

A K H E N A T E N

Dweller in Truth

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ANCHOR BOOKS

A DIVISION OF RANDOM HOUSE, INC.
NEW YORK

The High Priest of Amun

Thebes had returned to prosperity after its terrible desertion by the heretic. Once more it was the capital of the empire, its throne graced by the young pharaoh Tutankhamun. Men of peace and war returned to their positions, and the priests resumed their duties in the temples. Palaces were restored, gardens blossomed, and the temple of Amun regained its grandeur and stood proudly with its giant columns and flowering garden. The markets were filled with buyers, merchants, and goods, and the stream of wealth flowed continuously. The city was now a marvel of glory.

It was my first venture to Thebes. I was dazzled by its brilliant architecture and amazed by its vast population. I was overwhelmed by the sounds of the city and the sight of its roads, busy with carriages and carts. In comparison, my city Sais seemed like a small, quiet, obscure village.

I reached the temple of Amun at the appointed time.

A servant ushered me through the hall of grand columns and into a lateral corridor leading to the room where the high priest awaited me. I saw him in the center of the room, seated on a chair of ebony with armrests of pure gold. He was an elderly man with a shaved head, and was dressed in a long flowing skirt, with a white sash wrapped around his chest and shoulders. Despite his advanced age he was a man of vigor and had a confident heart. He honored my father at the mention of his name and praised his loyalty.

"Those times of adversity helped us recognize men of good will like your father," he said. Then he murmured a few compliments regarding my endeavor and continued, "We have destroyed the walls with all the false inscriptions they bore. The truth, however, must be recorded." He leaned his head forward in gratitude. "Now Amun sits prosperously on his throne and in the holy of holies, master of all deities, protecting Egypt and fighting off its enemies. His priests, too, have regained their precedence. Amun liberated our valley by the power he vested in Ahmose, and extended our empire in every direction by the power he vested in Tuthmosis III. For he grants victory to whom he wishes, and humbles those who betray him."

I knelt in reverence until he called on me to rise and be seated on a chair before him. I listened carefully as the high priest spoke.

It is a very sad story, Meriamun, though in the beginning it seemed merely an innocent whisper. It started with the

Great Queen Tiye, the heretic's mother and wife of the Great Pharaoh, Amenhotep III. She came from a common Nubian family, with not a drop of royal blood in her veins. Yet she was shrewd and powerful, as though she had four eyes and could see in all directions at once. She was intent on maintaining friendly relations with us. I shall never forget her words on the day of the Nile Festival: "You priests of Amun are the fortune and blessing of Egypt." She was so strong that she could stare with her beautiful, big eyes into the faces of powerful men till they lowered their gaze in embarrassment. We, however, did not regard her with apprehension, for we knew how the pharaohs of this glorious family had always cherished and supported the priests of Amun. Then the queen declared an interest in broadening the scope of theological doctrine to encompass other deities, and in particular Aten. On one level it appeared as a mere expansion in the knowledge of religions that we all respected and held sacred. There was no sense in protesting, although we were displeased that other deities should attain such merit here in Thebes, the home of Amun. Tiye assured us that Amun would forever remain the master of all deities, and that his priests would rank above all others in Egypt. But her words did not appease us.

One day Toto, the chanter priest, said to me, "I detect behind the queen's decision a new policy that has nothing to do with religion." When I queried his statement, he continued, "The Great Queen is seeking the sympathy of the provincial priesthood in order to curb us, limit our power, and strengthen that of the sovereign."

"But we are the servants of Amun, and in the service

of the people. We are the teachers, the healers, and the guides in this world and the hereafter. The queen is a wise woman; she must acknowledge our merits," I replied.

"But this is a power struggle. The queen is ambitious. In my opinion she is more powerful than the king," he said irritably.

"But we are the sons of the greatest deity. We are backed by a heritage stronger than destiny," I argued, against my own misgivings.

Maybe at this point I should tell you about King Amenhotep III. His grandfather, Tuthmosis III, had established an empire that surpassed all others in its vastness and the multitude of its peoples. Amenhotep III was a powerful king. He rose to the defense of his country at the slightest alarm, and achieved such triumphs that the whole empire gave him allegiance. Peace and wealth prevailed throughout his long reign, and he cultivated the fruit of his forefathers' work. Crops, minerals, fabrics, and goods, everything was abundant in Egypt. He built beautiful palaces, temples, and sculptures. He indulged himself in fine food, wine, and women, but his wife Tiye knew his strengths and weaknesses, and used them to good effect. She encouraged him to fight at times of war, and tolerated his philandering, sacrificing her feminine emotions in order to share his throne and pursue her boundless ambition. I do not deny her the merit of knowing every detail of the empire's affairs. Nor do I question her loyalty and farsightedness, or her concern for the glory of Egypt. But I do condemn her greed for power. It was greed that tempted her to exploit

religion to attain exclusive power for the throne, and marginalize the priests. Gradually I became aware of other ideas that occupied her mind. One day she came to the temple, and after making her offering to Amun, preceded me with firm stride to the reception hall. As soon as we were seated she asked, "What is it that worries you?"

Before I could think of an answer, she continued quickly. "Like the priests I can read what is buried deep in people's hearts. You suspect that I have raised the status of other priests to the disadvantage of the priests of Amun."

"The priests of Amun are loyal subjects of your glorious family," I replied.

"Here is what I think," she said, her eyes glaring as she continued. "Amun is the master of all deities in Egypt. For our citizens in the empire, he is a symbol of power. They fear him. But Aten shines for everyone. He is the sun god, and anyone can embrace him."

I wondered if she was sincere, or whether it was just another pretense masking her desire to neutralize our power. In any case, I was not convinced by the argument itself.

"Your Highness," I said, "those savages must be ruled by force, not compassion."

"By compassion, too," she replied with a smile. "What is appropriate for a wild beast is not always suitable for the tamed animal."

This seemed to me a futile, womanish concept that might very well have disastrous consequences. And I was proven right by the painful events that followed.

The high priest was silent for a while as he gathered his thoughts. Then he continued.

At the beginning of her marriage, Tiye faced some difficulties. She remained childless for a considerable time, and feared she might be barren, particularly since she came from a common family. But, by the virtue of Amun and his priests, our good prayers and effective sorcery, the queen became pregnant. Even then, she gave birth to a girl. Whenever I met her in the palace or the temple, she would look at me with wariness and suspicion, as though I was responsible for her misfortune. We would never have thought of disturbing the order of the throne. It was the queen's own wickedness that made her so distrustful.

Once more he was silent, as though reluctant to continue. Then he said, "Then, in some mysterious way, she bore two sons." He thought a while, setting my curious soul on fire. "The older and better of the two passed away, while the other remained to exercise his perversity in the destruction of Egypt." I said nothing, but the high priest noticed my eagerness and went on.

We have ways of hunting out the truth even when it is hidden from others. We have the power of sorcery, and

our eyes are everywhere in the empire. The heretic was a man of questionable birth, effeminate and grotesque. Following in the footsteps of his father, Amenhotep III, he married a common girl. Nefertiti was like his mother, not only in humble descent, but also in her insatiable ambition and lust. She was beautiful, stubborn, and defiant. She plunged into the affairs of the country, supporting her husband's destructive policy. She bore six girls, the fruit of her liaisons with other men. Despite his apparent love for Nefertiti, Akhenaten never really loved anyone but his mother, who gave him life and nurtured his absurd ideas. He sensed Tiye's pain and loneliness, and harbored rage against his father. When Amenhotep III died, Akhenaten erased his name from all the monuments. He said he meant to erase the name of Amun from the people's memory, and to do that his father's name—Amenhotep, meaning Amun is Content—had also to be erased. The truth is, having failed to avenge himself during his father's life, he killed him after his death. When Tiye taught him the religion of Aten, it was merely a political maneuver. But the boy believed in it as an end in itself. Politics did not befit his feminine nature. What happened next was something even his mother had not anticipated. He became a heretic.

I still remember his repulsive appearance, neither man nor woman. Because he was so weak and frail, he naturally became resentful of all strong men, priests, and deities. He conceived of a god similar to himself in weakness and femininity, both father and mother, with no other purpose but love. A god worshiped with rituals

of dance and song! Akhenaten drowned in a swamp of foolishness, and neglected his obligations to the throne, while our men and loyal allies were being massacred by the enemies of the empire. Though they cried for help, they received none, and eventually the empire was lost, Egypt was destroyed, the temples were empty, and the people famished. That was the heretic who called himself Akhenaten.

Overwhelmed by the intensity of his memories, the high priest was silent for a while. I waited patiently, until at last he laced his fingers and rested his hands in his lap.

I first received reports about Akhenaten when he was still a young boy. I had my eyes in the palace, men who had dedicated themselves to the service of Amun and the country. They told me that the crown prince nurtured a suspicious affinity for Aten, favoring him over Amun, master of all deities. I learned that every day at dawn the boy went to a secluded spot on the Nile bank to greet the sunrise in solitude. I foresaw in his strange practices a future laden with trouble. I went to the palace, where I confessed my fears to the king and queen.

"My son is still young," Amenhotep III smiled.

"But the young boy will grow, and he will retain within him the ideas of his childhood."

"He is but an innocent child seeking wisdom wherever he thinks he might find it," Tiye said.

"Soon he will begin his military training and learn his true calling," the pharaoh added.

"We have no need of more countries to add to our empire. What we need is the wisdom to keep what we already have," Tiye said.

"My glorious Queen," I argued, "the safety of the empire relies on the blessings of Amun and the exercise of power."

"I am surprised that a wise man like yourself should undervalue the role of wisdom in such a manner," said the cunning queen.

"I do not deny the importance of wisdom," I insisted, "but without power, wisdom is nothing but chatter."

"In this palace," the pharaoh interjected, "there is no question that Amun is the master of all deities."

"But the prince has stopped visiting the temple," I said anxiously.

"Be patient," the king replied. "Soon my son will fulfill all his obligations as crown prince."

I returned from the palace with no solace. Indeed, after hearing the king and queen come to the prince's defense, my fears were even stronger. Then I heard about a conversation the crown prince had with his parents and I became convinced that within the prince's frail body was an abyss of evil power. One day one of my men asked to see me. "Even the sun is no longer a god," he said. I queried him and he continued, "There are rumors that a new god has revealed himself to the

crown prince, claiming to be the one and only true god and that all other deities are spurious."

The news stunned me. The fate of the older brother who died was more merciful than the madness that had descended upon the crown prince. The tragedy had reached its climax.

"Are you certain of what you say?"

"I am merely reporting what everyone says."

"How did this so-called god reveal himself to the prince?"

"He heard his voice."

"No sun? No star? No idols?"

"Nothing at all."

"How can he worship what he cannot see?"

"He believes that his god is the only power capable of creation."

"He has lost his mind."

The chanter priest, Toto, said, "The prince has gone mad and is no longer fit to take the throne when the time comes."

"Quiet," I said. "That the prince is an infidel does not change the fact that Amun and our gods will remain the only deities worshiped by the people in the empire."

"How can a heretic take the throne and rule the empire?" Toto asked angrily.

"Let us not be hasty. We will wait until the truth is clear, then we will discuss the matter with the king," I continued, my heart heavy with gloom. "It will be the first confrontation of its kind in history."

When the crown prince married Nefertiti, the eldest

daughter of the sage Ay, I held by the last of all hopes—that in marriage, the prince would return to his senses. I summoned Ay to the temple. As we talked, it became clear to me that the sage was extremely cautious in what he said. He was certainly in a predicament, and I sympathized with him, saying nothing about the prince's unbelief. Before he left, I asked him to arrange for me a private conference with his daughter.

Nefertiti arrived promptly. I looked at her keenly, and saw beyond her captivating beauty a roaring torrent of strength and power. I was instantly reminded of the Great Queen Tiye, and hoped this power would work with us and not against us.

"I grant you my blessing, my daughter."

She expressed her gratitude in a sweet, pleasing voice.

"I have no doubt that you are fully aware of your duties as the wife of the crown prince. But it is also my duty to remind you that the throne of the empire is founded on three fundamentals: Amun, the master of all deities; the pharaoh; and the queen."

"Indeed. I am fortunate to be granted the honor of your wisdom."

"A sensible queen must bear with the king the burden of protecting the empire."

"Dear Holy Priest," she said firmly, "my heart is filled with love and loyalty."

"Egypt is a country of timeless traditions, and women are the sacred guardians of this heritage."

"Duty, too, dwells within me."

Nefertiti remained wary and reserved throughout her

visit. She spoke, but revealed nothing. She was like a mysterious carving with no inscription to explain it. I could extract no information from her words, nor could I express my fears directly. Yet her wariness meant that she knew everything and that she was not on our side. Her position did not surprise me in the least. By a stroke of luck capable of turning the strongest head in the country Nefertiti had found herself a future queen. Her primary concern was neither Amun nor indeed any of the deities—she craved only the power of the throne. I said a prayer of mourning with the other priests in the holy of holies, then related to them the proceedings of my meeting with Nefertiti.

“Soon there will be nothing but darkness,” said Toto the chanter. When all the other priests had left, Toto said, “Perhaps you can discuss the matter with Chief Commander Mae.”

“Toto,” I replied earnestly, recognizing the danger in his allusion, “we cannot defy King Amenhotep III and the Great Queen Tiye.”

Meanwhile in the palace, tension was rising between the mad prince and his parents. Thus King Amenhotep III issued an imperial mandate ordering the crown prince to tour the vast empire. Perhaps the pharaoh had hoped that when the prince became acquainted with his country and subjects he would see the reality of things and realize how far he had strayed from the right path. I was grateful for the king’s attempt, but my deep fears continued to haunt me. Then, while the prince was still away, some grave events took place. First, Queen Tiye

gave birth to twins, Smenkhkare and Tutankhamun. Shortly after, the pharaoh's health deteriorated, and he died. Messengers from the palace carried the news to the prince, for him to return and take the throne.

I discussed the future of the country with the priests of Amun, and we came to an agreement. Immediately I took action, and asked to meet the queen despite the mourning and her preoccupation with mummifying her husband's body. Even in her grief, the queen was powerful and enduring. I was determined to speak out at any cost.

"My Queen, I came to speak my mind to the rightful matriarch of the empire." I could tell by the way she looked at me that she knew what I was about to say. "My gracious Queen, it is well known now that the crown prince does not respect our deities."

"Do not believe everything you hear," she replied.

"I am prepared to believe all that you say, Your Majesty," I said readily.

"He is a poet," she said. I was not satisfied with her answer but remained silent until she added, firmly, "He will fulfill all his duties."

I mustered up all the courage I had within me and said, "My Queen is surely aware of the consequences that would befall the throne if the gods were offended."

"Your fears are unfounded," she replied irritably.

"If necessity calls we can entrust the throne to one of your younger sons; you will be the guardian regent."

"Amenhotep IV will rule the empire. He is the crown prince."

Thus did the wise queen yield to the mother and lover

in her. She wasted the last chance for reparation, and armed destiny with the weapon that dealt us a fatal blow. The mad, effeminate crown prince returned in time for the royal entombment.

Soon afterward, I was summoned to appear before him in his formal capacity as the future pharaoh. It was the first time I had seen him closely. He was rather dark, with dreamy eyes and a thin, frail figure, noticeably feminine. His features were grotesque and disturbing. He was a despicable creature, unworthy of the throne, so weak he could not challenge an insect, let alone the Master Deity. I was disgusted but revealed nothing; instead I called to mind the words of wise men and great poets, words that inspired me to keep my patience. He fixed his gaze on me, a look neither hostile nor friendly.

I was so distracted by his appearance that I could not utter a word.

"I have had so many tedious arguments with my parents because of you," he began.

I was finally able to speak. "My only concern in this life," I said, "is the service of Amun, the throne, and the empire."

"You have something to tell me, no doubt," he said.

"My King," I replied, anticipating a battle, "I heard disturbing news, but I did not believe it."

"What you heard is the truth," he said, seemingly quite unconcerned. I was startled, but he continued, "I am the only man of faith in this heathen country."

"I cannot believe what I hear."

"You must believe it. There is no god but the One and Only God."

"Amun will not forgive this blasphemy." I was so enraged that I no longer cared about the consequences of what I said; my only concern was to defend Amun and our deities.

"No one but the One and Only God can grant forgiveness," he replied, smiling.

"Nonsense!" I said, shuddering with anger.

"He is the whole meaning of this world. He is the creator. He is the power. He is love, peace, and happiness." Then he threw me a piercing look that seemed out of keeping with his fragile appearance, and continued, "I call upon you to believe in him."

"Beware of the wrath of Amun," I said furiously. "He creates, and He destroys. He grants and dispossesses, aids and forsakes. Fear his vengeance for it shall haunt you to your last descendant, and destroy your throne and the empire."

"I am but a child in the vast expanse of the One and Only, a budding flower in his garden, and a servant at his command. He granted me his gracious love and revealed himself to my soul. He filled me with brilliant light and beautiful music. That is all that matters to me."

"A prince does not become a pharaoh until he is crowned in the temple of Amun."

"I shall be crowned in the open land under the sunlight, with the blessing of the creator."

We parted on the poorest terms. On my side there was Amun and his followers. Akhenaten had the heritage of his great family, the holiness with which the subjects regarded their pharaohs, and his madness. I prepared myself for holy war, and was ready to sacrifice

everything for the sake of Amun and my country. I put myself to work without delay.

"The new pharaoh is a heretic," I told the priests. "You must know that, and let everyone in the country be informed."

I too was furious, but I thought it best to channel Toto's anger. I proposed that he should pretend to join the heretic, to become our eyes in the palace. As for the king, he, too, lost no time. He was crowned with the blessings of his so-called god. He even built a temple for him in Thebes, the city of Amun. He proclaimed his new religion to the candidates for his chamber, and consequently the finest men of Egypt declared their faith in the new god. Their particular motives may have varied, but the goal was one—to fulfill their ambition and attain power. Perhaps if they had renounced his religion, things would have taken a different course. But they sold themselves like whores. Take the sage Ay, for instance. He thought himself a part of the pharaoh's family and was blinded by glory. Haremhab, a courageous warrior, was another one. He was a man of no true faith; for him it was simply a matter of substituting one name for another. All the others, too, they were nothing but a band of hypocrites, hungry for wealth and power. Had they not renounced their sinful ways and repented at the critical moment, they would have deserved to die. In the event, they won their lives back, but I have no respect for any of them.

The conflict threatened Thebes. People were torn between their loyalty to Amun and their obligation to the mad offshoot of the greatest family in our history.

The Great Queen Tiye was consumed with worry as she watched the seed she had sown grow into a poisonous plant. He was falling into a bottomless pit, dragging his family along with him. Tiye kept bringing her offerings to the temple of Amun, in an attempt to diminish the turmoil that jeopardized the throne.

"You win by allegiance, and lose by defiance," she said.

"You are asking us to be loyal to a heretic. If only you had listened to me in the beginning."

"We must not despair."

Her usual strength collapsed in the face of his mysterious insanity, and she was impotent before her effeminate, spoilt son. It was inevitable that we continue our holy struggle. The mad king was no longer able to bear the pressure in Thebes, particularly when he heard the hostile cries of the people during the feast of Amun. Claiming that his god had commanded him to leave Thebes and build a new city, he left in a grand exodus with eighty thousand other heretics, to live in their accursed exile. His move from Thebes gave us time to prepare for holy war, and allowed him to indulge his blasphemy and make the new capital a place for riotous festivities and orgies. Love and Joy, this was the slogan of his new, nameless god. Whenever his natural weakness stung him, he went to extremes to prove that his power had no limits. The priests were evicted and the temples closed. The idols and all the patrimonial endowments were confiscated. I said to the priests, "It is death and the hereafter you must cherish, for there is nothing to live for now that the temples are closed." But we

found refuge in the homes of the pious followers of Amun. They were our fighters, and we continued the struggle with hope and determination.

The heretic continued to flaunt his power, parading in the provinces and calling upon the people to join him in his heresy. Those were the darkest days. The people were torn and dismayed, not knowing whether to choose their deities or their feeble king and his obscenely beautiful wife. Those were the days of grief and torment, hypocrisy and regret, and fear of divine wrath. But the words of love and joy began to take their toll. The public servants cared little for their duties and exploited citizens for their pleasure. Rebellion spread throughout the empire. Our enemies feared us no more, and began to threaten our borders. When the rulers in the provinces called for help they received poems instead of troops. They died as martyrs, cursing the treacherous heretic with their final breath. The stream of riches that had flown into Egypt from all over the world dried up, leaving the markets bare, the merchants impoverished, and the country famished. I cried out to the people, "The curse of Amun has descended upon us. We must destroy the heretic, or else we will be extinguished in war."

Still I opted for the path of peace to spare the country the trauma of war. I confronted the queen mother, Tiye.

"I am troubled and grieved, High Priest of Amun," she said.

"I am no longer high priest." Bitterness grasped me. "I am only a hunted vagabond now."

"I ask the gods for mercy," she stuttered.

"You must do something. He is your son; he adores you. You are responsible for all that has happened. Caution him before a civil war wipes out everything."

She was vexed when I reminded her of her responsibility. She said, "I have decided to go to the new capital, Akhetaten."

Indeed Queen Tiye made some deserving efforts, but she could not repair the damage. I did not despair, but went to Akhetaten, despite the danger in such an undertaking. There I met with the heretic's men.

"I speak to you from a position of power," I said. "My men are awaiting a signal from me to pounce on you. I am here now in a last attempt to save what can possibly be saved without bloodshed or destruction. I will leave you to yourselves for a while, and trust you will come to your senses and do your duty."

They appeared to be convinced, and in due time they did what I asked of them, each for his own purposes. But the country was spared grave affliction. They met with the heretic and presented him with two urgent demands—to declare freedom of worship, and to send an army to defend the empire against our enemies who were making incursions across the borders. The mad king refused. They proposed that if he abdicated the throne, he could keep his faith and preach it however he wished. Again, their offer was rejected. But this time he appointed his brother Smenkhkare to share the throne. We disregarded his order and named Tutankhamun king of the throne. The heretic's men deserted him and

pledged allegiance to the new pharaoh. In time, order was restored in the country without war or destruction. We relinquished all desire for revenge on the madman and his wife and those who remained loyal to him.

Amun's followers hurried to the temples after their long deprivation. The nightmare had ended and life began to resume its normal course. As for the heretic, when madness had consumed him, he fell ill and died, disappointed in his god and hopeless of the hereafter. He left behind him his wicked wife to endure loneliness and regret.

The high priest gazed at me silently for a long while. Then he said, "We are still healing. We need time and serious effort. Our loss, inside and outside the empire, was beyond estimate. How did it all happen? How could such a mad, distorted person stir up such agony?" He paused for a moment then concluded, "That is the true story. Record it faithfully. Do carry my sincere greetings to your dear father."

B e k

I met Bek, the sculptor, in his house on one of the islands of the Nile two miles south of Thebes. He lived in virtual isolation in a small but elegant house in the center of his modest farm. Bek was widely known to have excelled in his vocation above any other sculptor, but when our country was being rebuilt after the wars he was not summoned to participate as were many others of his standing. Bek was known for his loyalty to his former king, Akhenaten. In fact he was occasionally accused of being a heretic himself. Now he was almost forty years old, a strong, dark man, tall, slender, and full of energy. But his gaze was overcast by melancholy. He greeted me with a warm smile as he opened the letter that my father had given me. When he finished reading, he began.

Beauty and peace vanished when Akhenaten left our world, and I no longer find pleasure in color or in music.

I first knew him when I was still a young boy learning the basics of my vocation at the school of my father, Menn, the sculptor of King Amenhotep III. One day a young boy, carried on a sedan chair, visited us at school. My father whispered to me, "The crown prince."

I saw a lad of my own age, then, frail, unassuming, but with a piercing look. He seemed fascinated by the mere encounter of the chisel and the rock, as though it were a miracle. He came to watch and learn, and he engaged us in conversation with such friendliness that we soon forgot he was a member of the pharaoh's family. He continued to visit the school regularly, and we became friends. I was extremely happy with our friendship. My father took pride in our acquaintance and granted us his blessing.

"Akhenaten is a young boy with the wisdom of a man, my son," my father would say.

Indeed he was. Even the high priest of Amun acknowledged his wisdom and his maturity at such an early age. The priests interpreted it as an evil force that had taken hold of Akhenaten. That was not true, Meriamun. The evil force dwelt in the hearts of the priests. My king knew no evil. Perhaps that was his tragedy. Once, when we were young men, my father was absorbed in carving a sculpture for King Amenhotep III, and Akhenaten was watching him as he worked with his assistants.

"Master Menn," Akhenaten said, "you insist on all these traditional methods. I find them stifling."

"Tradition is power, Your Highness. With tradition

we can overcome the passage of time," my father answered with pride.

"Every sunrise brings a new kind of beauty," Akhenaten said ecstatically. Then he turned to me. "Bek, my friend, this sculpture may be beautiful but it will not be truthful. Where is the truth?"

Akhenaten lived for the truth, and because of the truth he died. From a very young age his soul was inspired with all that was mystical, as though he had been born from the womb of spirituality. He said to me once, "I am very fond of you, Bek. If you master your art I will entrust to you all matters of art and aesthetics when I become king."

The truth is that I owe Akhenaten everything, religion and art together. First he taught me the religion of Aten, then he showed me the path of the One God. I was filled with peace when I heard him recite with faith and love:

*The land is bright with thy light
And is no more in darkness,
O Lord,
Master of the universe,
Of heaven and earth,
Of man and animal,
O our Creator.*

One day, as we were walking from the quarry to school, I said, "My Prince, I believe in your God."

He was overjoyed. "You are the second believer after Meri-Ra; but our enemies will be plentiful."

I learned later that Nefertiti had joined the faith at the same time, while she was still at her father's palace. Akhenaten used to talk to me occasionally about the difficulties he faced because of his religion. Despite my isolation in the quarry, I was able to acquire some understanding of the events that transpired.

It was from my father that I learned the fundamentals of my vocation, but Akhenaten gave me the spirit. He committed himself to the truth, both in life and in art. Because of that he provoked those who lived only for this transient life, those who swarmed around every banquet like vultures and crows.

"Bek," he told me once, "do not let the teachings of the dead shackle your hands when you work. Let your stone be a harbor for truth. It is God who created everything, so be loyal to him in your representations. Do not allow fear or greed to influence your work. When you make a sculpture of me, let it show every flaw on my face and body so that the beauty of your work will be in its honesty."

That was Akhenaten, who rejected the old ways and was fascinated by novelty.

He renounced the idols and pulled out timeworn tradition by the root. Akhenaten found ecstasy in truth.

When he became king, I declared my faith again before him and he appointed me first sculptor of the king. When God inspired him to build the new city and move his throne to it, I was in charge of eighty thousand workers, building the most beautiful city ever known, the city of light and faith, Akhetaten.

We built the largest roads, the finest palaces, and the most beautiful of gardens and ponds. It was an artist's masterpiece, but in the end it fell prey to the malice of the priests.

Bek remained silent for a while, unable to conceal his grief for his most cherished creation, which was now slowly vanishing into the dust of the earth. I, too, remained silent out of respect for him, until finally he continued.

Akhenaten was an artist himself. He recited poetry, painted, and even tried his slender hand at carving stone. I will tell you a secret that few people know. He carved a sculpture of Nefertiti that was by all standards an ideal of beauty. It may still be in the abandoned palace, or in Nefertiti's palace, or perhaps it was destroyed with everything else. When the queen abandoned him unexpectedly, he took out the left eye of the sculpture to express his disappointment, but left the rest of it intact as a token of eternal love.

The queen and Akhenaten were a symbol of the God who was father and mother in one. They were united by a deep love that weathered many storms. I still do not understand why she left him at the very end. Her enemies accused her of leaving the sinking ship. They said she wanted to find herself a place in the new nation. But she did not try to win anyone over after that. Of her

own will, she remained isolated in her palace, until it became her prison. It was not true that she had been nursing her own interest. I believe that her faith might have been shaken when God did not come to their aid at the time of those painful events. In a dark hour she deserted both the throne and her religion. As for Akhenaten, he was determined until the end. How could he give up his faith when it was he who had heard the heavenly voice of God call him his dear son? After that Akhenaten could not hear any other voice, nor did he care for any other opinion or listen to anyone's advice as a person should when he seeks the truth. It was not he who was defeated, but us. I, too, had my doubts, particularly when they asked him to relinquish the throne, and even more when everyone abandoned him. I saw him once standing alone, calmly watching everyone leave. When he saw me approach he said, "You must go with them, Bek."

"No one dared speak to me of this, my King," I said agitatedly.

"But you will go," he replied with a smile.

"I will remain by my king forever."

"Bek," he said gently, "you will go, whether willingly, or by force."

I remained silent for a moment, then asked, "My Master, can evil overcome?"

He seemed to disappear in his thoughts for a moment, then I heard him say, "Evil can never overcome. What we are witnessing is only a fleeting moment. Only death can keep us from seeing the truth."

Then he began to sing:

*You dwell within me, My Lord.
No other has known you
But your son Akhenaten.
You inspire me with your knowledge.
You are the power of creation.*

In the same way that he never gave up his faith, he never stopped loving either. Even when he saw the pyramid he built destroyed, and saw his own men join his enemies and his beloved wife desert him without explanation, even then his heart did not know a moment of hatred or spite. He was above punishment; he had nothing but love for man, animal, and even inanimate matter. When he first took the throne, Egypt was a vast empire with loving, obedient subjects. He could have chosen to indulge in worldly comforts: women, wine, food. But he looked away from such temptations and gave himself to the truth, challenging the powers of greed and selfishness. So he sacrificed everything, without ever losing the smile on his face.

“Why don’t you use force to defend love and peace?” I asked him one day after the seeds of evil had started growing.

He replied, “Vicious people and criminals always find an excuse to justify their thirst for blood, and I am not one of those, Bek.”

I will never forget his kindness when he sensed that I

liked Mutnedjmet, his sister-in-law. He tried to pave the way for me to ask her hand in marriage. When she refused me he consoled me: "Do not be sorry, she is like a vulture waiting for her chance to attack." I asked him what he meant, but he did not answer.

When everyone else had left, I insisted on remaining with him, as did Meri-Ra, the priest of the One God. But the sage Ay met with us and said, "We are only leaving to protect him from an attack that we cannot ward off. It is the only way we can save his life. Believe me, if anyone was to remain with him I would have chosen to be that one. I am the father of his wife, and his first teacher."

"But Ay, my staying with him will not change the course of events anyhow."

"The agreement between us and the priests was that Akhenaten would not be harmed, on the condition that none of his followers and men remain in the city with him. The priests will assign a few servants to watch over him."

My heart was seared with pain as I was forced to join everyone else. I still have doubts, for I, too, cannot understand why God abandoned him. Sometimes I pray to God and sometimes not. When I received the news of his death, I wept until my eyes exhausted their tears. I had a deep feeling that he did not just die but that they killed him by sorcery or in some other brutal way. Now, here I am living without purpose or a trace of happiness, waiting for death to take me, as it took my beautiful city.

Meri - Ra

Meri-Ra's face was a prelude to the sadness inside him. His skin was bronzed by the sun. He was slim, rather tall, in his mid-forties. He lived alone in a small house, with no companions or servant. Meri-Ra was once the high priest of the One and Only God in Akhetaten, the city of light. I visited him in his town, Deshasha, two days north of Thebes. When he read my father's letter he asked me, smiling, "Why do you take such a burden upon yourself?"

"To find out the truth," I answered.

"It is good to think that there is one person who seeks the truth," he nodded. "Perhaps I was the only one who was driven out of Akhetaten by force. I refused to abandon my king. The voice of God was silenced, the temple was destroyed, but destiny has yet to have its final word." Then he gazed at me with his sad brown eyes and began his story.

I was fortunate to have been among the prince's closest companions from boyhood. Akhenaten and I were greatly drawn to mystical themes. We studied the religion of Amun together, as well as Aten. Like many of our peers, I was enchanted with his charm. I admired his sensitivity and insight. He was a remarkable theologian. He blessed me with the words that later conquered everyone's heart: "I love you, Meri-Ra. Do not withhold your love from me."

His love penetrated my heart and spread to my soul. He often invited me to join him in his place of retreat on the western side of the palace by the Nile bank, an awning supported on four columns and surrounded by lotus and palm trees. Its floor was lush grass, and in the middle there was a green mat and a cushion. Akhenaten would wake up in the darkness of the early morning hours. When the golden sun emerged behind the fields, he sang to Aten. His sweet voice still echoes in my ears, and intoxicates me like the smell of holy incense:

*Your light, a summit in the sky,
Aten, the living God,
Aten, the first of life,
When your rays appear in the East
The world is a festival of light.
Aten, the living Sun,
Aten, shining above,
Your light unifies the two lands
And all that you created.*

You may be distant, but your rays are here on earth.

When the sun had risen, we wandered blissfully in the garden. "There is no joy so pure as the joy of worship." His face glowed. But even then, Akhenaten's life was not free of pain. His failure in military training embittered him. "My father will not forgo his desire to make me a warrior, Meri-Ra," he complained. Then he looked in the gold-framed mirror and said, "Alas! Neither beauty nor strength."

The death of his older brother Tuthmosis left him with a scar in his soul. Only a deeper wound, the death of his beloved daughter Meketaten, made the pain of his childhood loss bearable. How he cried for his brother. Death became a mystery, a terrible question that confronted him mercilessly.

"What is death, Meri-Ra?" he asked. I remained quiet, avoiding the conventional answers he detested. "Even Ay does not know," he continued. "Only the sun rises again after it has gone. Tuthmosis will never return."

Thus was the eternal war he waged on weakness and grief. He set himself on a path, like the rays of the sun, promising a bright day every morning. Then one beautiful morning I met him in his place of retreat. He was rather pale, but there was something about the fixed gaze of his eyes that made him look fearless.

"The sun is nothing, Meri-Ra," he said without returning my greeting. I did not understand what he meant. He

pulled me down beside him on the straw mat and continued, "Heed my words, Meri-Ra, for I speak the truth. Last night I was intoxicated with ecstasy. The darkness of the night was my companion, so intimate, like a lovely bride. I was entranced with longing for the Creator. And there, across a thousand visions, the truth revealed itself to me, more apparent than anything seen with the eye. I heard a voice sweeter than the scent of flowers: 'Fill thy soul with my breath,' it said. 'Renounce what I have not granted thee. I am the Creator, I am the stream from which life flows. I am love, peace, and joy. Fill thy heart with my love, quench the thirst of all the tortured souls on earth.'"

He was radiant with excitement, dazzling.

"Do not fear the truth, Meri-Ra," he continued, "for in the truth you will find happiness."

"What splendid light," I murmured breathlessly.

"Come, live with me in the truth," he urged me.

I sat upright. "I am with you, my Prince, until the very end."

Akhenaten became the first priest of the One and Only God. He became my teacher and spiritual guide, eager to answer my questions even before I asked. One day I said, "I believe in your God."

"Rejoice!" he cried. "You shall be the first priest in his temple."

Akhenaten declared his new faith to a few of his close companions. When he married Nefertiti—and he delighted in marriage—he was most pleased that she, too, believed in the One and Only. He did not begin the denunciation of other deities until later. During his

father's rule, Akhenaten did not have the power to do what he liked. Later, when he became king, his attacks came progressively. At first he renounced all the deities. Then he abolished their worship, confiscated the temples, and allotted their patrimonies to the poor. In Akhetaten I became the high priest of the One God. When my king decided to close the temples, I warned him, "You are challenging a power that has prevailed through the ages and across the land, from Nubia to the sea."

"The priests are swindlers," he said confidently. "They live off propagating superstition in order to exploit the poor and extort their daily bread. Their temples are brothels, and there is nothing they hold sacred but their carnal desires."

I discovered then that within his feeble body Akhenaten possessed a power that no one had guessed at. His courage exceeded that of Haremhhab and Mae, who had reputations for bravery. To everyone else he was an enigma, but to me he was as clear as the sun. He exhausted himself in the love of his God and devoted his life to the service of the One and Only, regardless of the consequences. I did not find his performance during the memorable tour of the empire surprising at all. Nor was I surprised that he kept to his message of love and peace even in the most extreme circumstances. He dwelled in the expanse of God's empire and lived by his command. For Akhenaten, the shrewdness of politicians and the power of military men was of no significance. It was only the truth that concerned him. They accused him of living an illusion, and of madness.

The truth, however, was that they were the ones who

dwelled on the illusions of a corrupt world; they were a raving mob. Indeed the throne was the least of his concerns. I remember how he became morose when he was summoned from his tour to claim the throne after his father died. "I wonder if the duties of the throne will keep me away from my God?" he asked sullenly.

"But my King," I replied eagerly, "it is but a divine purpose to put the power of the throne in the service of God, as your forefathers have done for their false deities."

"You speak the truth, Meri-Ra." He appeared relieved. "They sacrificed the lives of poor peasants to their gods. I shall slay evil and offer it to my God. Thus I shall be God's instrument to break the shackles of those who have no power."

He ascended the throne to fight the most fierce of wars. He fought for the happiness of people, as his God commanded him. During that war he proved that he was stronger and more enduring than Tuthmosis III.

He proclaimed his religion in the provinces. People were exhilarated. They received him with flowers and love.

He was determined to renew every day the faith of his own men, those who were closest to him. They would stand before the throne, and when they had finished discussing the affairs of the nation with Nefertiti, Akhenaten would talk with them about religion, so that he was certain that they were deserving of God's bounty.

Meri-Ra was silent for a while. He heaved a loud sigh then continued.

Then clouds of grief came, one after the other, driven by winds of spite, within the country and from outside. Each man faced up to them according to the strength of his faith, and although some of them faltered, my King was not distraught. "God will not let me down," he said. One day in the temple he asked derisively, "My men advise me to be moderate, and my God commands me to uphold the faith. Whom should I follow, Meri-Ra?" The question required no answer.

Haremhab came to meet me in the temple when matters were at their worst. "You are the high priest of the One God, Meri-Ra, the closest of all men to the king," he said.

"It is but a gift from God, bestowed upon his servant," I replied, anticipating what he was about to request.

"The situation demands a change in policy," he started. I replied firmly, "Heed only the voice of God."

He frowned. "I hoped we might have a reasonable discussion."

"Only true believers are capable of a reasonable discussion," I replied.

When I learned about the men's decision to abandon the king under the pretense of protecting his life, I said to Ay, "I cannot accept a return to heathen ways."

My King refused to compromise. It is not that he did not care about the welfare of the country, for he, too, had his plan to avoid civil war. He had intended to confront his people and the rebels alone. He was confident that he had the ability to guide them afresh to the faith. But by then, the men were convinced that he was going

to be killed, and that if they did not leave they would soon pay the price with their own lives. Everyone deserted him. Armed soldiers came to take me. The guards who were left with Akhenaten were ordered to stop him if he attempted to venture out of his palace. Thus they prevented him from confronting people. He became a prisoner in his palace. Even Nefertiti left him. I cannot imagine that she left him willingly; she, too, I should think, was carried away by force. He was filled with grief for the faith that he had spent his life trying to plant in people's hearts. Then we received news that he was ill, and shortly after, he died. Actually, I doubt that his death was caused by illness. I believe that the foul hands of the priests of Amun had finally found their way into his pure, precious soul. He died without knowing that I never wanted to leave his side.

Once more Meri-Ra was silent. He gazed at me for a long time, then he said, "Akhenaten did not and will not die. For he has found the eternal truth. The day will come when he will be victorious. He heard the voice of God promise that He would never forsake him."

Meri-Ra reached over to open a drawer beside him. He produced a scroll of papyrus and handed it to me. "This is a record of all his religious teachings and his songs," he said. "Study it, young man. Perhaps your truth-loving heart will find some solace in his words. You did not start this journey for no reason."

Bento

Bento was Akhenaten's personal physician. Indeed, when I met him, he still occupied the position of personal physician of the pharaoh in Tutankhamun's palace. Bento was sixty years old, with a noble bearing and marks of Nubian descent. When I visited him in his beautiful palace at the center of Thebes, I found him to be a man of serene nature and soft voice, yet extremely energetic. His clothes were exquisitely tasteful. Gathering his memories, Bento began.

Today, Akhenaten is known only as "the heretic." But despite all that was said about him, my heart still fills with love at the mention of his name. What a life he created for himself! Did Akhenaten really live among us? Did he really devote his life to love? Why, then, all the malice and hatred that was left behind? Whenever I

think of him I remember how, when he was a young boy, he aroused the concern of all those who knew him. The Great Queen Tiye would often ask me, "Why is Akhenaten so frail, Bento?"

I remember my confusion in trying to answer. Akhenaten had no particular ailment. But he was thin and feeble, and, unlike his brother Tuthmosis, he was prey to every malady that came his way. He did not like sport, nor was he keen on maintaining a good diet. I often prayed to Thoth, the god of science, asking him to advise me on Akhenaten. Yet all my attempts were to no avail. Thoth's amulets had no effect on him, and herbs blessed by Isis did nothing to help his sickly body. I became extremely worried when, during the khamsin winds, he fell ill and his brother soon contracted the same disease. They were both confined to one room when the queen said to me, "Look, Bento, their faces are so yellow, and their stomachs feel like stone. Neither of them has relieved himself in days."

I examined them carefully. "They have a temperature and their stomachs are bloated. Give them a drink that will ease their bowels. Then mix some sweet, fermented malt water with flour and leave it to infuse overnight. Let that be their only food for four days."

Before four days had passed the strong Tuthmosis died and the feeble brother was spared. Akhenaten wandered about the palace, grieving, looking for his brother.

"You left my brother to die," he protested when he saw me. Then he looked at his father and continued, "When I become pharaoh, I will kill death."

"Could Tuthmosis come back for just one day?" he asked me once.

"Pray to the gods who spared your soul, Akhenaten, for there is no return from death, and we shall all die in time," I replied.

"Why?" he insisted.

"Akhenaten," I said softly, "let us hear that song you sang with your brother."

*Our loved ones left us
Only words to remember.
O saddened hearts,
Live not in grief,
For Osiris shall hear no pleas,
Nor will wailing
Bring back the dead.*

For a long time sadness was his only companion, so much so that I thought he outdid even his mother in mourning his brother. As I was treating him once, he asked, "Why all this effort if we are going to die anyhow?" I smiled and continued my work. He said, "You smile as though you were immortal."

I replied, to avoid his pestering, "Ask your tutor Ay."

"Ay doesn't know any more than you," he said scornfully.

The maturity of his mind, in one so young and delicate, made a deep impression on me. I followed his spiritual adventures keenly, and was filled with admiration. He had astounding qualities that one could not fathom;

he had the power to defy any force that challenged him. Despite his physical weakness, he had exceptional perseverance. He barely slept. Instead, he prayed constantly like a priest, and read like a sage. He never wearied of asking questions or debating. What, I wondered, would destiny hold in store for him if one day he sat on the throne of his forefathers? His father, King Amenhotep III, was so concerned that he once said, "The boy is worthy of anything but the throne."

One day I noticed him glaring angrily at his father. "You understand matters beyond your age," I said, "but you still do not realize your father's greatness."

He replied irritably, "I cannot bear the way he gobbles his food."

He was repulsed by those who were driven by carnal desires. I used to believe a healthy body was essential for a healthy soul, but he proved that the opposite was also true. I learned from him that the soul may lend a weak body power beyond its physical capabilities.

"You pay so much attention to the body, as if it were everything, when in fact the real strength lies in the soul," he said. "The body is a poor frame, sordid and amoral. It can fail and collapse with only an insect's sting. But the soul is immortal." Then he cried out, as if he had completely forgotten my existence, "I do not know what I want, but I know that I am full of desire. Oh how dreary is the long night!"

He would sit silently in the darkness awaiting the sunrise, and when the light came he would be glowing with happiness. Until one day he heard the voice of the One God with the first rays of sunlight. I realized then that

Akhenaten was no gentle spring breeze, but a winter storm. Thebes knew no peace thereafter.

The king and queen summoned me. "What is the meaning of that voice he heard, Bento?" Tiye asked.

I was bewildered. "Perhaps the sage Ay is more suited to answer your question, my Queen."

"The queen asked you in your capacity as a doctor," the king said severely.

"I know no mind as sound as his, Your Majesty," I replied sincerely.

"Is he mocking us then?"

"He is the most earnest man I know."

"So you have no explanation for it."

"That is the truth, Your Majesty."

"Do you think his mind is sound?" he asked with a scowl.

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"Could it be the voice of some evil force?"

"Decipher his words, for only they bear the answer to your question."

He cried angrily, "The answer is in the storms that will hit us when the priests learn of his absurdity."

When Akhenaten married Nefertiti, everyone hoped that in marriage his religious ardor would be restrained, and that he would begin to have a more realistic vision. But the wife, too, became a priestess. Together, they walked the path of the One and Only. No power on earth could stop them. Amenhotep III died and Akhenaten, bearing the message of the One Creator, succeeded him. We knew that in his reign something of grave significance was bound to happen; we were frightened to predict what

it might be. Like the others, I was given the choice of either adopting his faith or living my life however I wished away from his palace. I did not hesitate and declared my faith in his God. The thought of being away from him was unbearable. Besides, I did love his God and secretly considered him the master of all gods. But I also kept my old faith in the other deities, especially Thoth, the god of science, whose talismans I used to treat people's maladies. Then there was the new city, Akhetaten, the marvelous city of the One God. We moved to it all together, an assembly of joyful people singing blissfully. The king was entranced, his face beaming with ecstasy.

"Here we are, O Mighty God, humble and transient in your pure city. O Great One, we enter your home, which has never known any god but you."

At first we were so happy that we wished we were created immortal to live forever in that paradise. Every morning I compared what I heard in the temple of the One God to the liturgy of the old gods and the rituals of the Book of the Dead. I became certain beyond doubt that a stream of divine light was filling us with pure happiness. The first winds of trouble came with the death of the beloved princess Meketaten.

"Bento, save her. She is the love of my life," Akhenaten pleaded.

When the beautiful princess passed away, the king and queen wept a flood of tears. He blamed his God until Meri-Ra said, "Do not anger God with your tears."

Upon hearing the high priest, Akhenaten's wailing grew louder. No one knew if it was out of grief or guilt. Perhaps both.

"It is the sorcery of the priests of Amun," Nefertiti cried. She repeated the same words every time she bore a daughter and the chance of a male heir was lost once more. Akhenaten shared her pain.

"Bento," he asked, "can you help us bear a son?"

"I try my best, Your Majesty."

"Do you believe in the sorcery of the priests?"

"We certainly should not underestimate it," I replied reluctantly.

He meditated for a moment. "God will persevere, and his joy will fill the universe. But we, his humble creation, shall never be rid of our little sorrows," he said mournfully. Because of his faith he was always able to elevate himself from grief to the summit of the holy truth where the brilliant light of God inundated his soul.

When the tension grew inside Egypt and on its borders, the high priest of Amun sent me a secret messenger.

"Can I trust you with saving the country from the dreadful fate that looms over it?" he asked, after reminding me of my vow in the temple of Amun.

I realized instantly that the high priest wanted me to use my role as the king's physician to kill him. I replied, "My profession does not condone treachery."

I met with Maho, the chief of police, and asked him to step up security, particularly among the cooks in the palace.

Bento was silent for a while, seeking some rest from these wearisome memories. I remembered some of the conflicting reports I had heard about Akhenaten's sexu-

ality, but doubted that Bento would allude to it. Since I was very curious, I had to ask. "Akhenaten's body and features had the attributes of both male and female," he said. "But, as a man, he was capable of loving and procreating." Then my lips trembled with a pressing question. After a moment of hesitation I mustered up all my courage and asked, "Have you heard what they say about his relationship with his mother?" Bento scowled and said, "Of course I have, just like you. But I always dismissed it as malicious fabrication." He stopped for a moment, looking increasingly troubled, then continued, "The fact is that Akhenaten was a very special being, far too good for any of us to understand. He was a visionary, promising a paradise irreconcilable with human nature. He confronted people with their mediocrity and provoked their deepest fears. So they pounced on him with animal anger and desperation."

Encouraged by his openness, I continued, "What do you think of Nefertiti?"

"A great queen who has earned her greatness."

"And how do you explain her desertion of Akhenaten?"

"I have only one explanation. She could not endure the blows that poured down on them; she felt helpless and took flight." Then he continued.

The tragedy came to a terrible end when Akhenaten's men decided to abandon him. I asked Haremhab to let me stay with him as his physician. He told me that the

priests would send their own physician to tend him. But he allowed me to examine him for the last time before I left. I went to the palace at once. It was empty apart from him and a few slaves and guards that the priests had appointed.

I found him in his usual solitude, praying, singing gently:

*Lord of the beautiful, O Beautiful One,
With your love hearts beat
And birds trill.
You dwell within me, O Lord.
No other has known you
But your son,
Akhenaten.*

When he finished his prayer, he looked at me and smiled. I looked away to hide the tears in my eyes.

"How were you able to come, Bento?" he asked.

"Haremhab gave me permission to examine you before I left."

"I am in excellent health," he said calmly.

"All the loyal ones were forced to leave," I said, my voice tremulous with feeling.

"I know who was forced and who chose to leave." The smile never left his face.

I bowed down and kissed his hand. "It pains me that you must remain alone."

"I am not alone. Have faith, Bento," he said calmly. Then he continued with an invigorating determination,

"They think that my God and I are defeated. But he never betrays nor does he accept defeat."

I cried so much that when I left the palace my eyes were like firebrands. I was certain that the physician they sent him would kill the most noble soul that has ever inhabited a human body. Since the time I left Akhetaten, I have been immersed in inescapable loneliness.

N e f e r t i t i

I was allowed to enter Akhetaten only with special permission from General Haremhab. There were security checks at short intervals all along the bank of the Nile. A soldier escorted me across the northern quarter of the city from the harbor to the palace of the imprisoned queen. I was barraged by a host of emotions that left me stranded between sadness and wonder. The once glorious streets of Akhetaten had disappeared beneath heaps of dust and the dried leaves of withered trees. The grand doors of the palaces were closed like eyelids on tearful eyes. The palaces were collapsed, the fences fallen. The gardens had lost their colors and were left with the remains of trees shriveled like mummies. A heavy silence covered the city. In the center were the ruins of the temple of the One and Only God, where once the sweetest and holiest hymns were sung.

It was early afternoon when I reached the far end of

the northern quarter. The queen's palace towered in the distance, set in a lush and colorful garden. My heart pounded when I glimpsed the only open window in the palace. It was the middle of autumn and the Nile was still in flood. Its mud-red water had filled the palace lake. My heart beat faster as I approached the end of my journey, as though the entire purpose of my quest was to meet this woman in her solitude.

I was ushered into a small, elegant room. The walls were inscribed with holy texts. In the center of the room there was an ebony chair with golden arms and legs, each sculpted in the form of a lion.

Finally I saw her, a vision, coming toward me gracefully in a white, flowing dress. She was elegant and beautiful. Her back was unbowed by forty years of grief and misfortune. I waited until she was settled in her chair, then she gestured to me and I sat before her. The beauty of her serene eyes was overcast by a shadow of weariness. She praised my father, then asked me bitterly, "And how do you find the city of light?"

I realized that I had been staring at her, captivated by her beauty. Abashed, I lowered my gaze, and remained silent.

"You must have heard a lot of tales about Akhenaten and me," she said. "Now you can hear the whole truth."

I grew up with a passion for true knowledge that was nurtured by the learnedness of my father, Ay. I lost my real mother when I was only one year old. But I did not feel that loss, for in Tey I found a compassionate, loving mother, and not merely a stepmother. She gave me a

splendid, happy childhood. Even after she had my sister Mutnedjmet, her feelings toward me did not change. She was a wise woman. At first, Mutnedjmet and I were loving sisters. Because I was better at most things than Mutnedjmet, she became jealous and built up a fair share of resentment. But that only became evident much later. Tey, however, remained impartial, at least on the surface. I was quite grateful, and when the time came for me to reward her I appointed her the queen's matron and gave her the status of princess. One day, my father returned home with a holy man, one of those who are endowed with the gift of foretelling the future. He read both our fortunes, my sister's and mine.

"These girls shall sit on the throne of Egypt," he said.

"Both of them?" said my father, astounded.

"The two of them," the man assured him.

For some time we faltered between our faith in the holy man and the peculiarity of his prophecy.

"Perhaps one of us will be first and the other will be her successor," I laughed.

For some mysterious reason Tey was not pleased with what I said. "Shall we forget about this prophecy and leave the future to the gods?" she said sharply.

We tried to forget. But every so often the prophecy seemed to cast its shadow upon us, until things began to take an unexpected course and it was fulfilled before our very eyes. The first time I heard of Akhenaten was through my father, when he was appointed tutor to the crown prince. Father used to speak of Akhenaten's wisdom and maturity during our family gatherings.

"Akhenaten is an unusual person," he once said. "He

criticizes the priests and the deities and no longer believes in any god but Aten."

Unlike my mother and sister, I was rather intrigued and drawn to what I heard. For I, too, loved Aten and was awed by his domain that comprised both heaven and earth, while other deities abided only in the darkness of the temples.

"The prince is right, Father," I replied innocently.

My mother and sister were not pleased with my remark. Father said with a smile, "We are preparing you to be a wife, Nefertiti, not a priestess."

I cannot deny my love for motherhood and other earthly pleasures, but the truth is, I was also born to be a priestess. Eventually my father told us the news of the new god, the Sole Creator. There was an uproar and the prince was the subject of stinging talk.

"What do the king and queen think?" my mother asked.

"There is so much turmoil in the palace. I am not sure what anyone thinks or believes," my father said gloomily.

"I fear that they will blame you, as his teacher."

"He is their son. They know that he will never follow anyone, no matter how grand they are."

"He is insane," Mutnedjmet said. "He will lose his throne. Is there another heir?"

"He has only one sickly older sister."

As they talked I felt such emotion that I was afraid I would faint. To me, the crown prince represented an irresistibly attractive, fabulous story. But I did not come to any particular conviction then. One evening I overheard my father secretly reciting one of the hymns of the new god:

*Lord of the beautiful, O Beautiful One,
 With your love hearts beat
 And birds trill.
 You dwell within me, O Lord.*

The words became imprinted in my heart forever, and I was elated with joy. I repeated the hymn and let its sweet nectar infuse my soul. Its words attracted me as a butterfly is drawn to light. And like the butterfly, I was burned by that light. I was filled with faith. What a beautiful and peaceful feeling it was! "My Only God," I whispered, "I believe in you eternally."

I presented myself to my father and sang the hymn. "You were listening," he said with a frown.

I ignored his gentle reproach. "Father, what do you think of the voice he heard?"

"I do not know," he replied cautiously.

"Can he be lying?"

He thought for a moment, then said, "He never lies."

"Then it must be true."

"Perhaps what he heard was a dream," he said reluctantly.

"Father," I confessed, "I believe in the One God, the Sole Creator."

Suddenly he became pale. "Beware, Nefertiti!" he cried. "Keep your secret in your heart, until I can rid your heart of it."

Then we were invited to the palace for the Sed festival. Tey saw in it an opportunity for her daughters to meet eligible suitors. "You must be seen in the most beautiful dress," she said. But I was only anxious to see

one person—he who had shown me the light of the truth. In the grand hall of the palace I met people with whom I later walked the path of life, with its sweetness and its bitterness—Haremhab, Nakht, Mae, and many others. That night, however, my heart saw no one but Akhenaten. When I first saw him, I was taken aback by his strange appearance. I had pictured him a token of perfection. Instead, he was thin and feeble. His appearance called more for pity than admiration. I admit that I was rather disappointed. But it was a momentary disappointment. I saw beyond his strange features and feeble body a spirit that was singled out by God to receive his divine love, and I secretly vowed my loyalty to this frail creature. He was seated to the right of his father, observing the dance without enthusiasm. My eyes never left him. Indeed, many people noticed that he was the focus of my attention. I shall never forget what Mutnedjmet said to me, suffering the sting of jealousy: “You have set your goal, Nefertiti. Now you will stride toward it.”

I wished that he would see me. And he did. He glanced in my direction and our eyes met for the first time. He almost looked away, but his eyes moved back and he fixed his gaze upon me. I believe he was rather startled at this young woman who regarded him so intently, and with so much longing. I looked at the Great Queen Tiye and saw that she was looking at me. My heart pounded quickly, and my dreams soared in the highest sky. But I never anticipated what followed.

I returned to our palace heaving with excitement and vague desires. Mutnedjmet, however, was sullen.

“I am quite sure now,” she said when we were alone

in our room. I asked her what she meant, and she continued, "He is sick and insane."

"You have only seen him from outside. You know nothing of what is in his heart."

The next day, when my father returned to the palace he told me that the Great Queen had asked to see me. His announcement shook the entire family, and we looked questioningly at each other.

"I suspect," my father continued proudly, "that the queen will appoint you one of her maids of honor."

I went to the royal palace in the company of my father. I was ushered to the queen's resting place overlooking the garden. I bowed before her until she called upon me to rise and sit on a sofa to her right.

"Your name is Nefertiti?" she said. I nodded and she continued softly, "Nefert-iti, The Beautiful One Has Come, a well-deserved name indeed." I blushed with joy. "How old are you?"

"Sixteen years, my Queen."

"You look more mature." She paused for a moment then continued, "Why do you think I summoned you?"

"A fortune beyond what I deserve."

"Well said, young woman," she smiled. "Have you acquired some education?"

"Reading, writing, poetry, history, theology, algebra, and home-making," I replied.

"What do you think of Egypt?"

"Egypt is the mother of the world, and its pharaoh the king of kings."

"Who is your most cherished deity?" she asked. I detected a keenness in her question.

"Aten, Your Majesty." I was compelled to hide the truth.

"What about Amun?"

"Amun protects the empire, but Aten circles it every day."

"One cannot control what the heart loves, but you must realize that Amun is the master of all deities."

"Indeed I do, Your Majesty."

"Tell me in all honesty," she continued, "has your heart ever known the love of a man?"

"No, Your Majesty," I replied without hesitation.

"Have you had any suitors?"

"Many asked for my hand in marriage, but my father did not consider them suitable."

She scrutinized my face for a while, then said, "You must have heard what is said about the crown prince's peculiar ideas regarding Amun and the deities. What is your honest impression?"

For the first time I was not able to reply. I remained silent until she continued in a voice laden with authority, "Speak only the truth."

"What is in the heart belongs to the heart. But the traditions established between the throne and the priests must be preserved."

"Well spoken!" she said. She appeared relieved. "Speak to me of your dream man. What is he like?"

"He has the strength of a warrior and the soul of a priest."

She laughed. "You are extremely ambitious. If you had to choose, would it be the warrior or the priest?"

"The soul is more important."

"In all honesty?"

"Yes, Your Majesty."

"You are not like other young women," she exclaimed.

"Life without faith is barren," I said.

"What is faith without life?"

"There is no faith without life, and no life without faith."

She remained silent for a while as I struggled to hide my rising excitement.

"Have you seen the crown prince?" she asked at last.

"At the Sed festival, my Queen."

"What do you think of him?"

"He has a mysterious power that distinguishes him from all other men."

"I meant, what would you think of him as a husband?"

I was silenced by the surprise. She repeated her question.

"I cannot find the words, my Queen," I replied, my voice trembling.

"Did you ever dream of being a queen?"

"My dreams have only risen as high as my humble heart."

"Doesn't the idea of the throne fascinate you?"

"It is a sky too high for my heart to fly in."

Tiye was silent for a moment. "I have chosen you as a wife for my son, the crown prince."

I closed my eyes under the intensity of my emotions. Pulling myself together again, I said, "But the prince doesn't know me, and he's not interested in me."

"But he abides by my wishes. I am his mother, and he loves me above all else," she said proudly. "It is impor-

tant for me to find him a suitable wife. When I saw you I felt that you were his match. I heeded my inner feelings just as much as I heeded reason." I was still silenced and overwhelmed. She continued, "But you must remember that as a queen, your duties will come before all else."

"I hope to rise to your expectations, my Queen."

"Promise me your unconditional loyalty," she demanded in a penetrating voice.

"I do," I replied, unaware of the extent of my commitment.

"I am sure that you will honor your word."

I could hardly think for joy and gratitude. But the moment I bid the queen farewell and left her chamber, I felt as though my hands were bound in shackles bearing her royal signet. She was a power I could never disregard. I remembered the crown prince and knew that the greatness of his soul would not make him any more appealing as a husband. I realized that I would pay a very high price for glory.

The news was like a thunderbolt to my family. I realize, of course, that Mutnedjmet must have been very bitter, and that Tey probably shared some of that. But still it was joyful news for everyone in the family. My fortune had lifted me to the throne of Egypt, but it had also elevated them to the rank of royalty. Because of that, they showered me with kisses and good wishes. I recalled the prophecy of the old man, and shuddered as I realized that it had in part come true. I wondered if Mutnedjmet, too, would sit on the throne of Egypt. Perhaps she also remembered the prophecy and found some solace in it.

"Today, your mother will rest peacefully in her tomb," my father said when we were alone in his room.

"I hope so," I said sadly.

"You do not seem happy, my daughter," he said with a smile and a keen look.

"Reality is more frightening than imagination," I said earnestly.

"Fate could not grant you a better chance for happiness."

"Are you certain, Father, that I shall be happy?"

"The throne will bring you glory, but happiness is only in the heart."

"I believe you, Father."

"I shall pray that you will be both glorious and happy."

The marriage took place with unusual haste. The celebration held in the palace was worthy of the great king Amenhotep III and his love of worldly pleasures. Tiye took me to the golden room and sat me on the royal bed, shimmering with gold. I wore a sheer dress with my body naked beneath. The crown prince appeared at the door as the light from the torches danced on the walls. He removed his cloak and approached me in a sheer loincloth, his eyes gleaming. He motioned to me to stand on the bed and held my legs to his chest.

"You are the sun of my life," he whispered. My soul delighted in his presence, but my body cringed. He continued, "I fell in love with you at the Sed festival. That night I hurried to my mother and told her I wanted to make you my wife." He laughed joyfully. "At first she denied me my request. She did not want me to marry a

girl with no royal blood. When I reminded her that neither was she of royal blood, she feigned anger and dismissed the subject. The next thing she told me was that she had met with you—and she gave me her approval.”

I recalled how Tiye had claimed that my marriage to the crown prince was her idea. I hid my smile. I felt as though I was expected to speak. I wanted what I said to be the truth.

“I believed in your God before I even saw you.”

“What joy!” he cried. “You heard from Ay?”

I nodded. “You are the first woman to believe, Nefer-titi,” he said.

I wanted to speak to him longer, to delay the moment when we would lie together. “I want to be the first to sing hymns in his temple.”

“I promise you that,” he whispered, and kissed me. “You shall bear me an heir to the throne.” Suddenly, all the magnificent emotions I had felt disappeared. All that remained was reticence and irritation.

We continued to walk our path together, both as man and wife and as believers. I delved further into the faith with him. His spirit engulfed me and filled me with so much light that I expected God might speak to me as he had spoken to him. As for my body, it convulsed silently every time he came near me. His seed grew inside me. I became pale and ill, as the child within me made a mockery of my beautiful, slender body. Akhenaten dwelled in the truth. He despised all lies and falsehood. I wondered how I would reply if he ever asked me, “Do you love me, Nefertiti?” I knew I could not find the courage to lie to him. I tried to be prepared. “Love will

come in time," I would tell him. I would ask his forgiveness and explain to him that he had taught me to love the truth. Perhaps it would have brought an end to my dreams even before I became queen. But he never asked.

One day Queen Tiye called for me, and as I approached her she looked at me closely. "You must mind your health," she started. "You are carrying a precious life within you that will soon be part of the history of this country."

"Pray for me, my Queen."

"You have a long life ahead of you," she said confidently. "Do not let fear control your mind."

"Some things are not in the hands of people," I replied.

"A queen is more than just 'people.'" She heaved a sigh.

The queen was destroying my defenses. What a powerful woman she was, just as my father had always described her. My husband loved her dearly, and she regarded him as her sole property. Even after our marriage, I felt the weight of her shackles.

The news about the One God reached the priests and the strife began. During that time I had grown to know the extent of the power my husband possessed within his feeble body. I felt the strength of his spirit, and the intensity of his courage and determination.

"All the stones of the pyramids cannot move me from my position," he said to me once.

"And I am with you," I replied.

"Our God shall not forsake us," he cried.

Even his mother could not persuade him to change his stand. One day, Tiye called me to her chamber. When I walked in I realized that this was perhaps the most important day in my life.

"Has the pregnancy distracted you from following the affairs of Thebes?" she asked.

"The affairs of Thebes are my affairs." I was prepared for a battle.

"Did your kind words have no influence on your husband?" she asked.

"The words of his God are more powerful."

"You do not seem saddened or worried."

"I believe in what he says, my Queen." My wrists were free at last. With that declaration, I made it known that my love for my God was stronger than my love for the throne.

Tiye glared. "Do you really believe in the Sole Creator?"

"Yes, my Queen."

"You renounce the deities of Egypt?"

"God is one and has no partner," I replied.

"Do you believe that other people have the right to worship their gods?"

"My God is not a threat to anyone."

"But one day your husband will be king, and he must serve all the deities."

"We serve no other but the One and Only."

"Your rebellion," she cried, "shall have the gravest repercussions."

"God will never forsake us."

"You promised me your unconditional loyalty," she said bitterly.

"You are my queen. But God is above all else."

I returned to my quarters with a heavy heart and tearful eyes. I did not know what destiny held in store for

me. Yet I felt at peace. Soon the prince was ordered to tour the empire. I felt that Tiye had begun her punishment. She meant to deprive me of my husband when I was going to deliver my child at any moment. When Akhenaten left, I was gripped by new emotions. The light of life had gone; even the sun had only darkness. I was choked with fear. Nothing could compensate for my husband's absence, not even having my stepmother, Tey, by my side. I was enshrouded in sorrow. I missed Akhenaten wherever I was and at every hour of the day. I could not believe that he had occupied so much of my life. I realized that, without him, I was not happy. It was then that I became aware that I loved him, not only as my spiritual companion, but as husband and lover. Bitter tears seared my face. I regretted my ignorance and my blindness. I longed for him to return so that I could throw myself at his feet.

Queen Tiye and I went into labor at the same time. I had Meretaten, and the queen bore twins, Smenkhkare and Tutankhamun. When I found out that I had given birth to a girl I was overcome with grief. I heard the whispers of the harem saying that it was the curse of the priests of Amun. They said I would never bear a son as long as I lived.

Around that time, King Amenhotep III married Tadukhipa, the daughter of Tushratta, king of Mitanni, to reinforce the ties of friendship between Egypt and Mitanni. Tadukhipa's beauty was renowned. She entered Thebes in a magnificent procession with three hundred slaves. Tey tried to entertain me by talking about the new princess in the palace. She spoke to me of her wealth

and beauty, but added at the end that, of course, no sun shone more brightly than mine. King Amenhotep III adored Tadukhipa, his new bride who was the age of his grandchildren. But the king was not able to savor his newfound happiness for long. For word arrived that the crown prince was preaching his religion throughout the provinces. I was summoned to appear before the king and queen. I did not expect to see the king so frail, but it seemed that he had exhausted himself in the pleasures of life.

"He is mad," the king cried viciously.

"We can send the armed forces to the provinces to correct the damage that has been done," Tiye said.

"He has lost the succession to the throne. Nothing we do will help him regain it."

"Perhaps he will succeed. Perhaps they will heed his words," I said after a moment's hesitation.

"You are foolish, Nefertiti," the king shouted. "Just like your husband."

"You could have tried to make him more reasonable," Tiye added. "Instead you joined him in his nonsense."

"How can I achieve what you have failed to do, my Queen?" I replied, trying to control my anger.

"You deliberately encourage him," she said accusingly.

"When he returns," Amenhotep interrupted with a wave of his hand, "I will have him choose between the throne and his religion."

My sadness grew. The morning after I met with the king and queen, Tiye woke me up and whispered, "The king is dead, Queen Nefertiti."

My heart was heavy with grief. I wondered if before

he died King Amenhotep III had carried out his threat. Would Tiye sacrifice her beloved son? One time, when she was overseeing the mummification of her husband, she called me and said, "I want you to know that the priests requested that I appoint Smenkhkare or Tutankhamun king and that I should be regent."

I feared what Tiye would say next. "Your decision shall be the wisest, and I will embrace it regardless," I replied.

"Are you speaking the truth?" she asked.

"What else do I have but the truth?" I replied desperately.

"I denied them their request. My love for my son was greater than my wisdom."

I felt as though I had just begun to breathe. I was speechless.

"Are you happy?"

"Yes, my Queen," I replied earnestly. "I abhor lying."

"Do you promise me to defend the traditions?"

"I cannot promise that."

"You deserve to be punished," she said. "But I also admire you. You and Akhenaten have chosen your path, so walk it. It is what the gods charted."

I returned to my quarters elated. I showered Meretaten with kisses. Then my beloved returned from his journey. I hurried to him and threw my arms around him.

"At last your love has come, Nefertiti," he said calmly.

I was startled and said, "I loved you even before I laid eyes on you."

"But only now, you love me as your husband." I was stunned by his ability to discern the secrets of the heart.

After the burial of Amenhotep III, Akhenaten came to me with tearful eyes. "Death frightens me," he said. "I did not love my father as I should have." We ascended the throne surrounded by hostility and apprehension. Akhenaten called upon his men to join his religion. They declared their faith willingly. It never occurred to me to doubt their faith, until much later when they all abandoned him to save themselves. Except for Meri-Ra, the high priest of the One God. I believe that Akhenaten knew that they were not sincere. But he believed that love was the cure for all ills. He thought that in time their faith would grow deeper with love, and that they would believe in him. He waited patiently for their faith, as he had once waited for my love. But they were not deserving. Some of them even harbored a secret desire to claim the throne after him—Haremhab, and even my father, Ay. Do not think that my bitterness has led me to fabricate this. I do not rely on mere impressions either. I learned these facts from conversations I had with the men during the last days of Akhetaten. I was pleased that the priests decided to entrust the throne to Tutankhamun instead. I believe the others still dwell on their old dream.

Despite the hostility that surrounded us when we first took the throne, Akhenaten and I were extremely happy. Meretaten was beginning to crawl, and a new life was growing inside me. Akhenaten had no other partner but me. He inherited his father's harem, with the beautiful Mitannian woman, but he abstained from visiting it. Then Queen Tiye came and I expected no good from her visit.

"Akhenaten," she started, close enough that I could hear her, "you are king now. You must not neglect your harem."

"I have but one love, just as I have one God," he laughed.

"But you must be fair. Do not forget that Tadukhipa is in your harem. She deserves to be treated well, if only for her father Tushratta's sake." Tiye glanced at me and noticed my irritation. She continued, "Nefertiti has proven to be a wise queen. Perhaps she will agree with me about your harem."

I remained silent, trying not to reveal that I was upset. Tiye continued to talk about the duties of a queen.

I became curious about the harem, particularly Tadukhipa. I visited them, saying merely that I wanted to make their acquaintance. Tadukhipa was indeed beautiful, but my self-confidence was not shaken. We exchanged a few words, and parted enemies.

The next day, as I sat with my husband in the palace garden, I found myself asking him, "What do you intend to do about the harem?"

"I do not want it," he replied simply.

"But the queen mother does not heed your desires," I complained.

"My mother loves tradition."

"But you do not believe in tradition."

"You're quite right, my beloved," he laughed.

I suppose it was around that time that I met with the high priest of Amun.

"My Queen," the high priest started, "perhaps you know what I have come for."

"I am listening, High Priest," I replied without enthusiasm.

"Let the king worship whichever god he pleases. But all the deities, Amun in particular, have the right to be worshiped," he pleaded.

"We are not trying to harm your god."

"I am hoping that when the time comes you will support us."

"I can only promise what I know I can give."

"Your father and I are old friends. And I know that nothing can spoil our friendship."

"I am glad to hear that."

When he left I knew I had made an eternal enemy. Akhenaten devoted his time to the religion. He called for love, abolished punishment, and relieved the poor of their dues. People began to believe that it was a new era of love and benevolence. I gave birth to my second daughter, Meketaten. Once more I was disappointed and remembered all that had been said about the curse of the priests. But Akhenaten loved his daughters. "The crown prince will come when it is his time," he said to comfort me. We built a temple for the One God in Thebes and went to visit it for the first time. The priests had gathered a mob of their followers and they stood outside the temple calling the name of Amun. The king was dismayed. He spent the night on the terrace of our room, addressing Thebes: "O city of evil, home of the lustful god, and merciless priests, O Thebes, I will never dwell in you." The voice of God told him to build a new city. Bek the sculptor selected eighty thousand men and started work on the city of the Sole Creator. Meanwhile,

we continued to live in Thebes, happy inside our palace, yet surrounded on all sides by malice. I bore two more girls, Ankhesenpaaten and Nefernatén. Then we moved to the new city. Smenkhkare and Tutankhamun came with us, but Tiye decided to remain in Thebes to preserve the last tie between the throne and the priests of Amun.

When we reached Akhetaten, the city of light, I cried with bliss, "How great is your beauty, how sweet is your spirit, O God of this city and of the universe." We prayed in the temple, and sang the hymns of the One God. Meri-Ra was appointed high priest of the Sole Creator. We lived in pure happiness, until one day the king returned from his solitude with a solemn look.

"My God commands me that no other deity should be worshiped in his country."

I realized instantly the gravity of what he said. "And what will become of the other deities?"

"I will decree the closing of their temples and appropriate their endowments." He was determined. I remained silent. "You do not seem happy, Nefertiti."

"You are defying the priests of the entire land," I replied.

"Yes. It is in my power."

"If you do so, you are bound to use violence and punishment. You are a man of peace. Why resort to such measures?"

"I shall never use violence as long as I live."

"What if they disobey you?"

"I will distribute the endowments of the temples to the poor of the country and call upon them to worship the One God and abandon the other deities."

I felt at once as though a weight had been lifted from my chest. I kissed him. "God will never forsake you."

The decree was made and executed without provoking the storms I had expected. It was God's power, and the power of the throne. We became more confident. In the evenings we visited the different quarters of Akhetaten in our royal carriage. The people received us with adulation. We descended from our carriage and walked among them under the palm trees, defying the long tradition that separated the royalty and the common people. We became so familiar with them that we knew their names and faces and professions. Love replaced the old fear in the people's hearts. The hymns of the One and Only were heard all over Akhetaten.

"I am afraid you are diminishing the traditional status of the king," my father told me once.

"Father," I replied laughing, "we only dwell in the truth."

Then we went on our journey through the empire, calling the people to worship the Sole Creator. Our enemies were in awe of our success. Maho, the chief of police, told us about the priests' attempts to win the people over to their side by slandering the king and the throne. But we took little notice. People grew accustomed to Akhenaten's peculiar ways of worship, his solitariness, and his complete devotion. I suppose it was I who became a mystery in their eyes. How could I be so immersed in worship, when I had to manage all the administrative and financial affairs of the country? Perhaps they even questioned the sincerity of my faith. The

truth is that I believed every word Akhenaten uttered. I shared his faith and his life. "When all the spirits have become pure and free of any evil," he used to say, "everyone will hear the voice of God and we shall all dwell in the truth." That was his real purpose, that everyone should dwell in the truth. When we returned from our journey we found Meketaten sick and bedridden. Her face was so pale that we hardly recognized the daughter we had created. Akhenaten remained by her side, praying. I asked Bento, the physician, to save her.

"Bento," I said, calling him to the corner of Meketaten's room, "my daughter is dying."

"I did all that I could," he said mournfully.

"The priests have cast a spell to deprive Akhenaten of his most beloved daughter," I cried in horror.

"Do not burn my heart with the grief of mourning her, dear God," I heard Akhenaten whisper. "I love her and cannot live without her in my life. She is far wiser than her age, O God. If you spare her life she will spend it in your service."

But Meketaten's soul faded until she left our world and ascended to the stars in God's Kingdom. We threw ourselves upon her, wailing, abandoned to grief.

"Why, O God?" Akhenaten cried. "Why do you try my faith so very severely? Must you be so cruel in showing me that I still do not know your mighty power? Why do you treat me so harshly when you are full of compassion, so coldly when you are love, so angrily when I am your obedient servant? Why do you insist on being a mystery when you are the light? Why did you make her

so beautiful, and give her such sound reason? Why did you make us love her, and prepare her for your service? O Mighty God, why?"

We remained in mourning until the sorrows of the country pulled us out of our grief to face a tragedy. We conferred with Nakht and he told us the details of the strife and the rebellion that had swept the empire. I must admit that my determination was no longer as firm as it had been before Meketaten died. But Akhenaten endured the most severe storms, as if he were the Great Pyramid, imperishable.

"God will persevere," he said. "I will not compromise."

I was encouraged by his strength of spirit, and my strength returned afresh. My misgivings subsided, and I felt remorse for my momentary weakness. Then the queen mother, Tiye, visited us in Akhetaten. First she met with our men in her palace in southern Akhetaten. Then she summoned me and my husband.

"The skies are filled with dark clouds," she began. "Your men have given me their word of honor that they will remain loyal to you under any circumstances."

"Do you trust them?" I asked curiously.

"In times like this, I am compelled to lend them my trust," she replied reproachfully.

"My God will be victorious," Akhenaten said.

"Soon the country will be consumed by civil wars." She was incensed.

"God will never forsake me," he repeated.

"I cannot speak for the gods, but I can speak for what transpires in the world of people."

"Mother," he said sadly, "you do not believe."

"Do not speak to me of the unknown. Speak to me as the king that you are and heed me as a queen. You must act before it is too late. Use the armed forces to protect your borders from the enemies. Use the guards and the police to stop the corruption inside the empire. Hurry, before your throne is lost to the enemies."

"I shall not have one drop of blood shed."

"Do not make me regret that I entrusted you with the throne."

"I only believe in the throne as a means to serve God."

Tiye looked at me and said, "Speak, Nefertiti—perhaps the gods meant you to marry him so that you can save him this very moment."

"Our God will not forsake us, Mother," I replied.

"Madness has won." She was desperate.

Tiye left the palace sad and ill. She returned to Thebes, where she lived only a few days more, then died with her worries. A few days later, Haremhab, Nakht, and my father Ay asked to speak with us.

"Your faces betray bad news," Akhenaten said.

"We have come because of our love for Egypt and the empire," my father began.

"What about your faith in the Sole Creator?"

"We still believe in him. But we are responsible for our lives, too, not only our faith."

"This responsibility you speak of is worthless if it is not inspired by faith," Akhenaten added.

"The enemies of the empire have crossed our borders," Nakht said. "The provinces are in open rebellion. We are trapped in Akhetaten."

"God will not forsake me, and I will not forsake his teachings," he insisted.

"We are facing a civil war!" Haremhab said.

"There shall be no wars."

"Are we to wait until we are slain like sheep?" Haremhab asked.

"I myself will confront the army that attacks us, alone and unarmed," the king said.

"They will kill you and then come after us. If you insist on upholding your message, then relinquish the throne and devote yourself to religion."

"I will not forsake the throne of my God. It would be treachery. I release you from your vow of loyalty to me."

"We will leave you some time to decide," Haremhab said.

They delivered their last warning and left us. I never imagined a pharaoh could be so humiliated. I wondered why God was so harsh on us, but Akhenaten's faith was not shaken. I admired his determination.

Then Haremhab asked to meet me privately. "Act now," he said. "Do whatever is in your power. If he insists on his position, he will be killed. He may be slain by his own men! You must act promptly."

I was bewildered. I saw the ghastly shadows of death and defeat. My faith was shaken. I felt the torment of helplessness. How could I save my beloved? It occurred to me that if I left him he might falter and take the advice of his men. He would be convinced that I had betrayed him, but at least his life would be saved. Thus I left my beloved king and husband, my heart seared with grief. I went to the palace in northern Akhetaten. My

sister, Mutnedjmet, visited me and told me that the king had not wavered from his position. She told me that the men had decided that in order to save him, they must abandon him and pledge their allegiance to the new pharaoh, Tutankhamun.

“When will you move to Thebes?” she asked.

“A part of the old prophecy has come true,” I said, reading the meaning between her words. “Now it is time for the other part. So you go to Thebes in peace, Mutnedjmet. I will stay here beside my husband and my God.”

Sadness set its roots deep in my heart, as though I had never once been happy in my life. I was haunted by guilt as I watched from my window the people leaving the city of light before the curse claimed them. I heard their voices, the cries of their children, and the howling of their dogs. I saw them come in waves, carrying whatever they could salvage of happier days. They hurried toward the Nile, the north, and the south. I watched until I saw the last of them leave the city. Akhetaten was deserted. Gloom hung over the magnificent houses, the gardens, and the streets. “Akhetaten,” I cried, “O city of light, where are the hymns and melodies, where is the victory, where is love? Where are you, my God? Why did you forsake us?”

The city was now empty except for two prisoners—my beloved and I—and a few guards appointed by the priests. When I wished to return to his palace to see him and talk with him, the guards stopped me. I was not allowed to leave the palace, they said. They did not allow me even to write to him. I knew then that there was nothing I could do but await my death in this prison. I

tried sending messages to the new pharaoh and to my father and Haremhab, stating my simple request to see Akhenaten. But the guards told me I was allowed no contact with the outside world. I waited patiently and without hope for my days to end. I was no longer aware of the passage of time. I prayed constantly, until I finally regained all my faith in the One God. Indeed, I believe now that the final victory will be for the Sole Creator.

The chief of the guards came to me one day and said, "I am ordered to tell you that the heretic has died after a long illness. A royal party has been sent to mummify and entomb him according to the royal rituals."

I did not believe a word he said. My beloved did not fall ill and die. They must have killed him. His soul now rests eternally. One day I shall follow him. I will explain to him why I left him and ask his forgiveness, and he will seat me beside him on the throne of truth.

Queen Nefertiti was quiet, her sweet voice stilled. I bade her farewell, dreading the path that took me away from her. My heart was infused with her beauty.

When I returned to Sais, my father greeted me happily. He asked me about my journey, and I answered him. For days we talked and I recounted the details of my travels. I told my father everything I had learned, except for two things—my growing fondness for the hymns of the One God, and my profound love for the beautiful Nefertiti.