfully on her back. Whatever it was bolted into the sky.

'Henut? What's going on?' Tjay had come down from the roof. He moved tentatively, running his hands along the wall of the house to help him see. He reached the door to the main room and pushed it fully open. 'By Thoth, who did this?'

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Henut sat up. Her backside hurt from the fall. Her elbow stung. She had a mark on the back of her ankle. It was still too dark to tell if it was mud from the tree root or blood from a graze.

There were hushed voices coming from beyond the dark main room. There was the familiar clinking sound of the half-dozen amulets that hung from her father's neck…

Sennefer's tired face loomed out of the doorway. He looked older without his eyeliner and wig.

'Da…' Henut began.

'We've been attacked!' Sennefer cried.

'A robbery, sir?' asked Tjay.

Instead of answering him, Sennefer slipped back into the main room. Before Henut could follow her father, he appeared at the door again, holding two pieces of stone.

'Someone killed him!' Sennefer said.

He thrust something into Henut's hands. It was one of the statues from the niche above the shrine. It had been broken in two. The head of the statuette rested in the palm of her hand, looking calmly up at her, like the jackal in her dream.

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‘Can we use clay to reattach it?’ Henut asked, examining the pieces while her father looked around for a lamp.

‘I can’t have my father-in-law spend eternity without a head!’ he snapped. He started whispering a spell while looking through his necklaces, trying to work out which one to hold.

Henut looked down at the two pieces of stone in her hands. ‘But this isn’t him…?’

‘It’s his *ka*,’ Tjay explained softly. ‘It’s the way he can be fed in the afterlife.’

‘But he was mummified, wasn’t he? His body is still intact,’ she reasoned.

‘His *sah*, his mummified body, lies in his tomb, but this *ka* is what we give offering to,’ Tjay said sagely.

‘I know that,’ Henut said, ‘but he has another *ka* statue outside his tomb. So long as he can still get offerings there, shouldn’t he be alright? Why does it matter?’

‘Why does it *matter*?!’ Sennefer whirled around and pointed his finger at his daughter. ‘You silly girl… You did this! He might curse

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our entire household! We could all be struck by sickness, our house could be destroyed, all our possessions taken! How could you do this to us?'

'I didn't! It was a bird,' she said. 'It must have flown in…'

'Flown in?' Sennefer pointed at the building. 'From where? Not even a tiny flycatcher could get its beak through the windows.'

Henut looked up at the roofline. Small faces peered down at the scene below. The cats had woken up and were enjoying the show, ears pricked to hear what the fuss on the ground was.

'What sort of bird was it?' asked a calm voice. Henut's stepmother, Nefer, appeared in the doorway. She looked beautiful, even half-asleep, with her hair tied and a patterned shawl wrapped around her. She held Henut's half-sister, baby Nebtu, sleeping in one arm and a lit oil lamp in the other.

'I didn't see. When I opened the door it flew right into me. I fell,' Henut pointed at the fig root.

Sennefer snorted. He obviously didn't believe her. He took the oil lamp from his wife and went back into the main room, surveying the damage.

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‘What were you doing in the house?’ Nefer asked gently.

‘That’s obvious,’ Sennefer said, marching back. ‘Seti will be arriving today. We’ve a store full of sweet fruits.’

‘The fruits are in the kitchen store!’ Henut whispered hotly.

‘Don’t answer back!’ her father hissed and repeated a phrase he often quoted. ‘Be respectful to your father, pleasant to your mother.’

Henut wanted to point out that Nefer was not her mother, but held her tongue.

‘My love,’ Sennefer addressed his wife softly as he pointed at the broken statue in Henut’s hands. ‘What will we do about this?’

Nefer frowned. ‘It’s a shame, but we can have another one made for him.’

‘But the expense! The sculptors are already busy making *shabtis* for my tomb…’

‘We still have time. You’re not going to…’ she stopped herself saying ‘die’. ‘You’re not leaving us anytime soon. You’re healthy, you’re strong.’

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‘But your father will surely curse us for not treating his *ka* with care.’

‘I’m sure my father’s spirit has better things to do than worry about one statue,’ Nefer said. ‘Put it down by the door.’

Henut placed it next to the doorstep. Its head teetered at a strange angle.

‘I think I’m unwell,’ Sennefer said. ‘Do I feel warm to you? Unnaturally so? Should we send for a physician?’

‘Come, come, let’s sit you down and find you a drink.’ Nefer offered him her arm, which he took with a gentle nod. ‘Then I’m sure you’ll feel better.’

They walked back inside, but before Henut could breathe a sigh of relief, Sennefer ripped his hand from his wife’s grip and jabbed it in the air. ‘Henut, you’re banned from music for a week! And you’re to fetch the water. For your vindictiveness and your lies!’

Nebtu woke up, and let out a long pitiful wail.

Henut felt like crying too. A rage boiled within her. The injustice!

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