

The Autobiography of Isis
With recollections from various gods and mortals recorded by Seshat
Goddess of Writing and Mistress of the House of Books



by
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Queen of Heka



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*“HEKA IS MY MAGIC PROTECTION; IT'S OLDER AND
GREATER THAN ALL THE GODS TOGETHER!”*

THE BOOK OF GOING FORTH BY DAY

Dramatis Personae and Glossary

APEP — The Great Serpent, a demon who rules the underworld.

ASAR UN-NEFER (Osiris the Good) — Lord of Abydos and Nomarch of Great Land. His name means “He who occupies the throne.”

DJHUTY — A god with the head of an ibis. The Lord of Truth, Time, Divine Words, and Knowledge.

DUAT— The underworld realm ruled by Apep.

HANA — Asar’s daughter by Oso.

HAPI — A god of the Nile.

HERU — Lord of the Horizon, a god who takes various forms: child, warrior, and falcon.

ISET WER-HEKA (Isis Great of Magic) Daughter of Nut whose hieroglyphic name means “Mother of Kings and Throne of the Two Lands.”

ISFET — Chaos

KHUFU — Prince of the Two Lands. Son of Nut and elder brother of Iset.

LAND OF THE BLESSED DEAD — Paradise where the dead live if they can cross the Duat.

MA’AT — 1) Goddess of Truth, Justice, and Divine Order and wife of Djhuty.

2) The law of cosmic harmony that embraces all aspects of existence, including the basic equilibrium of the universe, the cycle of the seasons, heavenly movements, religious observations and fair

dealings, honesty and truthfulness in social interactions. It seeks to avert *isfet*.

MOSI — Asar’s son by Oso.

NEBHET — Asar’s sister and Seti’s first wife.

NUBIS BAKH (Anubis) — Asar’s lieutenant and confidante.

NUT — Queen of the Two Lands. Mother of Iset and Khufu.

OSO — Queen of Kush and a powerful witch who was Asar’s mistress and mother of two of his children.

RA — King of the Gods and Maker of Heaven of Earth whose celestial boat is the sun. He appears as a man with the head of a hawk.

RIVER ROAD — The Nile, used as the main form of transportation in the Two Lands.

SETI SI-RA (Set Son of Ra) — Son of Nut’s dead sister and Ra. His name means chaos.

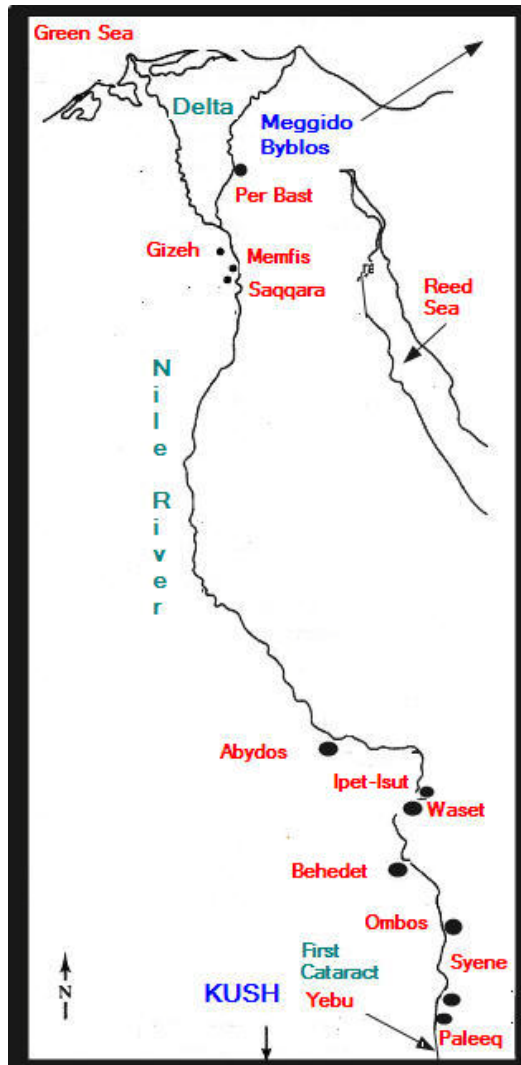
SOBEK — God of the Crocodiles, also known as Dark Water.

THE TWO LANDS — The name of ancient Egypt, referring to the Red Land of the desert and Black Land for farming.

WESTERN LANDS — Another name for the Land of the Blessed Dead.

YUYA — Nut’s bodyguard and assassin.

Map of the Two Lands (ancient Egypt)



- Green Sea** = Mediterranean
- Per Bast** = Bubastis
- Gizeh/Memfis/Saqqara** = Cairo
- Abydos** = Abydos
- Reed Sea** = Red Sea
- Ipet-Isut** = Karnak
- Waset** = Thebes/Luxor
- Behedet** = Edfu
- Ombos** = Kom Ombos
- Syene** = Aswan
- Yebu** = Elephantine
- Paaleq** = Philae
- Kush** = Nubia

Chapter 1

By now, you know me as Isis, Goddess of Ten Thousand Names. People tend to place great store in a name. My son called me Mother of Kings. My followers hailed me as Lady of the Two Lands, Mistress of Magic, and Queen of Heaven. My enemies scorned me as Asar's Cow, although I never saw any insult in *that*. Truthfully, I cannot recall all the names hung on me like so many necklaces.

What do I remember? Well, in the beginning, I was simply Iset, daughter of Queen Nut, and Asar called me his *darling girl*.

When it came time to inscribe my story in stone, the priests remembered all ten thousand of my names, but they left out so many other things. Like hunting. No one ever mentioned how it all began at a hunt. When I said someone must tell the whole story, only Seshat, among all the immortals, knew what I meant.



*ISET: Day 12, First month in the Season of Shemu
(Harvest), Year 15 of Queen Nut*

The Nile at Saqqara, capitol of The Two Lands

Servants ran along both sides of the river, thrashing the water with papyrus stalks. On the far bank, a crocodile's black-on-gold eyes, cunning and hooded as a successful courtier's, slid toward my hunting skiff like a shadow over the sun. The rowers

raised their oars, muscles taut and gleaming with sweat. A few hummed, either from nerves or anticipation, maybe both.

"At your word, Highness," the chief oarsman murmured.

I grabbed a spear from the stand, planted my feet, and drew back my arm. The command to *row* sat on the very tip of my tongue. Then, the incessant pounding of drums heralding the Queen's Hunt filled the air. The beast disappeared into the cool, green water. I slumped over the spear, exasperated less by the loss of a trophy than the chance to show up my royal mother.

The hunting fleet came around the bend. On the near bank just ahead of the beaters, the dark bulk of a hippopotamus emerged from the reeds. It blew a steady stream of water from its nostrils. *How had I missed that prize?*

Mother's boat broke away from the others. Drops of water shimmered on the gold-tipped oars. Servants wielded large ostrich-feather fans to cool her royal brow. An ivory bow across her knees, Mother sat on a low stool covered in leopard skins, all brought down by her own arrows, or so she claimed. No one dared call it a lie.

She regarded the river cow with a cool, appraising stare. Just last month, she had fixed the same unrelenting scrutiny on me. It was the day she summoned me from Djedu temple where I had lived ten of my fifteen years. Placing my hand in my cousin's, she announced *Since your wretched brother can't breed, you and Seti must try to give the Two Lands an heir. If you succeed, the pair of you will rule hereafter.* Seti, a tender smile on his face, hissed in my ear, *Fail me, cousin, and I'll slit your throat.* The memory still sat in my stomach like curdled milk.

The hippopotamus bellowed.

Nostrils flaring, Mother urged her oarsmen toward the river cow. They raised their oars in unison, a signal for the other hunters to fall back. Her boat vaulted toward the beast. Yuya, her

bodyguard, stood in the prow, spear in hand, ready to claim victory on Mother's behalf.

A way to sidestep fate danced before me like the visions that have plagued me my whole life. If I could best Mother in just one thing, she would surely reward such impudence by postponing my marriage. Gods willing, she might even send me back to Djedu temple to resume my study of herbs and potions under the guidance of the priests.

Yet, I hesitated. Mother's wrath, I knew for a fact, had broken stronger people than me. *I'll slit your throat.* Recalling Seti's breath and the scratch of his peculiar red hair against my cheek stiffened my resolve. I swallowed hard and hissed, "Get me there first!"

The oarsmen looked baffled. I pointed to the hippopotamus.

"Go, go, go," I shouted. A lull in the drumming sent my voice ringing over the wide water. Hundreds of courtiers swiveled their heads in my direction. Their shocked expressions spurred me on. "Row!"

They rowed. I stood between the benches, using the spear to keep my balance. My boat closed the gap, blocking Mother's vessel. A black cloud of rage settled over Mother's face. Her oarsmen, oars suspended mid-stroke, gaped.

"Faster!" I screamed.

My boat flew over the waves like a hawk on the wind. I kept my footing, even when the hippopotamus's warning bellow rattled my bones and its maw gaped wider than the entrance to the underworld. Wiping sweaty palms on my thighs, I hoisted the spear and forced myself to wait until we came into range.

My spear flew across the green water. The copper tip buried itself between the river cow's eyes; the wooden shaft vibrated with each outraged bellow. Whispering a prayer to any god that might be listening, I grabbed a second spear. It found a home beside the first.

"Oh! Yes, yes, yes!" The words spurted from my mouth. Someone thrust a bow and arrow into my hands.

The hippopotamus reared, flailing its front legs and exposing the rapid pulsing of its pale, distended belly. I glanced at Mother. Seeing disbelief written plainly across her face made my heart soar.

The beast began to drop. In less than no time, it would surely savage the boat with curved fangs nearly as long as a man's arm. A dreamlike calm settled over me as I nocked back the arrow. The air sang with the sound of its passage. I held my breath until a dull thud confirmed that it hit the animal's chest. Two. Three. Four arrows followed in quick succession.

For a million years, the huge body remained upright like a boulder. The animal made a low rattling noise that reverberated in the sudden hush. When it collapsed, waves crashed against my boat, buffeting us from side to side. The chief oarsman caught me in the last second, my face a mere hand's span away from the churning, bloody water.

I could not stop myself. My victory cry rang out like a temple horn. Defying protocol, I hugged the chief oarsman and babbled my gratitude.

Mother's boat drew alongside us. Yuya seized my arm and dragged me over the hull. My sandal caught on the wooden railing, but he jerked me free as easily as I used to toss rag dolls. I tumbled at Mother's feet like one of the animals she took credit for killing.

Yuya yanked me upright and held me fast against his naked chest. His skin burned through my linen shift, and I nearly gagged at the rancid smell coming from his armpits. A large, calloused hand cupped my chin so that I had no choice but face Mother's rage.

"I'm not one of your trophies," I muttered right before her hand cracked across my cheek bone. I had just enough time to blink before the second blow. Blood red sparks swirled in a field of black.

My vision cleared, but Mother's snarling face blocked the other hunters, the dead river cow, the entire river.



SESHAT: The Temple of Djhuty — Lord of Truth, Time, Divine Words, and Knowledge

Djhuty passed his hand over the water of his sacred lake and dismissed the mortal world after Nut struck Iset. Heru's loud protests started a nervous rustling in a nearby flock of ibis. Djhuty spoke sternly. "Hush, godling, you're disturbing my birds."

Hkeru's gold falcon helmet shimmered like sun on water, but his expression was thunder. He jerked his thumb toward the lake where the spectacle of the Royal Hunt had unfolded. "I didn't expect that, did you?"

Peering into the River of Time and breathing in the warm, ethereal scent of the sacred blue lotus, Djhuty scanned the future and weighed his response. "No, but it serves the purpose."

"How does it serve?" Lightning flashed in Heru's black eyes.

"Nut will send Iset where Seti can't touch her."

"For how long?"

Djhuty hesitated, unwilling to admit that he rarely saw farther than Iset's immediate future, a few days, a season at best. Closing his eyes, he drew the Fabric of the Universe between his fingers. Her gold thread shimmered amongst the drab strands of humanity. The concentration of power in that thread set his pulse racing, but her pattern eluded him.

"Long enough." His answer silenced Heru, and the silence coiled around them.

By unspoken agreement, they never discussed why they watched the girl. Djhuty, ever suspicious of other gods' motives, had cast his eye down the millennia and saw Heru studying hundreds of women with the same keen interest he now poured over Iset. Did

Heru seek momentary bliss with a mortal lover? If so, he was more fastidious than most gods. No woman had ever warmed his bed. Djhuty did not intend for Iset to be the first.

A chilly wind gusting from the north ended Djhuty's reflection. The skittish ibis flock scattered. An old man with the head of a hawk emerged from a grove of trees.

"Maker of Heaven and Earth and Creator of the Great River." Djhuty bowed to the King of Gods and nudged Heru, who merely nodded and transformed into a small boy with an impertinent grin. "May the Company of the Gods celebrate your rising, the earth rejoice, and your sun boat sail a million years."

"Lord of Truth and Time. Lord of the Horizon." Ra's lips curled when he spoke Heru's title. "Can someone tell me how this idiocy with the river cow came about? Just when Iset's ripe for marriage, her mother will send her away."

"Away from that brute you call son," Heru muttered.

"Marriage will gentle him." Ra brushed aside Heru's objection like a Nile fly.

"Can Seti be gentled?" Djhuty had first asked the question twenty-three years earlier when the red-haired prince entered the world, rupturing his mother's womb and draining her lifeblood. Nut's sister lived just long enough to name her son Seti si-Ra. *Seti son of Ra*. Ignoring Djhuty's counsel, Ra doted on his half-mortal son, whispering dreams of greatness in his ear.

"Does it matter? Iset is destined to be his Queen," Ra insisted, although Djhuty knew that the King of Gods had no particular gift for prophecy.

"No, she isn't," Heru said. "You only say that because Seti is *isfet*. Without her, no one will accept him as King."

"Seti is not chaos." Ra's mouth settled into stubborn lines. "He's young."

"So is Iset," Djhuty protested. "She's not yet ready to marry."

“Because of the heka, yes?” Ra asked eagerly. “I’ve seen her travel the River of Time, and true visions come to her. Do you think she has potential for greater magic?”

Djhuty nodded reluctantly. Mortals often demonstrated an aptitude for heka when a drop or two of divinity trickled through their veins, and Ra was only latest immortal to succumb to the charms of Iset’s kin. In the distant past, Djhuty himself had enriched her bloodline, and he could name at least five other gods and goddesses who had contributed to the mix. Even so, Iset possessed an exceptional gift.

“Do you imagine her heka will protect you from the Great Serpent?” Heru sneered.

Panic fluttered in Djhuty’s chest. Ra’s terror of the Great Serpent went unspoken among the immortals. Only Heru possessed the audacity to taunt the King of Gods. The last time he did so, their brawl had scorched the Two Lands and turned the fertile soil to desert, except for a thin slice on either side of the river road that Djhuty had managed to salvage. He heartily wished them both beyond the Fourth Cataract.

“Their children, my progeny, will be magician kings and rule the Two Lands for a million years,” Ra crowed. “Their adoration will prevent any other god from supplanting me.”

Djhuty remained prudently silent whenever Ra gave voice to his other greatest fear.

“Are you sure?” Heru asked, his face all innocence. Uneasiness cracked the stony splendor of Ra’s eyes. The most likely usurper had just spoken.

“The River of Time is murky on this matter,” Djhuty said truthfully. He fixed both Ra and Heru with a stern look. “What is not in doubt is that magicians are easily broken. Pluck the flower too soon, and the plant dies. Give Iset time to grow her gift.”

“Very well, but keep her in your eye,” Ra grumbled. “That girl is important to me.”

Forcing a false smile to his lips, Djhuty bowed. In truth, Iset was rarely out of his eye. She was a worthy vessel, a beacon of hope for weary humankind. He intended to fill her with his knowledge of heka, not lose her to Ra or Heru.



SESHAT: Per Asar (The House of Asar) in Saqqara

As the hunting party sailed past his estate, the clamor wrenched Asar un-Nefer, Lord of Abydos and Nomarch of Great Land, from a sound sleep. The brassy horns and the dull thud of the drums warned him that forgoing a royal hunt was a breach of protocol, if not the close kin to treason. Still, he did not regret his decision to stay abed when the memory of the last hunt lingered as bitter as bile. Soon enough, the drumming dissolved like morning fog. In the silence, the fishermen’s lament washed into his bed chamber like a whiff of death.

“Protect us in this bitter year, Father Ra. Send fish into the nets like insects into the mouths of birds.”

The keening wail had haunted Asar since he first heard it along the river road a few days after setting sail from Abydos. Now, it permeated the richest city in the Two Lands. Every day, more fishermen howled with fear and crowded into the temples to placate the gods with offerings of beer and flowers.

Asar rolled over and stared at the wall. Cracks in the plaster became the parched earth along the river road where fishermen, eyes flat with despair, accosted him. *My lord, how will I feed my wife and children when the fish don’t come at all?*

Asar had stopped counting how many men asked that question between Abydos and Saqqara. It wasn’t just the fish. Ra’s blazing sun boat wrung every drop of water from the black land on either side of the river. Worm-infested corn drooped on withered stalks. At night, drought mites plundered the wheat; their chattering

clogged the hot, heavy air. Famine stalked the river valley, unwavering as a jackal tracking a wounded lion.

"Isfet." The accusation slipped past Asar's clenched teeth. The balanced scales of Ma'at had tipped precariously, and the Two Lands teetered on the edge of chaos.

Hearing him speak, his daughter Hana bounded through the door and pounced. Sharp elbows sank into his belly and unshackled his breath in a short, excruciating grunt. After a brief scuffle, he snuggled her against his chest, drinking in her warm milk scent, trying not to remember the face of her twin brother taken from him nearly a year ago.

"Hana, sweeting, you taste so good today," he growled, nibbling her chubby fingers. When she nuzzled her face in the crook of his neck, she twisted the sorrow from his heart as easily as he coiled her black curls around his little finger.

The fishermen's mournful song snaked back into the room, eliciting memories of nameless villages and children with bloated bellies and bones poking through skin. Children who mewed like newborn kittens when they snatched the bowls of grain Asar's soldiers offered them.

My lord, how will I feed my wife and children when the fish don't come at all?

"That singing breaks my heart," he said.

Send fish into the nets.

Hana patted his face.

"That which goes into the storehouse must come out; bread must be shared," he murmured the inscription from the shrine of the goddess Ma'at. Hana looked puzzled. "I'm going to our granary this afternoon to give out wheat and corn. Do you want to help me?"

"Yes."

Asar wished his fellow nobles agreed so readily, but they insisted that Asar leave these matters to the gods. *Protect us in this bitter year, Father Ra.* The gods had stopped listening.

His steward knocked and opened the door. "Prince Seti's soldiers want to see you."

Flat on his back with sheets tangled around his feet, Asar felt like a beetle at the mercy of a small boy. His frustration spurted into words. "Tell them to go away."

The steward wrung his hands. With a sigh, Asar swung his legs out of bed, wrapped a linen kilt around his waist, and hoisted Hana onto his hip. He carried her into the public room filled with men.

The squad leader bowed. "Lord Asar, I am your servant, the dust of your two feet. The Prince bade me tell you, come straightaway. You missed the hunt, but not the other festivities. He said you can expect the Queen's forbearance."

Asar shuddered at the prospect of forced revelry while people starved. "I have an urgent matter to which I must attend."

"Pardon, my lord, I prostrate myself before you seven times seven, both upon my back and belly." The soldier cleared his throat and rocked nervously on his heels. "The Prince insists you come with us."



SESHAT: The Royal Gardens of Saqqara

The seductive bouquet of food, perfume, flowers, sweat, and musk, barely masked the hazy smell of blood. Asar's sister waylaid him the moment he arrived.

"Gods above, Asar, everyone's asking about you," Nebhet hissed. "You'd better have a good excuse. And above all, be polite."

"I'm always polite."

"Sometimes you're civil," she grumbled. "Barely."

He ruffled her hair and measured the distance to the river steps. She brushed his hand away, and he calculated how many people blocked his escape. Jiggling a gold amulet stitched to his sash, he wondered if one of the peasants loitering at the periphery of the gardens and hoping for banquet scraps might consider it a fair trade for a rickety papyrus boat. If so, he might reach the granary before the blazing sun drove away even the hungriest fishermen.

Nebhet followed his gaze. "Don't."

A group of girls rushed up, prattling about a boating party three days hence and saving him from Nebhet's tongue lashing.

"Will you be there?" One looked up at him through her eyelashes.

"It was my first thought on waking this morning. Only some catastrophe will keep me away."

"I've heard stories about your pleasure barge."

She poured smiles and flattery over his frustration like a honey balm. Her father had vast grain reserves, and Asar speculated whether sailing on *Glorious Ma'at* might induce her to charity. Before he could issue the invitation, Seti si-Ra clasped his shoulder. The girls fled, except for Nebhet, whose face went all soft, silly. She scoffed at Asar's warnings about Seti.

"We've been waiting for you." Seti guided him to a group of young noblemen congregated beneath a sycamore. They obligingly made a place for Asar and offered wine.

Seti wiped a drop of wine from Asar's lips. "When the Queen noticed your absence, she wondered if you were holding one of your Courts of Two Truths. I wouldn't want to walk in your sandals if you were, so lie if you must."

"Mayhap the gods have smiled on you, Asar. Iset's in Mother's eye." Prince Khufu looked almost giddy, obviously relishing his momentary reprieve from Nut's censure.

Asar glanced at the sky. Ra's sun boat crested the trees. Soon, the fishermen would retire to their stifling mud huts with only the rumble of hunger in their bellies. Seti draped his arm over Asar's shoulder. It felt like an anchor.

Khufu rattled on. "Iset's such a mooncalf. Mother went after a hippopotamus. Everyone heard Iset shout at her oarsmen to row harder."

A young nobleman came to life. "You should have seen her. The princess was splendid, simply splendid. She stopped the river cow with two spears. Then, damn me, what does she do next, but put an arrow straight through its heart. Prettiest thing I ever saw."

"Pretty." Seti curled his lip. "And pretty damn stupid."

"Here comes the wicked child." Khufu chuckled.

Keeping her spine as straight as her offending spear, the princess strode through the crowd. Courtiers opened a silent path for her.

Seti waved. "Iset, darling, come here."

She hesitated, a young gazelle crossing paths with a crocodile, and then shook her head. Defiance gave her eyes a brilliance that eye paint would never match. A shaft of sunlight broke through the leaves and caught a whisper of the startling beauty she might someday possess, but the hint of a bruise, a faint lavender shadow, marred the polished contour of one cheek.

"Did you learn nothing at Djedu?" Seti asked with wicked grin. "My tutors taught me that wisdom comes with age, not recklessness."

Someone snickered. Iset's ebony eyes blazed even brighter, but she scraped the toe of her sandal in the dirt like a little girl. Idle courtiers pressed in on every side, pushing her closer to Seti and slurping up the confrontation like beer. *Walk away while they're all watching her*, a voice inside Asar's head commanded. *There's still enough time to go the granary*. But, the scene playing out before

him, like the anguish of the fishermen, was a blunt reminder that Ma'at had all but disappeared from the Two Lands.

He nudged Seti. "Don't torment her."

"Did your prowess impress Mother?" Khufu taunted.

Everyone either looked away or laughed. Iset chewed on her lower lip, free of lip color, but still as plump and red as a pomegranate.

Ignoring the inner voice that screeched a warning, Asar bowed over Iset's hand, an exquisite hand, slender and white as the night-blooming lotus. "Pay them no heed, Highness. I heard you put these fools to shame."

"I thank you." Iset's voice, deep and rich, had the subtle undertones of good wine. Her slender, boyish frame and black hair pulled into a severe braid had not prepared him for that voice or her delicious scent. The dusky essence of myrrh lurked beneath the clean aroma of freshly cut papyrus.

Someone coughed a warning. In the sudden silence, shuffling feet and whispers of fine linen roared like a crocodile, dull and dangerous. Nut's cloying perfume preceded her. Revulsion unleashed Asar's tongue. "Don't you agree, Highness, if one's skill is inadequate, one ought not hunt?"

"We're in perfect agreement, my lord," Iset murmured.

The princess's smile left Asar weak in the knees, or maybe the sensation came from the Queen snapping, "Lord Asar, attend me!"



ISET: The Royal Palace in Saqqara

Mother's displeasure permeated every room like the smell of burning bread, making my nurse and servants jittery, but it filled my head with the twin promises of Asar un-Nefer and sanctuary at Djedu temple. Just remembering Asar's gallantry sent hot shivers

through my veins. Then, a little worm of dread began nibbling at my daydream. After Mother breathed fire in his face, would he still be bold enough to visit me at Djedu? I could cite at least ten poems that claimed an admirer lacking courage was worse than none at all, an opinion with which I heartily concurred. Had he read those same poems? Might he walk with me in the temple gardens? Such assignations were not uncommon, if I believed what other girls said, and they often ended with a kiss. I giggled. It was so deliciously wonderful and altogether ordinary.

With a renewed sense of purpose, I bent over the writing table and shuffled the stack of papyrus until I found one that met the exacting standards dictated by the Royal Scribes. I filled an alabaster cup with lamp black, water, and gum and stirred the mixture with an old reed brush. My nurse stood by with a cloth to catch any spatters. Dipping my best brush into the ink, I copied a riddle from the practice slate onto the papyrus and labored over each stroke.

Warm as bread, light as air, I claim no sex as my own, yet oft I come twixt the two.

I considered the opening line intriguing, but could a riddle spark a man's interest? A man like Asar? I prayed for the goddess of love to bless my endeavors and turn his head in my direction again. A door scraped against the floor.

"You spoil everything." Seti's sulky voice sliced through me like a knife through ripe fruit.

"Do I?" I slid the riddle under the stack of blank papyrus.

Seti crossed the room, and the servants fell to their knees, foreheads touching the floor. They did the same whenever Mother entered a room. "The Queen's furious."

"I know." I willed myself to be detached and composed, to be Mother.

"You don't know anything," he snapped. "You leave two days hence. Not Djedu, this time. Paaleq."

“She’s banishing me?” I shrieked in spite of my resolution. No one I knew ever ventured as far south as Paaleq, beyond which raging cataracts poured into the savage land of Kush. My nurse wrapped me in her arms and patted my shoulder with nervous little taps. My dreams evaporated faster than a jar of water spilled in the desert.

Without warning, Seti seized my nurse’s hair, nearly snapping her neck, as he pulled us apart. He gave her an extra shake for good measure. “I’m here on the Queen’s business; you are dismissed. Pack your clothes and leave the palace by sunset.”

“No, there’s some mistake.” I clutched at Seti’s free arm. He bent my fingers until the bones almost snapped and I yelped with pain.

“Highness, please.” My nurse kissed his hand repeatedly. “The Queen knows I’ve been with the Princess since the hour she was born.”

“And wonders why you never managed to teach her any manners in all that time.” He pushed her out the door and turned on me. “Well, my darling, even though the Queen doesn’t want to see your pretty face, you should count yourself fortunate not to be Asar.”

My heart throbbed, almost in my mouth. I clutched his hand again. “Can’t you do something?”

“I have. I promised her he would come to Court tomorrow and apologize. I hope for both our sakes he’s not too proud to bend his knee.” Seti’s expression grew colder. He pulled me close and hissed. “Of course, none of it counts for anything. After everyone forgets, she’ll send Yuya after him to do what Yuya does best.”

My face and fingers went numb. My brother Khufu called Yuya the best assassin in the Two Lands. The breath rattled around in my lungs.

A sneer twisting his mouth, Seti framed my face between his hands. “Ah! After Asar’s gallant spectacle, the child fancies herself in love.”

“No! Nothing like that. . .”

“Don’t be ashamed, sweeting. He gleams brighter than the sun boat.” He chuckled, but looked as baffled at speaking the words as I was in hearing them. “Even your mother longs for a bit of that gleam.”

I lowered my lashes, just in case there was something to see in my eyes.

“Just remember that lovely brightness is a lust for Ma’at.” Resentment, hot and furious, dripped from every word. I looked up. The lines of Seti’s face had gone all stiff. “What he did today wasn’t for you. He thinks only of pleasing that cold, bitch goddess.”

I considered Ma’at one of the more compassionate immortals, but kept that potentially contentious opinion to myself. Seti’s next words came so softly I almost missed them.

“His apology will give me time to remedy the situation.” The customary chill seeped back into his eyes, and he spoke normally. “You may use *Golden Breeze* for your journey.”

Although I cared nothing about the royal barge, I understood he had finished with confidences. His wrath would descend on me and all the servants if I pursued the matter.

“You can take two boxes.” He held up two fingers. “No more.”

“Why? Would three boxes sink *Golden Breeze*?”

He gave my hair a sharp tug. “Little fool, you’re in disgrace. The sooner you figure that out and show some remorse, the sooner she’ll forgive you.”

“She’ll never forgive me.” At least I might find a little satisfaction in that.

Unexpectedly, Seti grinned. “Don’t fret. Think how often she’s banished me. Remember when I put blue dye in Khufu’s bath?”

She threatened to hang me from the city walls. When you come back, we'll go live in the Mennefer palace and make half a dozen brats. The Queen will hand me Khufu's balls."

Seti had such perverse ideas of reassurance. His shifting moods made my head swim, so I muttered the first thought that fluttered through it. "Unless he has yours first."

A slap reminded me to hold my tongue. "Thank me for correcting your stupidity."

"Thank you," I stammered. My ears rang from a second blow.

"The Queen will ask if you showed any remorse; I never lie to her." Seti licked my cheek, his tongue lingering over the bruise that was Mother's gift. A shuddering sob escaped, although I clamped my teeth together until my jaw ached. "These tears are honey. When we marry, I'll harvest them often. Can you imagine how many ways there are to make someone cry?"

Shaking my head, I retreated until the wall slammed against my back. Oblivious to the cringing servants, Seti followed, rubbing against me until his manhood hardened and poked my belly. Clasp my hands behind my back, nails digging into the flesh until blood flowed, I tried to think of something to keep from flailing and giving him the satisfaction of hitting me again. Nothing stopped the tears from boiling down my cheeks. His tongue darted out to catch another taste. Bile burned my throat.

"I hear Paaleq's hotter than hot." His hand fumbled beneath my dress. "So, on those long sweltering afternoons, I want you to find some private place and practice hoisting your skirts and spreading these long legs of yours as wide you can. When you come back, I intend to plow you like a field. Night and day."

Paaleq's remoteness sweetened the sour taste of banishment.



SESHAT: Per Asar in Saqqara

The sun boat had reached its evening harbor when Seti invaded Asar's library over the objections of the steward. Asar sat at a writing table, fiddling with a stylus. The flickering oil lamp made a wall mural of Ma'at seem as if the goddess were nodding in approval. Not a good omen in Seti's opinion. He, sighed, settled on a cushion, and called for wine before demanding, "Gods above, Asar, what demon possessed you?"

A lengthy silence gave Seti ample time to rebuke Asar with a stony stare. To his credit, Asar made no pretense of misunderstanding. "I felt sorry for the princess."

"Is there no end to the people you pity? Next you'll tell me you're becoming a priest." The tap, tap, tap of Asar's stylus became deafening. Seti had condemned men to death for less, much less. When it became intolerable, he said, "Bad enough Iset's so reckless. I warned Nut those priests were filling her head with nonsense. But you! You're a man of twenty-two and at Court seven years. You should know better."

Asar's brown eyes blazed, a response Seti longed to incite under different, more interesting circumstances. Asar's face, however, remained stiff, his mouth a thin line.

"I gave my word to the Queen," Seti said. "You'll attend Court tomorrow and publicly apologize for your transgression. After that, I want you to visit one of those barbarian friends of yours in Megiddo or Byblos until she forgets your folly."

"I'll go to Abydos." Judging by Asar's expression, he considered it a concession.

Seti accepted a goblet of wine from a servant and placed his hand over Asar's to stop the infernal tapping. He let it linger, savoring the feel of skin on skin. "It's not safe anywhere in the Two

Lands. She's called in her assassin. Your apology buys time to get you out of the country."

"I suppose I'd waste my breath asking for the assassin's name," Asar said as coolly as if he had asked for the name of a good sandal maker.

"She'd know I told you, and we'd both be dead." He did not say that if Asar had spent more time at Court lately, he might know the name.

Asar's upper lip curled, and he muttered something.

Seti heard only one word. "Ma'at! Now's no time for philosophy. Do you think Nut cares for some silly notion about truth and justice?"

"I haven't thought that for a very long time."

"Then why this? Why now? You knew Nut was already displeased with your Court of Two Truths—whatever that is."

"The two truths are the scales of Ma'at." Asar lifted his arms to mimic the balancing pans of a scale. An unexpected brilliance suffused his face. Entranced, Seti leaned into the warm scent of Asar's perfume, cedar and myrrh. "On one side, laws for governing. On the other, facts, the actual deeds of men, if you will. When the scales reach equilibrium, we approach justice."

"More philosophy to infuriate the Queen." Seti said. "Nut says laws are to governing like love to marriage, a peculiar and unnecessary complication."

"I don't think . . ."

"No, apparently you don't think. So, let me be very clear." He ignored the stubborn set of Asar's mouth. "Settle your affairs, because — and make no mistake about this — in five days, you'll be on a ship bound for Megiddo if my soldiers have to tie you to a litter and carry you on board."

"You can't keep me there," Asar said, not altogether unreasonably.

"No, but I can make you a promise." Seti squeezed Asar's shoulder. Thank the gods, Asar's own words inspired him. He baited the snare as cautiously as he made offerings to the crocodiles in the sacred lake of the crocodile god. "Do as I say and I swear, by Ra who loves me, when I'm King I'll establish a Court of Two Truths in every city and place them under your authority."

The vein in Asar's throat pulsed.

"Isn't that what you call ma'at?"

"Perhaps." Asar dropped the stylus. Long, elegant finger formed pyramids in the air as he considered the proposition.

"Perhaps."



*ISET: Day 13, First month in the Season of Shemu (Harvest)
at the Royal Palace*

Attendants clad only in short kilts helped me off the bathing stone and wrapped me in a linen sheet. Wind catchers funneled tepid puffs of air into the room, but the heat radiating through the thick walls instantly consigned the silver ewers of cool, lotus-scented bath water to a dim memory, as dim as yesterday's dreams. The Mistress of the Wardrobe offered two dresses for my approval.

"That one." I rejected a body-clinging sheath in favor of a loosely pleated gown that left my shoulders bare. I raised my arms. The pleated dress floated over my head, scarcely touching my skin. The blistering white sun burned through the window. The heat thickened.

One woman applied henna to the palms of my hand and soles of my feet. Another started to apply kohl to my eyes, clucked disapprovingly, and held up a mirror. *Gods above!* My eyes looked redder than the desert sand and felt twice as scratchy from tossing and turning until dawn, worrying about Asar and my nurse.

The Mistress of Adornment lifted a tray of jewelry from the chest and frowned. "Some pieces are missing."

Five pieces, if I remembered correctly, four gold bracelets for my dismissed nurse. To erase the suspicion gathering like storm clouds in the Mistress of Adornment's face, I said, "I packed my favorites for Paaleq."

We both knew I had no favorites.

"What will you wear today, Highness?" She ignored my clumsy lie.

Just looking at the heavy gold objects made me hotter. Perhaps disgrace offered certain advantages. I might go about as unadorned as a scribe for all that anyone cared. I chose a single ankle bracelet. The hairdresser braided my hair.

A servant crept into the room and put her lips to my unadorned ear. The fifth bracelet had secured the services of a sentinel. "Highness, my lord's boat approaches the water steps."

I snatched the riddle from the dressing table and ran outside, winding through the shady arbors leading to the Nile. Taking the granite water steps two at a time, my dress billowed behind me. A stream of curses came from the far end of the dock where Asar secured his vessel. Excitement mixed liberally with nervousness clogged my throat until I could scarcely breathe. I fought an urge to slink into the shadows. *Don't be such a goose!*

"Lord Asar." The greeting came out in a disconcerting squeak.

He rose and made obeisance, displaying none of the eagerness attributed to lovers in my favorite poems. His cool demeanor made me acutely aware of each drop of sweat dotting my forehead and the damp tendrils of hair plastered against my neck. On the other hand, his tousled black curls invited a friendly touch. Were we friends? Never having had one, I was unsure. What I did know, however, was that I preferred his sharp cheek bones and hawkish nose to Seti's studied prettiness.

With another bow, Asar returned to mooring his boat, but he made no protest when I knelt and worked at the ropes, my fingers ten times more nimble than his.

"I'm leaving for Paaleq tomorrow." Where were all the witty remarks I had memorized for occasions like this?

"I'm leaving for Megiddo," he snapped. "Our flapping tongues seem to have gotten us both banished."

A slow burn started at my neck and worked its way toward my face. Thick silence coated my flapping tongue. Summoning every last bit of courage, I thrust the scroll at him. "I made this riddle for you."

"You honor me, Highness, but I'm in no humor for riddles. I have business with your mother." His rebuke slapped my confidence into the dust.

"I wanted to thank you for being so brave," I managed to stammer.

His expression softened. "Forgive me. I should never be so rude. Let me see your riddle."

Now with his eyes fixed on me, now that I held his attention, hot and hard as stone at midday, I questioned why I ever coveted it. Asar pried the scroll from my stiff fingers.

"Warm as bread, light as air, I claim no sex as my own, yet oft I come twixt the two. Formless as the void and wanting hue and size; tasted, heard, and oft times viewed by vulgar eyes." His clear, precise voice made the well-crafted riddle sound childish, silly. I longed to flee from another misguided scheme, but his hand circled my wrist, holding me captive. I prayed for the earth to swallow me instead. "I'm intrigued. Will you read the rest to me?"

I doubted his interest, but never considered refusing the request. My voice quivered. "Sometimes sought and sometimes feared; those who receive me often return the prize."

"Is that all?" he asked when I paused.

“There’s a bit more.” I moved slightly, but his grip remained firm. *How do I end this torture?* “Though in color and in custom they may differ wide, I am the gift of every man to his bride.”

“A gift?” His hand slid down my arm and cupped my elbow. I squirmed under his scrutiny. Finally, he nodded. “A kiss, is it?”

I nodded. Shame, hotter than Ra’s sun boat, scorched my pride. The riddle was too simple; I deserved any amount of scorn he chose to heap on me.

“You’re blushing. Do you want a kiss from me, Highness?” He trailed his finger along my jaw before tipping my face upward.

“Yes,” I admitted. He was smiling now. His lips brushed mine. The business with Mother evidently occupied his thoughts more fully than kissing someone on a hot, dusty dock; but I was going to Paaleq where no one would ever kiss me, so I slid my tongue between his lips.

“How many lovers have you taken?” he asked when I pulled back, flustered by the heat inside his mouth.

“Just one.” I lied.

“One’s not enough, is it?” he asked; I thought he might be teasing. “My sister Nebhet’s your age, a bit older and not nearly so pretty. She has four lovers.”

Did a single kiss betray my ignorance?

“You need a lover, Highness,” Asar said judiciously. “But, it can’t be me. Your mother wouldn’t like it.”

“She need not know.”

“Nothing escapes her notice.” The emotion tamped down earlier caught fire in his face. Mother was dry wood to his smoldering rage. No, she was something much worse than that.

My skin prickled, and my mouth lost all its saliva. With the memory of Asar’s heroism still fresh and caution already scattered like grain to geese, I hurtled ahead even though my conscience cried *treason*. “There’s a man called Yuya that she’s sending for you. You need to be careful.”

“I don’t know him. Is he in the palace guard?” I had his undivided attention.

I licked my lips. “He’s a demon who answers only to my mother.”

“Yuya.” Asar tested the name; his lips curled around it. With a wry smile, he said, “Someone called you splendid yesterday, but I think that scarcely begins to describe you.”

He leaned forward. His mouth created exhilarating little caresses as light as a bee’s wings at the corners of my mouth. If treason felt like this, I began to understand why Mother had to order so many people hung from the city walls.

Asar claimed a second kiss and gathered me against him. Pleasure fluttered in my stomach. His teeth nipped my lower lip. Unexpectedly, my body went so loose that only his arm around my waist stopped me from collapsing in a boneless heap.

“Oh, yes,” he murmured. His forehead slipped down to my shoulder; his tongue tasted the skin there. Cupping the back of his head, I stroked the tender, sweaty place where his hair began, and breathed deeply. He smelled of myrrh and cedar. I shivered, even as the warmth in my belly became a hot, overwhelming tide.

“You do need a lover, Highness, but it won’t be me. No, it certainly couldn’t be me,” he said pensively and moved away. Reclaiming the scroll on which the riddle was written, he tucked it in his sash. “But we can be friends. Would you do me the honor of receiving my letters?”

The breath coiling so tightly in my chest made it impossible to speak. Writing letters was rash; receiving them even more imprudent, but I nodded without hesitation.

“Good. The man who’ll bring them is called Nubis.” Tugging a ring from his finger, he placed it in my palm. “When you get to Paaleq, make an offering to the gods on my behalf.”

“Which gods?”

“I have a special affection for Ma’at, but given all that’s transpired, it might be wise to solicit the favor of one or two others. I leave the choice to you. Now, I must go to your mother.”

Watching his retreat, I closed my fingers over the gold ring nestled in my palm; it still held his heat. Priests called gold the flesh of the gods; that’s exactly what Asar’s skin had felt like against mine, the flesh of a god. That feeling was most certainly ma’at.

You do need a lover, Highness, but it won’t be me. No, it certainly couldn’t be me.

“Oh, yes, it can be you,” I whispered. “And it will be you.”

A crocodile on the other side of the river roared and thrashed his tail.

About the Author



Visit Michalea Moore's web site <http://michalea.com>

About Queen of Heka

Before Princess Diana, Joan of Arc, Mary of Nazareth, or Cleopatra, one woman symbolized beauty, compassion, and power.

She challenged the old gods and changed the course of a civilization.

She gave birth to a savior-god and remapped the boundaries between heaven and earth.

She defied death to resurrect the man she loved and gave humankind the hope of immortality.

She was a lover, mother, healer, patriot, and finally Queen and goddess.

Recalling an epic and harrowing tale of wits, magic, divine compromises, and a love so powerful it conquered death, Isis speaks for the first time: