

Natalie Yacobson
And His Name Is Dennitza

Daughter of Dawn



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Ancient Egypt. Pharaoh Akhenaten carries out an unheard-of reform, replacing all gods with one and only one — the sun god, but who is behind his decision? Taor, returning from the war, notices a winged creature bending over the throne of the ruler and imposing his will on him. It is evil incarnate, but it is impossible to resist its charm.

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Prologue

«... If you have the courage, release me», the voice seemed to call him from the tomb, but no one could enter this tomb. It was erected quite recently and in the shortest possible time. But everyone was already afraid to stutter about what was happening there. They did not talk about her, as if she did not exist at all, but she was, and the evil power emanating from her often declared itself.

«Free me!» the voice sounded more clearly. Right in his head. This voice was like the clink of gold coins falling on the floor of a tomb. Not a voice, but a call from a fairy tale. So the genie calls to let him out of the lamp. The beautiful voice gave off some kind of cunning.

Piay shuddered. Isn't that why he got here. To see something unusual. So far he has only heard. He came here at the risk of his life, having miraculously passed the guard post. So it is worth taking the risk further. There is nothing to lose anyway.

He touched his hand to the inscriptions carved into the wall of the tomb. They did not begin to crumble like dust under his living fingers. Everything that was told turned out to be a lie. The gods did not strike him as soon as he stepped on the cursed land. The fire did not incinerate him on the spot. His body was not rotted away by the plague. These were all just stories. The desert city was not cursed. The new pharaoh ordered to raze him to the ground only in order to eradicate the memory of his insane predecessor?

More than once Piay wondered: was the ruler Amenhotep really insane? Or is it all about the intricacies of politics? It was impossible to put one god above all, in this case the sun god.

The sun! Shine! A dazzling flash! The fall! Piay closed his eyes. Everything flashed before my eyes so quickly. He nearly went blind because he saw for a moment. Some kind of eerie deity with wings, all permeated with scorching sunlight.

«Free me!» the voice, a little tired, became insistent.

Piay nodded obediently. It was impossible to resist this voice. It called from the bottom of the grave, but it had greater power than all earthly rulers.

Deposed sun god! Is his power buried here? Piay has repeatedly sculpted his images from stone, but he has never seen anything like what he now dreamed of. There is no such creature among the gods of Egypt. It seems to be really above them.

He felt dizzy. There must be an entrance somewhere. He did not know this, but it was as if someone whispered to him. One of the smooth stone blocks should move, opening inward like a secret door.

Piay ran his hands along the smooth walls covered with bas-reliefs in places, and a miracle happened, in one place the wall gave way, with lightning speed, as if the lid had been removed from the casket. Piay looked inside. It wasn't dark there. Somewhere in the distance, lamps were burning on the sides of the passage. It remained a mystery who lit them here, and how long they burned in the tomb.

The voice no longer called, but Piay stepped forward anyway. It felt like he was entering a temple. Forbidden temple to a deposed god. This god must be stronger than any other.

A bird was screaming obsessively behind the wall of the closed passage. It looks like the cry of an eagle. Piay didn't think it might be a warning. He walked forward. Fate brought him here, he knew it for sure. He felt.

Inside, everything was different from ordinary tombs. No images of the usual gods. Everything was different here. Inscriptions, columns, drawings. Everything is different than in other pyramids. And also a stone bed in the very center. It stood here instead of the sarcophagus. On it lay something far more precious than the countless treasures heaped up here and there like offerings.

The enchanted youth walked forward. The light of the moon penetrating the top of the pyramid was enough to see the creature, which was glowing by itself. The lying body seemed to be molded

of gold and still alive. It seemed as if it was only sleeping. Cobwebs were already entangling him, but there was no sign of decay. It gave the impression of something more eternal than even a sculpture.

Piay stopped and held his breath. This is Pharaoh's daughter. The one about which they talked so much, and about which it was no longer possible to talk about. Her body was not made a mummy, and it did not decompose. It shone brighter than gold.

«Free me if you have the courage...»

She said nothing or moved, but he heard a voice that sounded more like the hiss of boiling tar. He looked and began to understand something. Not everything that was said was fiction. The dead golden creature did have wings. They spread over the stone bed under her back like a luxurious halo. And in their frame it seemed that this creature was just sleeping.

Shadow in the palace of the pharaoh

Years before

Everything remains the same, and yet something has changed. Taor felt as if he had come to the Pharaoh's palace for the first time in his life. They said that everyone who returned here from a distant journey or from the battlefield experiences this. But that was not the point now.

Unaccustomed luxury dazzled and at the same time struck with some amazing cold. This happens when you cross the threshold of the pyramid, where the deceased lies, over whom the ritual has already been performed, but death is still near, it has not gone anywhere yet. Its presence can be felt, though you can not see.

He had never experienced this on the battlefield, although there people fell dead at every step, blood shed, lives were cut short. But there was no sense that something dark was standing nearby and waiting. Something is already watching you.

Taor even glanced over his shoulder. The sensation of being around was so real. He didn't think about how the other congregation might interpret his gesture. He was never superstitious. There could be rumors about him that he had a head injury. The scar on his temple did indeed remain, although hidden under strands of hair. In one of the battles, an alien saber almost cut his head. A little bit... but what if the gods intervened in the moment.

And then the first big victory in his life was to deafen him enough to forget how close that blade was to his forehead. And, perhaps, it was worth not remembering the feeling that at that moment someone else intervened between him and the attacker. Someone intangible. The gods could do anything, but what if it wasn't them.

When did he think of gods lately? Taor did not want to think about them now. Only scraps of battle, festering wounds, severed limbs, and vultures feasting on the remains of their foes climbed into his head. He did not even know to whom to attribute these enemies: the Hittites, the Nubians... Egypt still did not know the tribe with which he was sent to war. Their attack on the country was sudden and unpredictable. Neither the royal advisers, nor the prophets, nor the priests could even guess where they came from, but they were innumerable and it was as if they were not people at all. Taor remembered chopping them, and they did not feel pain. Each of them was as difficult to kill as in other battles to put a dozen enemies. And after each killed, more and more of them arose. It was as if the desert spawned them. Pharaoh's troops were desperate, and Taor too. How many they did not kill enemies, but their number did not dry out. The scouts could not determine how many there were and where their camp was. Each time they attacked at dusk, and not at dawn, as it should have been. Taor and his subordinates had to stay awake at night, and with the first rays of dawn, the battlefield became empty. However, at night everything was repeated. Each new detachment advancing on Taor grew in number. These warriors had impenetrable armor, and the skin beneath them was even harder than the cuirass in which they were dressed. He chopped right and left like a butcher, and already knew that he could not win, but overnight everything changed. Enemy units suddenly stopped arriving... and this happened just after someone invisible took the sword from his forehead. Someone who spoke to him from heaven.

«Idols, your gods are only idols...»

Taor raised a hand to his forehead, wanting to touch the scar. That voice still sounded in his memory, belonging to no one but heaven. At the fateful moment, the young man did not see a single material being that could protect him. So maybe it just seemed to him?

There were unusually few people in the palace, but all those gathered looked with curiosity, and often with barely concealed envy. After all, he returned alive and victorious.

Everything was conceived differently. He, young and naive, was sent where he should not have come back. He would become the first victim in the struggle against a people hitherto unknown to anyone, and famous for their superhuman cruelty and strength. Therefore, the main commander of the pharaoh remained in the palace, other no less honorable commanders were left in reserve, and the youngest in rank and least born young man went to fight the demons. There was no other way to name them. Although they consisted of flesh and blood, there was so much superhuman strength and tenacity in them.

He had an involuntary respect for his enemies. It was not possible to take a single warrior alive, but he took many old men and women into the full. And he already knew what he would ask Pharaoh. Today was his day. He had the right to turn to the king with any request.

But his soul was still trembling. Will Pharaoh fulfill such a grandiose desire that has matured in him. Both morally and materially it might not be feasible, but he was going to try anyway. His request is pure. It comes from the heart. The gods must give him a chance.

«Your gods are idols...»

And again this haunting voice. A voice from heaven, as he used to call it. It's good that no one heard this voice except him. Taor knew that for sure. Lying in a military tent after the victory, he repeatedly asked if his subordinates heard someone's words, as if uttered from nothing, but each time they shook their heads in bewilderment. Once he asked an old woman about this, trudging along the road, she even got scared, mistaking the young man for a madman. And this is even despite the fact that he was wearing the armor of the king's commander.

It's good that no one else hears this voice. For the words spoken by him, the priests could punish a person with death. Pharaoh would agree with them. After all, he is also a god, an earthly and mortal god, as is customary to worship in Egypt.

Taor respected the laws of the country in which he lived, although now he was going to break them a little. The heavenly voice did not object to this, but he completely left the young man as soon as he entered the ceremonial hall.

The most honored guests gathered there, also in small numbers. It seemed that there were more guards with halberds than peaceful nobility.

The hall was solemnly decorated. The road to the throne where Pharaoh sat is free. He was to be honored today, but Taor was not used to such honors. He was embarrassed to go to the palace in a rich chariot presented to him, and all the more unpleasant to accept other royal gifts. All this seemed somehow undeserved, as if by accident, only because he suddenly had an invisible heavenly patron.

Fanfare, lotus petals that strewn the road, the cries of the celebrating crowd below under the windows... Everything is like in a dream.

You must remember that you have many enemies here who sent you to certain death, someone invisibly admonished him at the entrance to the hall. But here he was alone.

Taor brushed a lock of jet-black hair from his damp forehead. He was considered very handsome, and so what? He still didn't even have his own harem. The funds did not allow. So he can ask that Pharaoh allow him to keep some of the conquered treasures? No. He had already decided to turn to him with another request. There can be only one petition.

«Get up!» Pharaoh ordered not to prostrate when Taor was already down on his knees. Strange, but the usual ceremonial today was broken in many ways. Is it in honor of the victory? Or a lot had changed at court while he was away. Pharaoh himself also changed. It's scary to think, but he looked more like an inanimate statue on a throne. Someone seemed to bend over to him and whispered something in his ear, but there was no one behind the throne dais today, even slaves with fans were driven to the bottom.

«You proved yourself gloriously. A great warrior deserves a lot. I appoint you as the chief commander over all my troops, and over all other commanders».

Taor did not expect. Too many accolades. Too much envy, an almost palpable wave soaring over the hall. He was eaten with angry looks. The courtier, who did not have time to read the pharaoh's decree to his own words, nervously bit his lips, the chancellor was clearly displeased, the chief adviser diligently averted his eyes. He and Taor had long-standing scores.

Only the one in whose place Taor had been appointed stood sullenly aside. Taor found him with his eyes. Now the former military leader was preoccupied with something of his own, and not with the speeches of the pharaoh. He carefully hid his hand under his clothes. At first, Taor even thought that it was cut off, like a thief. But no, it seems the hand is completely dry. Strange, this usually happens from birth. Taor has seen many different injuries and epidemics on the battlefields, but he has never seen anything like this. The hand seemed to have been burned, but the motionless bone remained and festered. If it had occurred to someone to mummify only one hand on the body of a living person, he would have received such a result. Ujai was unrecognizable. Taor remembered him as brave and cocky, proudly throwing a challenge straight into the face of enemies and rivals, and now this haunted look, reddened eyes... What happened to him? What happened to everyone here at all? No one whispered, no gossip, no one seemed to be interested in anything. Taor felt like a stranger, not privy to the course of events. In fact, it was so, because he was absent for a very long time. But not long enough for people to suddenly become different... they behaved differently than before. The same inhabitants of Egypt, the same noble people at court, not counting the many dignitaries whom the pharaoh chose not from the nobility. He himself was now among them. Taor knew he should be grateful. In the old days he would not have been allowed to become so famous, now everything has changed. But what if these changes are not for the better?

Taor bit his lip bloody. Now the moment has come when he should express his main request. Several pairs of expectant eyes immediately gazed at him. He had long been indebted to these people for his promotion, but he did not want to think now about what was in their favor. He would repay them with something else later, and now he was going to ask not for himself, but for the whole province. Now the conquered lands have become a province of Egypt, so rich and fertile that it is unlikely that all the gold captured would have been enough to redeem it. The benefit didn't matter. He just wanted all the prisoners to be released.

If everything depended on him, then he would have done it already, but it will not be he who will decide, but a man like God, sitting on the throne. Everyone here felt involuntary respect for the symbols of royal power in his hands, his name, his uraeus. As he decides, so it will be done immediately.

There was no queen on the throne next to the pharaoh. Her absence, however, was not striking, because the ivory chair was removed for her, as if she was not expected at all. Pharaoh decided to be alone. Or did it just seem so? Someone was bending over him, someone, as if made of marble and gold. At first Taor could not see it. It was like the sun was shining in his eyes, and it hurt his vision... but then he noticed a graceful head, and the way luxurious black wings flapped over it. Marble hands slid over the pharaoh's shoulders like snakes, beautiful lips bent to his ear to whisper something. It seemed that fire would burst from those lips, not breath. The golden creature suddenly looked directly at Taor, and, gods, how beautiful it was.

Pharaoh waited for his words, but he forgot what he was going to ask for. The lips did not move. This is probably how a person who is turned into a statue feels: you want to talk, but you can't. And yet he braced himself. The future of an entire people depends on him: they will be turned into slavery or released. He must be strong. Taor spoke.

«I would not dare to ask for anything for myself, and yet I have one desire. May the bloody war end in peace, may the lands devastated by the battle remain independent, and may all prisoners be free».

That's all, there is nothing more to say. Request or impudence? How will the ruler of Egypt react to this? Will Pharaoh consider that his general wants too much? Will he leave the decision for later or will he answer now? Consent or refusal?

Taor always worried about others more than about himself. This set him apart from most people. It was said that such a quality would someday destroy him. Sometimes they laughed at him openly. But the golden creature behind the back of the throne suddenly looked at him with interest. How it looks like a deity, revived and delighted. Deity with a maiden body, dark wings and serpentine strands of gold color. Has anyone else seen her? Taor did not dare to take his eyes off her golden nails, which slid over the ruler's forearms. She bent down to Pharaoh's ear and whispered something.

«Let it be so», the answer of the ruler shocked everyone present. «The prisoners will receive freedom, and the lands you seized will gain independence. No tribute, not a single slave... if someone wants to stay as a guest, he was allowed to, if someone needs funds to get back to their homeland, they will be allocated them from the riches you seized. Is this your desire?»

Taor was confused. He did not express the request to the end, because he was ashamed, and Pharaoh already knew everything. The golden creature straightened up behind the throne. A sly smile played on his lips, his hands rested like a business on the ruler's shoulders. Did it read the thoughts of the congregation and convey them to Pharaoh? Who is it? Rather, she. Taor saw a slender body, barely covered by ornaments and garments that little resembled the clothing of the Egyptians. And the wings... they were alive, they moved, they flapped, then folded into a black halo above their heads. They acted like two large hands, absolutely mobile and graceful. Even the wings of birds are not like that. They were like two fluffy patches of darkness, like a separate living being above a divine body.

With difficulty Taor was able to nod at Pharaoh's words.

«Do you have any more wishes?»

Pharaoh's second question certainly struck him. He did not dare to hope that the first one would also be performed, and in fact, according to tradition, it should have been the only one.

«This is all that I dreamed of – about peace for everyone», his language almost did not obey.

That's all, the moment of his triumph is over. The golden creature looked at him, seemingly laughing. It expected him to regret having wasted his request. But he didn't regret it.

Pomegranate seed

At the exit, he ran into Ujai. The former military leader moved as if in a dream. Taor was even frightened at how strange he looked. Already looks like a mummy, although still alive. It seemed that a withered hand was devouring him, like a snake that had taken root on his body. How could this happen? What happened to him? After all, lately he has not even been on the battlefield, Taor fought instead. The young man was familiar with many epidemics. He saw how the warriors who touched the unclean blood became infected and sick. Everyone he killed in the last battles had impure blood. From her came filth and infection. Even scorpions avoided pools of such blood. But Ujjai could not get infected this way. It was safe here in the palace: no fights, no epidemics, no one who was infected would simply not be allowed here. Therefore, he did not even ask the question of whether the former military leader himself could be contagious?

Maybe he went out into the desert and something happened there? Taor did not know if it would be proper to ask about someone else's illness. It would probably be better to pretend he didn't notice. The court has its own ceremonial. The curious are not trustworthy. Plus, it's dishonorable to laugh at a losing opponent. Taor believed that Ujai deserved much more high office than himself. Although, perhaps, it was precisely because of illness that he was dismissed.

Their gazes met for just a moment. Ujjai was the first to avert his sunken, sore eyes. He wanted to say something, but did not dare and just walked by. Taor looked after him for a long time. It was as if he did not know this wretched, withered man. Where did the tall, mighty warrior go, who always treated everyone with arrogance?

«Are you looking for someone?» an old friend was already hurrying to him. Smenkhkara hung around at court, as usual, although he did not hope to get anything here. Only the son of one of the Pharaoh's concubines, although he was rightfully considered a prince, he could count on little. But he was always aware of what was happening.

Taor considered asking him about the deity behind the Pharaoh's throne and giving him advice on how to govern the country. For some reason it was uncomfortable to ask, as if you were interested in something forbidden. Perhaps you shouldn't have asked at all, so as not to make yourself more enemies than you already have. Taor knew that after today's honors, many here were ready to tear him up alive.

«You are the hero of this day, but what will happen tomorrow», Smenkhkara slapped him on the shoulder, faceted bracelets jingled melodiously. His dark hair was beautifully styled in thin braids, and his face looked unusually pale, as if the sun hadn't touched him for a long time. It was hot all around, even the large pools with lotuses that glowed blue throughout the palace did not exude coolness, and for some reason an unpleasant cold emanated from the prince. There was not a bead of sweat on his skin, and his hand was icy to the touch. He confessed to Taor that he recently broke up his harem.

«Someone drove away, someone presented, but most sacrificed».

«But why?» Taor was slightly amazed. Smenkhkara never came across as a cruel man.

«I just want something more,» he said cryptically.

«More?»

«Yes,» his eyes flashed like two obsidians buried forever in a pyramid. «The flesh is so dirty, so low. Deities are made of gold...»

«But», Taor wanted to argue that Smenkhkara is not a god, but he remembered his relationship with the pharaoh and said nothing.

«Sculptures of gods, I think only of them... Even if they came to life, they are not physical beings, not people... However, now we will have only one god. You must have heard rumors already, no matter how far away you are».

«One god?» Taor still didn't want to believe it. The very thought seemed wild to him. Although if you remember the deity that stood behind the throne. It alone could be worth all the other gods. A living deity instead of a pantheon of statues. Although no, probably he was wrong. The gods do not come to life and do not come to the royal palaces. Most likely, it was one of the pharaoh's daughters. Taor did not even remember all of them by name. Smenkhkara could list everyone by name. We need to ask him... But even the daughter of Pharaoh could not grow wings from her back, and golden claws from her fingers. Such traits are possessed only by gods who did not sit on the earthly throne.

«The sun god Aton now rules everything here,» Smenkhkara pointed to the sun disc etched on the wall. Taor vaguely remembered that there had been another symbol on this place earlier. Now everything has changed. The sun! Disc of the sun! Dawn! Why does the beautiful light of the sun seem to him so much like the glow of a bloody battle? The light of the sun, the color of blood, the screams of the amazed and the dead – all this is one The sun and god are also one. Deity of the sun! A golden figure behind the throne of Pharaoh! It seems to be woven from the sun.

Maybe she just dreamed about it? What if that fatal blow to his temple in the midst of the battle damaged his mind?

«God cannot be the only one. What about the other gods?» Taor felt a feverish delirium.

«Hush», Smenkhkara pulled him a little to the side. «If you want to pray to them, then pray silently. If you mention them out loud, you risk getting yourself into trouble. Things have changed a lot since you were gone. Perhaps it's for the best».

«How can you say that?»

«Just! I accept everything new, just as you were accepted here. You are not from the nobility, but you can rise above the most noble people, because now the time has come for new traditions».

«I have no high aspirations».

«Then you are very different from all the people that I know. And I know many».

Smenkhkara raised a hand to touch the pendant on his neck, but the hand remained in the air. He was thinking about something or suddenly felt something. The pendant on his neck gleamed slightly. Taor only just noticed how strange it was, just like a pomegranate seed. Of course, this is not a grain that was pulled out of the fruit, but a hard ruby, which the craftsmen have given an intricate shape. Some currents emanated from the stone.

«Like?» Smenkhkara caught his gaze.

Taor nodded reluctantly.

«Very inventive. What kind of jeweler made it?»

The friend smiled mysteriously.

«Jeweler?» his black eyebrows parted so mockingly, as if he heard a terrible stupidity. «How little you know yet».

«I see that the stone is rare. Does he symbolize something? After all, this is not a solar disk, which, probably, is now supposed to be worn by everyone. Another deity's mark?»

Smenkhkara did not find it necessary to answer.

«This stone is even more reliable than a magnet. It will always return to its owner, even if you lose it, or drink it, or give it, it will still remain yours, because it will burn other people's hands and again be attracted to you. He can have only one owner, but it is almost impossible to get such a stone. It can neither be ripped off nor stolen. Only if she gives it to you herself».

«Who?»

Smenkhkara was silent, as if he had not heard the question at all. His perfectly shaped black eyebrows came together thoughtfully on the bridge of his nose, muscular arms in bracelets somehow seemed constrained.

«I would also like such a stone».

«It is too early. Come to me later, when the celebrations are over. Then it will probably be about time».

Why isn't the time now? Taor watched Smenkhkara leave. He had no more friends here. So he had no one to expect kind words from, but there was no one to expect an open attack either.

He ignored the man hurrying towards him through the crowd. Only when the sharp blade cut the air a millimeter from his face did Taor recoil. The weapon drove into the column. The young man felt blood running down his cheek from the cut. Everything, as then on the battlefield, when he could have been killed, but only wounded in the temple. As if someone invisible pushed him away now. Again! All repeats. Everything is closed, as in a circle.

Taor watched, dazed, as the Nubian guards tied his assailant. Another dagger fell from his hand and clinked on the floor. Apparently, he was going to strike from close range. This was the first time Taor had seen this man. He could not look at him for long. The guards quickly led him away. What a madman could have dared to attack him right in the palace. After all, it was immediately clear what the outcome of events would be.

Taor absentmindedly rubbed the blood off his cheek with his hand. Could it be that this person is really insane. Yes, he has many enemies here: influential, rich, high-ranking. Naturally, none of them would kill him with their own hands.

It was enough to hire someone. The assassins would have waited for him in a dark alley. The body would be thrown into the Nile. He had heard of such cases. So they removed people who were objectionable to influential persons. Several killers were always sent so that the victim had no chance to escape. Nobody attacked in public. No man in his mind would do that.

«He's going to be executed right now,» ordered the chief vizier.

It will not be difficult to predict what will happen next: the culprit will be brought to his knees, his head will be tilted, and a sharp blade will cut his neck. Taor could not allow this.

«No!» He raised his hand resolutely. «Today is the day of celebration. Let this person be pardoned».

«But...»

«I myself am ready to ask Pharaoh about it».

Well, he again chose the path of direct conflict, as once upon a time. The vizier looked at him with mild condemnation, but tried not to betray his indignation. He quickly gave the order to put the captured man in prison. There he will stay until he is sentenced. Vizier Panahesi was firmly convinced that the pharaoh would listen to his advice more than to the petitions of his general. Let him think so. Taor was not about to get into an argument. So far, he has achieved a postponement of the execution, then, perhaps, he will be able to do more.

Although why should he try for a completely stranger to him, who, moreover, was going to kill him? He didn't know himself. It was just as natural for him to sacrifice his own interests for someone else as to breathe.

The blood flowed down his cheek more and more. Taor had the feeling that someone was looking at him from the crowd, someone whom he himself could not see.

At the exit, the chief vizier caught up with him. Panahesi was angry. Now, when there were almost no witnesses around, he no longer tried to control himself.

«You cannot ask for mercy on the one who was going to kill you».

«But my petition will soon be in your hands. You will have to hand it over to Pharaoh, whether you like it or not.

– You have already crossed all permissible boundaries today.

Borders?! Who installed them? Taor looked away. He knew that he was asking too much, he expected that his request would be refused, but his right to at least try to intercede for all these people».

«They will not be grateful to you, all these people...»

«I don't need it».

«Just do not say that you never dreamed of your own power, let it be power even over a small province of Egypt».

«Never,» the answer came easily to him, because he was always honest and straightforward. Many were disarmed by such honesty, so Panahesi suddenly took a step back.

«So you are not like everyone else».

«Like everyone in the palace, is that what you want to say? You know only those people who come here sooner or later. I communicated with ordinary people in all parts of the world, I met those who were ready to sacrifice themselves for the sake of another».

«While not being in love with him?»

The question was venomous, like a crushed snake, because Taor did not understand its meaning.

«On the battlefield, no one is in love with anyone, but someone is always ready to sacrifice himself to save a comrade, even if he does not know his name, even if he never sees him again at the end of the war».

«These are all ordinary soldiers, but the one who raised his hand against you raised it against the Pharaoh himself, since you represent him».

«But I want peace and forgiveness for everyone, because I know what war is. So let him be forgiven».

«This is stupid kindness».

«And yet it's right,» Taor turned and wanted to leave. The feeling that someone was watching him did not pass, and it was not at all the grand vizier who had pestered him so inappropriately with unnecessary discussion. He decided everything for himself, he did not want to change anything in his actions or outlook. Fate made him a warrior, but he didn't want war. He knew how to fight as if he himself were one of the gods, but did not see the need for bloodshed. If people knew how to be honest, then they could agree on everything peacefully. So he believed and was not going to change his opinion.

His armor clanked melodiously as Taor departed. The sandals scratched the floor a little.

«You cannot save the whole world,» Panahesi's angry voice caught up with him at the door.

«But I have the right to try».

Taor objected, turning only slightly, but a golden shadow in the distance struck him like a flash of lightning. His head was scorched, his heart was scorched... What is it? Glamour! Or, near the already empty throne of the pharaoh, someone really stood and looked at him, as if at an insect that would certainly be crushed someday.

All-crushing power

The day before

They didn't want to obey. Riots have happened before. Alais is used to it. The new pharaoh wanted too much. As soon as he ascended the throne, he already behaved differently from all his predecessors: his fathers, grandfathers, great-grandfathers, the entire royal dynasty of Egypt, revered on a par with the gods. Amenhotep was also revered as an earthly god, but Alais knew that he was not. And he knew it too. Ever since the dark winged lover left him, Amenhotep, the current Akhenaten, realized that he, like every ordinary representative of his people, is only mortal. He didn't want to put up with it. Already in the second year of his reign, he chose a different name and a different fate than that of everyone who sat on the Egyptian throne before him. He wanted to become a god in reality. Alais didn't mind his feeble attempts to transform, because after all, everything he did, he did for her.

Now she ruled Egypt, like all its provinces. But some didn't like it. Although they saw the wings behind her, they insincerely worshiped her as a deity. They felt creepy at the sight of her face, hypnotized by unearthly beauty, but they were embarrassed by the girl's body.

It especially confused the commander-in-chief Ujai. According to the long-established unwritten laws of advantages, here he felt himself the strongest. Moreover, it was not only a matter of physical strength, which might seem overwhelming. He felt himself in charge of all the military forces of the country, and this gave him an unconditional advantage. With everyone except the ruler, he behaved unceremoniously and arrogantly. For the daughter of Pharaoh, as Alais was first introduced to him, he kindled with base sympathy, but as soon as he received a refusal, he fiercely hated her. Once he sent her jewelry and flowers, and now he was ready to crush the walls with his bare fists, just to harm her. Alais fed on his rage as a source of life-giving energy. When people are angry, rampant, or simply worried about something, their power is so easy to steal. That's all she needed from people – to drink from them all her life, like juice from a fruit.

It is good that Ujai did not know about this, otherwise he would have made an effort on himself and restrained his emotions. Today he has gathered a whole regiment of people who share his opinion. He easily incited others to take risks. Therefore, it should have been eliminated. He, in turn, dreamed of eliminating her. Who will win? Alais looked at him and her eyes laughed. The mortal did not know with what force he had contacted.

«I understand why I have to obey Pharaoh's orders, but why should I obey you? Why should we all?»

Others didn't support him with an approving giggle just because they were a little afraid of the arrogant creature with wings and golden claws, but they continued to stand a little further from Ujaya. A whole small army, located in a semicircle in the large palace hall.

It was worth studying them all before destroying them, even though there was little time. Something told Alais that the instigator here was not Ujai at all. Someone, more secretive and dangerous, lurked behind a crowd of human heads and bodies. She inhaled the scent of cruelty and evil through her nostrils. Whoever this person was, but now he was hurt, as it seemed to him, quite by accident. Just a pinprick. This is how the creatures with iron claws that served her acted. They roamed about the floors of the palace, and no one would have distinguished them from the cats. It will be easy to detect by the smell of blood.

«You!» Alais stretched her hand forward and pointed directly at the wounded man. «Speak for yourself! No one is obliged to voice your thoughts and desires for you, even if you brought him with an army to this hall».

Ujai could not object to this. He suddenly felt that he was losing the ability to speak at all. His throat was constricted like a stranglehold. The other congregation exchanged furtive glances. They knew who had brought them here. But how did she know? Fear and suspicion are the first weapons to confuse the enemy. Alais was aware of her strength.

The instigator had no escape from her. His blood attracted like the exquisite aroma of wine. He had doomed himself as soon as he turned against her. And it didn't even matter who he was: one of the priests who did not support the cult of Aton, a disgruntled official or the pharaoh's son lost in a harem, who envied that she had chosen Smenkhkara, and not him. Alais followed the smell of blood, paralyzing everyone who got in the way with her gaze. Those who saw her now knew: you will not object to the deity, you simply cannot open your mouth when it pronounces its truth, you will not enter into confrontation with the deity, because in his presence you will be numb. Those who thought otherwise were stupid.

The instigator was bleeding before she even touched him. The body was covered with red blisters, as if it had been doused with boiling water. He decomposed before he died. But along with him, a dozen more soldiers were covered with a rash. They did nothing to her, but they died the same way. Their number continued to increase until it exceeded half of those present. Ujai looked and could not believe his eyes. His best people knelt or fell flat on the floor, and in the blink of an eye turned into vile rotting remains, as if someone had been drinking from them all their lives.

«Together with everyone who disobeyed, I will kill forty more innocent people,» Alais explained. It doesn't matter. How indifferent she said it, as if she had crushed insects that deserved it.

Her golden nails were not bloody, but looking at this creature, Ujai involuntarily imagined that someday he would have the blood of the whole world on him. And he once loved this creature. Did you think you loved?

But did you yourself act better, asked the voice of conscience in a distant corner of his consciousness, did you yourself not chop down hundreds of people in battles, did not give orders to advance and not spare anyone. Ujai filled the memory of the slaughter with wine. Alais never ate or drank anything, except human blood. She did not hack to death hundreds of people in battle, she killed forty people with witchcraft. But how did she do it... With what amazing indifference! As if it was her sacred right to take the lives of people around the world.

«Forty is the number of my god,» she explained calmly, but so that everyone would hear. «Remember that together with each of the guilty forty innocent people from his inner circle will be killed. Or just people dear to him».

«And so Aton orders?» Ujai is finally speechless again.

«Aton?» Her graceful eyebrows arched in amazement. «What does Aton have to do with it?»

It seemed that her laughter would now be heard, but an amazing silence reigned in the hall.

«You said 'your god,» Ujai said after all. «That is, the sun god?»

And again a sly smile. What was behind it? This creature knew much more than told them all, and even Pharaoh. How cleverly it manipulated everyone and everything here! How delightful it looked! He hated Alais and yet could not take his eyes off her. He wanted to look at her and look until he finally loses his mind. This is how the one who is doomed to burn in its rays looks at the sun. Ujai now felt so condemned, who had been suspended high in the mountains in the desert to be burned entirely – a long painful execution. He knew this firsthand. Alais flapped her dark wings, dispelling all his illusions. Creation of gold, darkness and the power of solar fire.

«The first name of the sun god was not Aton», Alais looked at him, no longer laughing.

«What's the difference? Egypt is ruled by you, not he. On his behalf, but still we will all have to bow to you. Instead of the cult of Aton, then there will be the cult of Alais, and it does not matter if there is a god at all.

«It is not in your power to look at the one who was considered to be a god from the beginning and at the same time not to lose his mind, man».

The last word made him angry. An insect, that's what she really wanted to call it. People were just insects to her. And it doesn't matter who they are: slaves carrying blocks for pyramids or royal entourage – they are all just people. It's just those who live and die, from whom only a handful of rotting meat and bones will remain in the end, and she is different. There is nothing human in it.

It looked more like a sculpture cast in gold tones. The stone features expressed nothing, and at the same time the cold face seemed to be something vulnerable, almost defenseless. He could not love her. He wanted to hit that seductive face, so proud and so innocent, even some kind of naivety flashed in the azure eyes, and then they suddenly turned green, like an emerald, like Basted's cat eyes. He did not think about the goddesses for a long time, the rudeness in his experience was the main thing, he beat women in his harem, beat whores on the night banks of the Nile, beat slaves, but he would not dare to swing at the daughter of Pharaoh, even if not real, but his hand involuntarily clenched into a fist, and then Alais deftly intercepted it, as if she was about to shake it. It was not even the strength of this shaking that struck him, but the fact that the whole hand suddenly flared up, as if on fire. Such a pain! He closed his eyes, gritted his teeth so as not to scream, but the scream still broke through. The hand was bubbling and went crimson spots. The spots turned into ulcers, eating flesh. In just a few seconds, nothing was left of the hand but the charred remains. Now he was screaming at the top of his lungs, no longer holding back. And Alais looked all the same indifferently, and it was no longer clear where her gaze was directed: at the crippled warrior or at the entire crowd of human beings in general, absolutely superfluous in this room where the deity settled.

Let the rest live as a warning to others. There are less than forty of them. Alais beckoned with a golden claw the one who seemed to be the youngest and most naive. He will never leave her field of vision. Perhaps his arms and legs will remain intact, but... Alais was looking for a place where she would put her seal. Ear, finger, shoulder, neck... better right on the forehead, under a lock of hair. She brought her claws to his forehead. They are sharp as razors and hot as the hot disc of the sun. You need to press them to human skin just once, and a person will become its slave for his entire life.

First impression

Taor did not know what to do here. He seemed to have done everything that the ceremonial obliged him to, and was free to leave, but he was ordered to remain in the palace as an honored guest.

«The days of festivities lie ahead,» Smenkhkara explained to him.

«What kind of festivities?» the young man was amazed. There were no holidays at this time of the year, unless... he forgot that instead of all the previous gods now there was only one, which means that the dates of religious celebrations were also postponed to another time. He did not ask about it in detail, so as not to show himself a simpleton. In the intricacies of secular and religious life, he really did not understand well. Military science was the only thing in which he understood something.

It is a pity that the memories of the victory were somewhat darkened. He often closed his eyes and imagined a dark cloud over the battlefield, where the dead revived and again rushed into battle. There must be many miracles happening in the world, but he had never seen such a thing before. Much in the last war may have seemed strange and implausible. It seemed as if the dark palace mirrors at dusk were beginning to reflect that battle again. But all around was calm. The only reminders of the war here were people in wretched clothes scurrying through the festive crowd – these were the prisoners whom he offered to release, and who wished to stay here as guests during the celebrations. They could be understood. Food and drink – that's what attracted people here, left homeless by the war and deprived of everything they had acquired. Will they stay in Egypt forever, finding places for servants? Or, after resting, they will go back to the devastated lands where they come from?

Taor still did not even know the name of this tribe. He did not understand their language and could not ask them anything, nor would he dare to enter into conversation with the vanquished. Some kind of anger, something gloomy emanated from them, and each time he averted his eyes, stumbling across the crowd at one of them.

Their faces were surprisingly unpleasant in appearance, their skin was earthy, their eyes were of an unpleasant shade that gave off red. Facial features also had little in common with the faces of the Egyptians and representatives of any other peoples familiar to him. Pointed noses, pointed ears, eyebrows like wings, lipless mouths... with old people it was still understandable, but he had never seen such ugly women and children. Perhaps for their tribe, such features of appearance were considered normal, but the Egyptian was unpleasant to look at it.

Taor suddenly remembered Ujjai, his withered limb and the hopeless despair in his eyes.

Perhaps these people were not born so ugly, but something happened during the war, which disfigured their faces and bodies. But what? What could have happened to women and children who did not go to the battlefield themselves and did not even come close to dangerous areas where men were fighting. Taor was perplexed... Probably, there was something unhealthy in the local deserts, which was so reflected in the appearance of the local population. Each person looks beautiful as long as he is not sick with anything. One mentor, once in his childhood, told him that all the people of the world, like fruits or flowers, plant them on not fertile soil, and nothing will remain of external beauty. The fruit will rot, the flower will wither, and the person from hard work and lack of comfort will become weak and unattractive in appearance. As far as Taor observed, there was some truth in this. Women who were born into poverty did grow ugly at an astonishing rate, but those who lived in palaces looked like beautiful flowers.

The lotuses in the palace gardens also seemed more beautiful than anywhere else. Taor sat down right on the ground in front of one of the ponds. Here he was found by the king's messenger, who brought a small scroll in a gold frame. He thought that this was an invitation to another celebration, but no – the pharaoh's daughters sent him an invitation to appear and tell about their military exploits. There were signatures below. Taor shuddered, expecting to see a new name he didn't know

before – the name of that golden creature from the throne room. She, too, must be a princess, so it seemed to him, at least. But the list included only the names of the princesses already known to him: Meritaton, Setepenra, Nefernephriaton-tasherit, Ankhesenpaaton. Everyone who gave him their attention long before. The only strange name was the last name: Macketaton – the already dead daughter of Pharaoh. She herself could not sign this invitation in any way. This is probably a mistake.

Taor did not know how to respond to this invitation. Now he could not keep anyone company. There was a whistling void in his head. He must have gone a little distraught after the last battle. Probably those deserts were cursed and it was not worth going there, but he had to defend the lands of Egypt from the attackers. In those deserts, he lost all his usual cheerfulness, and brought with him something gloomy and oppressive. Every time he tried to sleep, the battle in his dreams continued: arrows whistled, the dead rose, a voice sounded from heaven, only much more clearly than he had heard long ago in reality. The voice is like a golden ray that tore apart black clouds. It seems that instead of rain in his dreams, blood was pouring from heaven, and he felt its streams on his face. The skin was stained with scarlet clots, the world around him became ugly, and the voice from heaven was divinely beautiful.

«I choose you,» he said, and Taor woke up with the feeling that the sword that someone had put in his hand should destroy everyone, including himself, in search of one single victim.

They were just dreams, he consoled himself. In the old days, he would have gone to the temple, made sacrifices and asked the priest for advice on how to interpret these dreams, but now only the temples of Aton remain. For some reason, this god repulsed him. Probably because he took the place of everyone else. Such absolute power was frightening, and how suddenly it happened. There was nothing, only the sun remained. The entire pantheon of familiar gods was no longer absent, was replaced by only one. As if one of the members of a large family cut out everyone else in order to establish themselves in their power.

Taor didn't like this. But what could he do? Everything is decided by the pharaoh, who himself is revered as a god on earth, and ordinary mortals must only obey him. This is how the world works. This is how Egypt works. But who and why arranged it this way? Who is really the one who hides there in the sky like a golden voice? One inhabitant of heaven or many?

Such thoughts had never occurred to him before. He was a simple youth who knew only about the military craft and a variety of martial arts. Governing the country is not his lot. To rethink the norms of religion or the structure of power is also not given to him. He just doesn't understand anything about it.

The only thing that caught his attention in the throne room was the golden silhouette behind the back of the throne. He had never seen anything more beautiful in his life. Where to see her again? Taor looked around. Somewhere in the palace, of course, you can meet her, but where? So far, he has had no luck, although he has been wandering back and forth all day. Perhaps she still did not leave her chambers or from the chambers of the Pharaoh himself. Can she be his wife, not a daughter, another queen of Egypt above Kiya and Nefertiti? But then, why doesn't anyone talk about her, glorify her name, as it should be? However, no one said anything about Nefertiti and Kiya either, as if there were no more of them. And even none of the harem was present in the throne room. Pharaoh was alone, apart from the golden winged creature next to him, which no one seemed to see.

Taor wanted to ask someone about her directly, but still hesitated. He felt in his gut that it was not worth doing. There are things that living people are better off not talking about, like the dead coming to life on the battlefield in the battle from which he himself recently returned.

The lotuses in the garden pond gave off a strange scent, like the scent of death. They were all white. No variety. And earlier, a riot of colors reigned here.

The young man brushed the bluish-black strands of hair from his forehead and looked at his reflection in the water. His face remained beautiful and without scars, as if he had not just been

in the thick of the battle. For some reason, the mark on the forehead was not reflected in the water mirror. Taor frowned.

«I choose you!»

What did these words mean? They were supposed to mean something, right? Now he, too, saw the reflection of the sky in the water, but the voice from heaven did not sound. Perhaps it only sounds in a dream. Or in that state of battle, which is close to eternal sleep. This is the name of the gods themselves to another world. It is the gods, not god. Taor still believed there were many. But the only divine creature that he saw with his own eyes was somewhere in the palace here. And it was not an idol, it was alive. What a pity that there, in the throne room, it was impossible to come close and touch to see if it really exists. It said something in the ear of Pharaoh, but he did not hear the words, it moved, but did not leave the place, it had seductive feminine features, but he did not feel physical attraction, only some kind of madness. It was as if he had been hit on the head, and he moved as if delirious.

«The beauty of the gods should frighten mortals.» The inscription in hieroglyphs was carved on the column recently and inaccurately, as if someone's claws had scratched it deeply into the stone. Taor only noticed her because he sat down beside her. I wonder how many more symbols appeared in the palace that were not there before.

The garden was filled with amazing animals and birds, whose names Taor did not know. Probably, travelers brought them here from such distant places that he had never heard of. The little monkeys scurrying through the orange trees were black as demons.

Somewhere far away the hymn to Aton sounded.

«Hail...»

What a monotonous chant. It was as if all around it immediately became darker. It was twilight and fatigue, Taor decided, he wanted to sleep.

Scary holiday

A strange chomping woke him up. These are two magnificent birds, which he noticed in the trees during the day, pecking pieces of fresh meat on the ground. They did it so aggressively and viciously that they no longer seemed so beautiful. Drops of blood sparkled on the plumage.

Interestingly, but human meat? Taor could not understand the reason for this thought.

He had just had a strange dream – that golden winged creature that he was looking for was sitting opposite him on the ground by the pond and performing some terrible ritual. It cut black birds and whispered something, and then buried winged corpses right in the ground. All around were symbols inscribed in blood and lighted torches. Taor saw neither one nor the other now. The ground was untouched, torches burning only in brackets on the walls behind the garden. The hymn to Aton sounded somewhere again. When he fell asleep, he heard him too. The singing hurt the ear unpleasantly.

«Glory! Your greatness is eternal, beautiful Aton. You shine over everyone, but all your secrets are known to only one Akhenaten. Nobody knows you the way he did».

A strange hymn. Taor raised himself on his elbows. In the darkness, the palace garden did not look as pretty as it did during the day. The gloom closed over the lotus ponds almost perceptibly. The heat was everywhere, not a breath of breeze. Who would have thought to line up torches stuck in the ground in a dense ring and cut birds in their circle? But that was exactly what he saw in half asleep. He probably just imagined it. Everything happened in an eerie silence, the birds did not scream, because their beaks were pulled together by something metallic. The ritual knife, which was commonly used to cut the mouth of mummies, dug into their plumage, slicing through the flesh. The golden winged creature did not raise its head from its occupation. It did everything mechanically and somehow obsessively, as if someone's life, or more, many lives were veiled from this.

«Many lives of someone's enemies», these were also the words of the hymn to Aton, or someone pronounced them right into the silence. «You can only slaughter black birds, and the warriors on the battlefield will die by themselves. Or, on the contrary, rise from the dead. What I wish. My choice is everything, and yours is nothing».

Taor looked around in bewilderment. The dream was eerie, and now it left a heavy impression. It seemed that graceful fingers, tearing apart the carcasses of birds, and then digging graves for them, would never leave his memory. A beautiful creature in a dream moved itself somehow like an animal. So predatory!

Somewhere in the distance the rhythmic beat of many drums was heard, after a while the sounds of lyres, flutes, flutes and zithers joined it. It looks like a holiday. At a time like this? It's deep night now.

Taor got up with difficulty and walked in the direction from which the music was heard. It was now gloomy, now solemn. With such sounds, they were escorted to the tomb of the pharaohs. There was more of a funeral hymn here than of idle mirth. Maybe someone died? Taor was somehow all the same... One ruler, another ruler. The young man is used to not getting attached to anyone. He was a lonely person, not tied either by family or by any material values. His duty was to serve the one who is currently occupying the throne of Egypt. And who exactly, it doesn't matter... But the thought that that beautiful golden creature, which he took for the princess of Egypt, could be buried with such celebrations, echoed with an unbearable blow in his mind. He clearly imagined how a winged body was lying on a luxurious stretcher, his hands with claws were folded on his chest, and a real live snake with a golden skin was twisting on his forehead instead of the royal ureus.

He hurried. The premises of the palace were empty, as well as in the dark gardens. Nobody! No servants, no guards, not a single person... But judging by the sounds that reached him, a large

crowd had gathered in the throne room. Taor rushed there, and then an unpleasant surprise awaited him – two Nubians with halberds, who remained on guard at the entrance, blocked his way.

It was useless to argue with them. Behind the drawn curtains, Taor did not even manage to see what was happening there, beyond the passage that they so vigilantly guard. The guards in the palaces were silent, like statues, and very executive. You can't slip past them. Taor was about to come to terms with this, but then he noticed a strange man in a Horus suit. Isn't it now forbidden to worship this god or keep a reminder of him? Taor even doubted the new statutes. The stranger was so confident. He beckoned Taor to follow him, and the young man suddenly realized that he could not disobey.

He moved for the best copy of a god that, perhaps, only a mortal could recreate. Horus moved, dancing slightly, and incessantly beckoning Taor with him with slightly feathered hands.

Taor noticed on the wall a new modified image of Aton, vividly reminding that there is only one god now. And yet Horus was here. Either this is just a joker, if you pay attention to his cheeky postures, or today is the very night when traditions can be violated for some reason.

Some kind of incense smoked on the tripods in the corners with an unusual smell, intoxicating the mind. Maybe it only seems to him that the dancing Horus in front of him is the real god, and the shimmering costume on him is actually an integral part of his body.

Taor felt himself suffocate. He reached up to his neck to rip open the nonexistent collar, but instead tore open the necklace he had worn for a long time – the final reminder of his mother who died. Oddly, he didn't even feel the slightest regret. The beads rolled across the floor. Taor stepped over them and followed Horus, now beckoning him away from the palace.

So they went out into the street. The crowd was buzzing here. The pleasant nighttime freshness was dispelled by smoking torches. Taor looked around in amazement. How many people gathered in the square in front of the palace. The whole city did not sleep at night? He did not remember anything like that. Those gathered were noisy. Someone expressed delight, someone fear. Taor alone did not understand what was the matter. He followed Horus, before whom the people parted without hesitation. No one recognized him as yesterday's hero. Or people were just overly involved with something else. He looked in the same direction as everyone else – at the dais in front of the royal palace. It was possible to get there only from the balcony of the throne room, nevertheless, the guards in atypical red robes gathered below. Torches blazed high in the brackets, snatching from the darkness a magnificent image of Aton. Next to him, everyone seemed insects, even the pharaoh, but not the golden creature with luxurious wings, proudly occupying the center of the dais. Everyone came to look at him – a living deity. It looked just like that.

It was performing some kind of ritual. Golden claws took blood from several priests directly from their wrists and mixed with something in a precious goblet. From here, a column of sparkling sparks could be seen, separated from the mixture, and also, like the urey on the head of a winged deity, turned into a real golden snake. She slid down the girl's body and wrapped around her slender wrist like a bracelet.

Do others see her too? Taor tried to look into the eyes of those next to him to determine. Maybe yes. Otherwise than they are all so intoxicated.

«Alais!» it shouted someone from the crowd. That must be her name. He had never heard such a name before, but if this is the name of a deity, then there is nothing surprising.

Alais's hand with long golden claws immediately pointed to the one who had called her.

«She points to the victim».

It was said by someone disguised as Horus. He stood next to Taor, as if he had grown out of the ground. The eyes under the bird's mask sparkled like sapphires.

«But he called her himself.» Taor looked at the man who had already been seized and dragged to the dais. It seems that it was one of the priests who refused to remove the marks of the old gods.

«It always seems that way, because the victims themselves call her some careless word or deed».

Horus's hand fell confidentially on his shoulder, but Taor threw it off. The touch was very unpleasant, as if a dead bird had touched you.

The seized one had already been brought to the dais and brought to his knees before a new deity with two magnificent wings and a living snake on his wrist. Alais refused to accept the ritual knife, bent down slightly and tore at his throat with her nails. They turned out to be sharper than a knife. Ten knives. Five on each hand. Or did she have more fingers? From this distance, he could not accurately see and count. And she substituted the bowl under the stream of blood, which poured in many streams from the numerous wounds on the neck. The man under her feet was dying in agony, and the golden snake from her wrist smoothly crawled into the glass and wrapped around the bow with some kind of bizarre symbol.

The hymn sounded again, but not only to Aton. Her name was there too. Taor could not understand some of the words and expressions, and the crowd watched in fascination. It seems they have seen this not for the first time and wanted to see it again. Alais clenched her hand into a fist, as if collecting the remains of blood, and then opened her palm, showing the audience some symbols traced in scarlet on the skin. They flashed before Taor's eyes, instantly reviving the memory of a circle of torches and slaughtered birds, hiss and burial. It seems that there were such symbols too.

For a second, it seemed to him that Alais's eyes found him alone in the crowd, and a smile like a snake ran across her lips.

He felt bad.

«Let's go!» someone in a suit of Horus supported him and helped him to leave. Taor did not want to touch this man. The feeling that the suit was part of his body was all too real. Perhaps it was so. After seeing, he began to believe that sometimes gods descend from heaven to walk on earth.

«Then I will go alone», Taor moved away from the obsessive companion. He did not show his resentment in any way.

The sky above the square lit up with golden flashes of sparks, just like in her glass of blood. The guards in red snatched out some people from the crowd, at which Alais at times pointed with her hand, first at one, then at another. And no one objected, no one resisted, although they all faced the same fate as the priest who had just been sacrificed. Someone was robbed of children, someone of wives... but there was not a word of objection. The creature at the top seemed to have hypnotized people, forcing them to give their lives for granted.

Life and blood. Alais took both. And it seemed that over the square, along with sparks, many winged snakes, created by someone's creepy imagination, were flying. Taor was not even afraid that they might seize him. For Alais, there seemed to be no titles or ranks during the sacrifices. She just told people to give her life, and people gave her. With humility.

Taor felt a burning sensation and nausea.

«Glory to the daughter of the sun», so they called her. The anthem became more and more gloomy. The terrible holiday continued, and he ran away, and yet he wanted to suddenly turn around and once again look at today's deity. There, on the dais. Alais was no longer alone, someone dark and gloomy, huge, like a black cloud, bent over her, as she herself had recently over the throne of Akhenaten. He behaved just like her, predatory and arrogant, to match the king himself. If the whole world had a king, it would be him. Only from afar it seemed immaterial, more like a dense shadow. And this shadow also had black wings.

Demon pact

Nobody has visited this place for a long time. No one was allowed, because everything here remained as before.

Hall of the Gods. He called it the hall of sculptures. Round as a sanctuary, it always seemed half empty. The oppressive size accompanied the feeling that people here are insects. Along the perimeter of the circle between the columns, majestic bronze figures occupied their niches. Seth, Anubis, Hathor, Isis, Bastet are deadly deities around a single living thing that appeared as if out of nowhere.

Alais could enter through one of the aisles between the columns, which looked more like empty niches, but he knew for sure that she did not. She seemed to be born out of nothing right here. In a room full of sculptures of gods that seem to be gone. Anyway, not a single person on earth has ever seen the statues move. Unlike them, Alais was alive and mobile, but even more powerful than if the heavy statue came to life and came down from the pedestal. He was afraid of her.

He is the high priest of Amon-Ra. At the sight of the statue of his god in the niche, he guiltily averted his eyes. He, like many priests, long ago realized for himself one truth. The gods are more a symbol of strength than strength itself. Alais completely turned this performance upside down. The sun god seemed to come to life in her. Here, in the dim hall, he was real, alive. He had a slender female body, held on too self-confident, wings behind his back, glowing golden skin and even more golden hair. It was as if it was entirely sculpted from liquid molten gold, which for some reason, having taken shape, did not solidify, but continued to burn, continued to move, and inside this amazing creation some kind of evil all-crushing force suddenly awakened by itself.

Before her, the pharaohs were considered gods only symbolically. But many in the palace were not from the common people, for example, the priests, realized that the pharaohs are mortal, like ordinary people, they can be killed, you can arrange a conspiracy, no god will come down from the pedestal to protect them. With the advent of Alais, the concept of divinity suddenly became literal. She was not flesh and blood like all Pharaohs. She could not be injured or killed. But she herself can do arbitrariness with everyone. Absolute deity! Not a human! Without feelings. Emotionless. No weakness. Invincible. Merciless. Not knowing pain and compassion. She will never grow old. Will never die. What will happen then with Egypt.

Essentially nothing. One immortal ruler will replace the mortal dynasty. That's all. But darkness will come with her. Rivers of blood. Dark wonders.

«Whoever dares to kill her will commit suicide, the one who dares to raise his hand against her will immediately lose his hand,» said the winged creature in the sands. Why did he dare to check these words.

«The man who shouted my name in the crowd at night in the square, you sent him in vain,» Alais's voice also burned his ears like molten mercury. It was painful to listen to her, but it was also impossible to leave. If he tries, she will bring him back in one small effort. She will just squeeze her beautiful hand into a fist, and at the same time he seems to bump his forehead against the wall and fall right at her feet. This is how the gods behave. Real gods. Only insects are mortal for them. Once in his youth, he longed for the appearance of a real deity, even sought him in all parts of the world and did not find it anywhere, but now, in old age, when it appeared in the palace by itself, he felt a chilling fear. Such a creature was not worth looking for, because for all its beauty it was terrifying.

For a while he did not dare to answer her.

«It's so easy to send your own person to execution», Alais ran her nails in the air as if they were still sparkling with blood. «People so easily sacrifice their own kind for the sake of some invented goals and at the same time consider themselves fair. Who are you after that, since the earth still tolerates you, in spite of all your minor and major sins?»

«Who are you?» he himself did not know how he dared to stubbornly raise his eyes to her.

«It's not enough to say my name, neither on the holiday of the new moon, nor during the sacrifices, to destroy me,» she said. «I am not one of your Egyptian miracles, and even less a man born of the fruits of the earth, the name has no power over me».

«You are evil!»

«People are evil,» how naturally she said it, if he were a little weaker in reason and could not help but believe her. «People and any gods who vote to populate this land with people. Look at yourself: you send your friends to death, betray your chosen ones, go to any tricks and meanness in order to take a comfortable place, without even thinking that it will be temporary, like life, and out of envy you are ready to destroy a person in the most insidious ways... God created you evil, gave you the ability to lie, to pretend. I, for example, do not know how».

God! She always talked about some one god, even when the cult of Aton was not even discussed. He remembered well the years when Amenhotep the Fourth, the current Akhenaten, was co-ruler of his suddenly ill father, and then she appeared, at first like a spirit woven from a light shadow. At first, she was secretive and did not interfere in anything. Who would have known where her appearance would eventually lead?

In her mouth, God was always the one and only. And it was not clear whether she loved him or hated him fiercely. It was impossible to guess her feelings and thoughts at all. Alais did not deny the presence of a wide variety of higher powers hovering over the universe, did not mind the fact that other gods of Egypt also existed, but someone alone, in her opinion, stood above them all, someone whom she never named, and it was not Aton at all. Aton was a part of herself.

Is she divine? Or is there another name. The stranger in the sands called her differently, and for some reason this word seemed incredibly frightening to him. Angel! Unfamiliar sound. If you do not explain what this means, then you will not understand. For him, it was consonant with the words: murderer, seducer, altering the world in front of you, as Alais did. An angel is an evil with a cold essence and searing beauty.

It was not a name, just a name, because the stranger told him that there are still many such creatures and not all of them are evil, but one is the main thing over all. And this dominant creature was Alais. This explained her arrogance and a sense of absolute power over everyone: both people and even gods. She was sure that both physical and ethereal creatures would submit to her. She has more strength in her little finger than an entire army. And she doesn't want to use this power for good. How not to be afraid of her?

«Merira is the former high priest of Amon-Ra, the current high priest of Aton, tell me, is there something that does not suit you with your current position? Does it have any extra privileges that you consider yourself not quite worthy?»

How easily she pronounced his name, as if she really had some secret power over him. It is worth calling an object or person by name, and you gain invisible power over it. Merira still didn't believe it. But next to Alais everything changed. All the usual reality scattered to dust. A being called an angel overshadowed all the gods he was used to.

«Tell me if it was worth mixing them all.» He scanned the circle of statues. «Hathor, Isis, Osiris, Amon and Mut, all of them, this pile of dead stones and the living meaning inherent in them, which makes the crowds prostrate before them, and helps the pharaohs to keep their power. And all this for the sake of the appearance of a single living angel».

The creature with golden claws, an article of a deity and wings arched its eyebrows in disbelief.

«Angel!» She repeated it as if for the first time she had heard the word itself. «Do you know what this name means?»

«He ... – that is, a stranger in the sands. – He said that it means a messenger, a messenger with a message...»

«For our family, yes,» the golden head nodded condescendingly in agreement. «But for you this word means something else...» an instant throw of the hand, like a snake that caught his throat, squeezed. Alais's lips, breathing fire, tilted to his ear to hiss just one word. «Evil!»

Absolute evil! He felt it rather than heard it. The auricle was burned. How hot her breath is! She could have set the whole city on fire if she had just died. But for now, she kept herself in a cold, regal manner. How long will this last yet?

He rubbed his neck excitedly after she finally released him. Even before that, Merira suspected that a being called an angel carries in itself an indescribable evil. One had only to look at Alais to feel this evil. Something malicious, oppressive, all-crushing emanated from her beauty... Those who looked at her felt like crushed insects at her feet. Perhaps this is how it should be, if the creature in front of you is from the angelic race. But who are these angels after all? If they are higher than the gods, and people, and earthly rulers, then where did they come from?

All the questions led nowhere, and Alais's beautiful lips grinned coldly. When she smiled, it seemed that not a smile, but a snake ran over her lips. And at the same time, something in her inexpressibly attracted.

«Then what does your name mean? The name that you carry now?» he did not give up, trying to get at least something from her. There is something that has power over her. In any case, there is always hope to find at least one weak point.

«But this does not concern you any more».

Merira watched as she imperceptibly circled the hall, her movements were deliberately slow and at the same time seemed impetuous. The wings fluttering behind them reminded of a storm in the sands. Alais was more self-confident than any kings. She, too, looked into the motionless faces of the statues, but felt only triumph. No remorse. But it was she who drove them all out of here.

«You probably want a war to break out because of you».

«War?» Alais grinned cruelly. «War for me means an indisputable victory. The hand that has risen on me will immediately dry up, the sword aimed at me will instantly turn against its owner. I know who my father is, and this is not one of the deathly Egyptian gods, but you know his name».

She bent down and whispered in his ear. And these were the words of an angel.

The winged man in the sand seemed to be saying the same to him, but the way she said it sounded scary, almost like a snake. More precisely, she would have scared the snake with her hiss. What a stark contrast to such beauty. For some reason, this combination made it even worse.

Alais knew her own worth, and was fully aware of her own strength. She will crush the whole world, just step on him with her heel, and he will crack under the weight of her oppression.

«Maybe he's worth it,» her eyes declared slyly. «With the pettiness of people and their intrigues, with their hypocrisy. Show me at least one infinitely kind person, and I will spare the world for his sake, as Michael (this is the name of that winged guard that you saw in the sands) is ready to do for the sake of only one believer as a whole a swarm of wicked people. He has repeatedly stated that only one person devoted to God is worth sparing an entire country of atheists for the sake of his sincere faith. He believes that the faith of one pays for the excesses of many. Let's say I'm ready to do the same, but I need one absolutely pure soul. A person who never wishes harm to anyone and under any circumstances. If I see such a person and do not be disappointed in him, as God was disappointed in me, then I may save the human world from destruction, which the Almighty now wants. After all, he created the devil as punishment for arrogant people. He created me.» The tip of the snake tongue licked his cheek. «I am a punishing force because people have become too cruel. Rivers of blood must be shed to cleanse the world that God so carelessly created. He already regrets it, although he does not want to openly admit it. Hypocrisy is his strong point, but not mine. I speak openly, even though the truth hurts. I will not regret people, only beautiful things made by their hands, but there are already plenty of them in the world. Show me someone I can regret to stop me. Time is limited. Thirteen sunrises because thirteen is my favorite number».

Her wings flapped again, gracefully and somehow dangerously, as if they could twine around him and strangle him in a deadly embrace. Merira reluctantly retreated.

«It's a fair deal,» he nodded. If only she fulfills her conditions...

«Just one person,» Alais repeated. «You only need to find one, but someone who will not disappoint me. He alone must be so pure as to become worthy to atone for the sins of all mankind».

The priest was afraid of her. Alais knew that. Backing away, he stumbled and fell. How awkward! Where can he find something.

But the deal was good. Just one soul! Alais had never met one like this before, although it seemed like an eternity remained behind her. Only one person, unlike all people, could change her idea of eternity.

And this man almost became a young man who uttered a strange request the other day in the throne room, but he somehow disappointed her.

Bloody hieroglyph

«If the Nile was filled with blood, and not water, then she would have lived there».

It was Ujai's voice. Taor did not immediately notice him, and he, it seems, did not notice anything at all, except for his sore hand, which he swaddled with bandages and rocked gently, like a child. He himself seemed to be hiding from everyone and still talked with someone in the void. It seemed that he was absolutely sure that he saw some interlocutor in front of him, although the palace corridor was empty. He must have lost his mind from the injury.

It would be most reasonable to pass by, but Taor decided to show his concern and squatted down in front of the victim.

«Can I help you with something?»

Ujai looked at him like an enemy and even bared his teeth like a beast. Taor was not offended. It was already a sad sight before him. The man is alive, and his hand is already mummified, although not torn from the body. Something was stirring under the bandages. How strange! A withered hand cannot move like a living creature. Or something other than dry flesh is buried under the bandages. Taor remembered the birds that had been slaughtered. Suddenly, crazy with grief, Ujai has bandaged a live bird there, and it is now swarming in its death throes? Or is something bursting out of his body? An absurd idea, but so persistent.

The young man did not know what to say, how to entertain or console the person who seemed to need nothing, but Ujai suddenly spoke himself.

«Did you encounter something similar there, on the battlefield, where you were sent?»

What a meaningful phrase for a madman. Taor was alert. So the man in front of him still has not lost his mind?

«What unusual could I encounter there?» There really was a lot of indescribable happening, but let Ujai touch on this topic himself.

«With creatures that maim or burn people with just one touch, and at the same time look incomparable, although they are still creatures,» his tongue twisted, but his thought was sober. Taor remembered the dead who were resurrected and those who seemed impossible to kill.

«I've seen a lot,» he said carefully.

«You'll see more here», Ujai drawled derisively. «Because here, in the palace, she settled».

«Who is she?» Taor did not dare to ask anyone about it. For some reason, it became scary to just ask a question about what worried him. «Pharaoh's daughter? The daughter of some priest who taught her to conduct the mysteries? A child of one of the gods themselves?»

Ujai just shook his head. He did not know, only speculated.

«Pharaoh called her daughter. At first. But she appeared suddenly, already being an adult and... winged. No matter how hard it is to believe it, the wings are alive, they grow from her back».

«Did you check?»

«Yes».

«How?»

«By chance. I touched her as she walked by».

«Has your hand started to dry out since then?» Taor guessed.

«No,» Ujai shook his head sadly. «Here the point is different. The first time I just got a little burned. It was necessary to be more prudent, but what can be done here when she walks nearby, right through the palace... Now no one calls her just a princess anymore. She seemed to have become a ruler herself. As if God came down from heaven to rule alongside the Pharaoh».

«What about Queen Nefertiti? News reached me that not so long ago Akhenaten made her his co-ruler».

«Where do you see her here?» Ujai expressively looked around the empty space.

In some ways, he was right. Taor himself noticed numerous changes in the order of life in the palace. All representatives of the royal family, who had at least some kind of power, disappeared, as if they were deliberately kept under lock and key. The Pharaoh himself, sitting on the throne, seemed just a puppet.

Otherwise Taor would not have thought of interfering in the natural course of someone's power struggle, much less making inquiries. It's none of his business. Asking about something like that, he brazenly climbs into other people's secrets. But Alais... Her face... She seemed not at all a stranger to him. He wanted to know something about her, and what he did not understand himself.

Ujai's diseased limb should have been a warning to him. Something similar can happen to him if he pokes his nose where he should not.

Taor moved a little away from Ujai and watched his dry hand vibrate slightly under the bandages. What if you take a blade and cut them off his hand? What will he see then?

Taor could hardly resist the temptation to check. After all, he is a warrior. He saw a terrible death, and an unusual infection, and even the living dead in the last war. What he sees under Ujai's bandages shouldn't scare him too much after that.

This was the very place in the garden by the pond where Alais performed the ritual with the slaughtered birds. Ujai just reminded him of a bird so withered that it only remained to be buried in the ground. He stopped looking like a living person. Anubis seemed to have forgotten to come for him in time, and the dry shell remained moving to live. But how long is it? The movements of the living corpse became more and more sluggish.

He wanted to say something else to Taor, but his language clearly did not obey. Then Ujai raised his good hand to his mouth and bit his own finger. The blood went slowly, there was little of it, as if it had almost dried up inside the body, but it was enough for him to draw a hieroglyph on the wall. Only one. And, probably, he drew it incorrectly, because there was not enough strength for the clarity of the lines. Taor did not know such a sign. You can't read it. And Ujai won't write more. His hand dropped limply.

«Let's go! I will take you to your chambers». Judging by his condition, much cannot be done for him. It is unlikely that he will last long. But you can do at least something to make him a little easier. Experienced doctors are familiar with drugs that help at least forget, if not relieve pain.

«Leave him alone!» The imperious voice made Taor flinch. He was like steel. You won't even hear such notes from commanders in war. The very tone made him obey.

Taor gave up his vain attempts to lift the seriously ill man to his feet and turned around. Before him stood the high priest of Aton himself. No security. No accompanying persons. Well, isn't it amazing.

«He likes to bask in the sun,» Merira nodded at the unfortunate man, as if he were some inanimate object. «After all, the sun is all that we live by now».

«But he's trying to stay in the shadows,» Taor looked back in bewilderment at Ujai, who was hiding in the shadows, entwined with plants, of a column. The hieroglyph inscribed in blood stood out strangely on it.

«Do you know what this man wanted?

«To touch the burning solar disk and not burn out?» Shrugging his shoulders, suggested the young man.

Merira looked at him like he was a complete idiot.

«Destroy you completely. Do you even recognize him?»

«It's hard to recognize him, but it's still him».

«And if he feels good again, he will continue his fight for the first place, and, most likely, he will destroy you, as he intended at the beginning. Do you allow this?»

«Quite. I already had the experience of communicating with him when he was healthy», Taor wanted to turn around again to look at the bloody hieroglyph again, but Merira watched him so closely that it was uncomfortable.

«What kind of person would want to help his worst enemy?»

«The one who sees that he needs a doctor».

«He doesn't need him.» The high priest avoided looking back. «It's too late to do anything».

Taor himself was aware of this, but he could not pass by the person whom no one else helps. He could not understand how, in a palace full of servants and slaves, no one was still concerned about the state of the honored guest, who suddenly became ill.

The priest's hand tugged urgently away.

«Let's go to!»

«But where!»

«If you want to achieve a high position here at court, you shouldn't ask too many questions,» Merira said condescendingly.

«But I don't want to,» Taor admitted honestly.

Merira stopped and looked at him carefully, as if checking to see if there was even a drop of lie in this.

«That's what I wanted to hear,» he admitted unexpectedly.

«Simplicity!» the high priest led him to a strange place, more like the sanctuary of the old gods, located in the recess of the basement of the palace, far from everyone. «Simplicity is exactly what I'm looking for in a person. I need someone like you. Anyone who is not looking for any benefits specifically for himself. Man is higher than all people».

It seems that somewhere between the pillars, painted with hieroglyphs, huge wings, the size of a man, flapped. Taor gazed there. Nowhere else is there a rustle or movement. He gazed up at the low ceilings, still painted with images of Amun, Mut, and Khonsu.

«This room has not yet been redone properly», Merira led him a little forward. «Tell me, have you ever wondered why a previously little-known god suddenly became the only god of Egypt?»

Taor just shrugged.

«I don't know much about anything. It is better to ask me about swords, about fighting techniques, about strategy, about war, about how to defend yourself and protect others, about how to lose as few people as possible in battle and at the same time win. This is an area in which I can answer any question, but everything else is beyond my comprehension».

«For example, why people here, in the palace, are ready, without any threat of war, to gnaw each other's throats in order to make their way a little higher to the sun, that is, to the royal throne...»

«All people have their own desires».

«And they all contradict each other, so you can't make everyone happy. Someone will still become angry with another, who, in their opinion, received more, and intrigue».

«Perhaps the new god will do something to change this».

«Aton!» Merira seemed genuinely amazed.

«Well yes! After all, the sun equally warms everyone with its rays», – Taor remembered a new image of Aton with the royal ureus on his head and rays extending from him. For some reason, these rays looked more like severed human hands than a source of all the warming heat. «When it rises to dispel the darkness, one can believe that its light brings the same benefit to everyone». And evil desires simply do not remain.

He recalled the dawn over the field of his last battle. Before his rays, all the corpses in the darkness seemed to be the same cesspool. The bodies of companions, eaten by vultures, evoked pity, animals that have no name seemed to crawl right out of the ground and tore the flesh of the still living wounded, and dead enemies, who did not rise more painfully, but looked with empty eyes at

the sky, as if beckoning to themselves, demanding only one thing for him to taste their dead flesh. He could hardly resist then. The urge to eat carrion and drink blood was almost unbearable, but the sun rose and it passed.

«Perhaps it's for the best that the sun god is now the only one,» Taor said earnestly.

Why did the high priest of Aton look at him with slight pity, as a man who was deliberately mistaken?

«Do you already know that the Pharaoh is going to move the capital from Thebes to another city?»

«To Memphis?»

«No, to a city that doesn't even exist yet, but construction is about to begin», Merira beckoned him with his hand to papyri with some drawings, casually laid out on a low table. «The city that will be named after Aton. And it will not be like all those cities that you have seen so far. Its population will also not be composed exclusively of people». Merira stopped, as if someone had hit him in the mouth.

«That is, the population of the city will not consist only of Egyptians?»

«Probably,» Merira began to choose his words more carefully. «What if you knew that the sun god would make the city and all of Egypt prosperous for everyone, but it would cost the life of someone special, for example, the winner of a recent war, a hero who has no equal... What if you knew that his blood is so dear to the gods that sacrificing it can buy peace and prosperity for centuries. Would you allow yourself to be sacrificed?

«Everyone dies someday», Taor kept looking around, looking for huge wings, but in vain. «Every time I go into battle, I know there's a better chance that I don't come back alive. So what? Have I given up even one battle? Only people who are weak in consciousness and scoundrels value life. A worthy person should not be afraid of death. Moreover, death is something that inevitably awaits everyone».

«Alas, not everyone remembers this. Many believe that they will live forever like gods...»

Here they are! Again! He heard the rustle of wings. But you can't follow them with your eyes.

«If Aton demands my life, I will give it, without regrets, Taor admitted, «just tell me whether you saw the sun god live, right in front of you or near the king's throne. A living deity with wings, skin glowing with gold, golden eyelashes and hair. To whom, no matter how you, it could have come true, because you are its chief priest».

And silence. Merira was in no hurry to say anything in response.

Taor was still looking around, hoping to spot a winged silhouette somewhere, even though such absent-mindedness was disrespectful to the interlocutor. However, as a mindless warrior, they could forgive him a lot. He often acted ridiculous, but they tried to ignore it.

«Pharaoh ordered to show you special honors», the high priest remembered very aptly. «They say that what you did there, in the deserts, far from Egypt, means a lot to all of us. Before you, others were sent there who did not cope and died. Have you seen their remains there?»

«No,» Taor tried to remember exactly. «Some of the attackers took off military clothing from the corpses and continued to fight in it, obviously to confuse us».

«Savages», stated Merira. «But you better not tell anyone about their antics. Your ill-wishers may decide that you deliberately finished off still living competitors».

«How competitors can be those who are fighting on your side?»

«Trust me, they can always».

Taor wanted to ask again about the golden deity, but he could hardly restrain himself and said nothing. Merira probably heard his first question as well. If the priest wants, he will answer. He cannot know nothing about Alais. But instead of her, he tried to draw the young man's attention to the scattered drawings on papyrus.

«All those temples of Aton that are being built now in all the cities of Egypt, it seems, are few», he stated. «In Memphis, in Heliopolis, in Fayum, in Hermopolis, in Gemm-Aton, here in Thebes. Throughout the temple for her».

For her!? Taor frowned. Could he have misheard? He could well, given that he was not listening carefully. All this did not bother him much; he wanted to talk about something completely different. Even Ujai, although a little insane, gave out much more information than this secretive priest. Merira tried to talk about many things, but about nothing. He seemed to be waiting for the initiative from Taor himself, trying to push him into something.

«And now this new city, where a temple called «House of Aton» is already being built. It is being built amazingly quickly. We can say that construction is advancing above human strength. The city is growing as if from under the sand, and the plans of other builders and temples for other gods are all destroyed», Merira hesitated a little, as if pondering how much to say now. «The city will be located north of Thebes, it will be called the Horizon of Aton, Akhetaton. And that's all, the only god of all things will live there forever and begin to accumulate strength in order to manage all the lands from there, both those that we already own and those that we will own. Both Upper and Lower Egypt, united into one, and possessing numerous provinces, as a result, will become too small for the new god, and he will take over the whole world.

«Is it bad?» Taor could not understand whether Merira was offering him some honorary position in an unfinished city or sending him to conquer new territories.

«Everyone who thought it was bad...» Merira hesitated. «You know, I'm not the first high priest of Aton, since this shining god took over all Egypt under his rule, before me there were others. There are records of Tutu, my predecessor...»

Merira, looking around nervously, beckoned the young man to follow him and pointed to a chain of inscriptions that streaked one wall. Taor only had time to read the first lines.

«The massacre of the unwanted...» this slightly alerted him, and then he noticed in the center the very hieroglyph that Ujai had recently drawn with blood. He didn't know how to read it. The hieroglyph stood out clearly among the others, and seemed to erase the meaning of everything.

«What does it mean?» Taor turned to his interlocutor.

«Well, how can I tell you...» Merira was extremely careful, as if the walls themselves could overhear their conversation. «Not everyone liked to abandon old traditions, sacrifice their churches and positions. Different gods gave much more opportunities for different people than if everything belongs to someone alone and only he should be worshiped, to make sacrifices, both bloody and symbolic. Those whose temples were rich from the offerings to Set, Horus, Mut, Osiris and many other gods at first opposed. But she brutally suppresses resistance...»

«He», found the strength to correct Taor, noticing between the columns a new image of Aton with the royal uraeus and rays pulling down like severed human hands.

The priest seemed to have been hit.

«You know, they say that the gods are actually sexless,» he said apologetically.

«I've never heard of such a thing.» Taor's black eyebrows furrowed painfully. «I didn't want to ask about the gods at all,» he turned to the wall, «but about this symbol».

All you had to do was poke your finger in the middle, where the hieroglyph was located, a little larger in size than all the others, but it was no longer there. He could not crawl away like a scarab. The young man looked in bewilderment at the place where the sign had just been. It seemed that all the hieroglyphs were now sprinkled with something brown, like crushed cloves or caked blood. There is just little light and little air. Taor felt a little dizzy. Then he clearly discerned the flapping of wings in the silence.

«Is there anyone here besides us?»

«Not likely», the high priest said with pressure, and nevertheless looked around warily, as if expecting some witness to follow them. «You probably get bored away from people. You're used to being with the army all the time».

«I'm not complaining about anything. Since I returned from the war, here in the palace everything has changed a lot, not even the setting, the atmosphere itself. At first it was strange, but now I began to like it here, as if I was finally at home».

«But others would give everything to escape from here, but in essence there is nowhere to run. Changes, like an infection, spread from the capital to all distant corners, and then outside the country».

Taor was not afraid of change and did not intend to oppose them like those about whom the warning notes were made. Firstly, he would never and in no way oppose the decree of the pharaoh, because, in fact, the ruler sitting on the throne is the only god for his people, only he has the right to give orders, say what is right and what is not, the lot of subjects is to obey him. It is not for nothing that the ruler of Egypt is revered as the representative of the gods on earth. Secondly, the young man was not particularly religious. The gods in various temples, no matter how many there were, existed for him as something self-evident, but inanimate. People worshiped them, brought gifts to the priests, performed rituals, but all this was more like a background surrounding the true power, not divine, but royal. The more Taor was amazed when he saw in the palace a living creature, similar to the deity that believers can only describe in words. There weren't even such statues. Deity incarnate. Taor did not know with whom or with what to compare him.

«Have you ever been in love?»

The priest's question surprised him.

«I don't remember that,» Taor admitted honestly.

«Then it's strange how a young man like you, who's not curious about anything but martial arts, can act so generously.

Taor stared at him blankly.

«On the day when you were honored as a winner, you gave the impression of a lover who is ready to give up all awards for the sake of one specific object or at least his attention», the priest wisely explained.

«Nothing like that,» Taor turned sharply over his shoulder. Again he heard wings flapping somewhere.

«Explain this to me: you return with victory and spoils of war, you can ask for wealth, for your own advancement to the very top, even for the hand of the princess, if you wish, but... in the moment of your glory, you tried to trample yourself, asked for which you could only be punished – for the benefit for others, for your own enemies, to be honest».

«So what?» Taor was sincerely surprised. Why return again and again to the events of days gone by? They didn't bother him anymore. He got his request granted.

«A normal person could understand you if, say, you were so delighted with all the women who were taken away to the full that you decided to take them to your harem without sharing with anyone».

«I don't have my own harem».

«And you don't even want to have it?»

«So far I have managed».

«Why not?»

«I believe that abstinence strengthens the will. Physical passions make people weak. The worst of all warriors are those who seek the attention of whores at night».

«But now it's not a war, you could relax».

«I prefer to keep in shape».

«You're the only one here,» said Merira pointedly. «All other people I know behave differently. Many people like both girls and boys. You're pretty handsome. The royal daughters were staring at you. Do you want to know in what words they praised you?»

«No», Taor wanted to ask more about the golden creature, which he saw first in the throne room, and then at the eerie night festival, but is it reasonable to start this topic again if he has not already been answered. «And Akhenaten does not have another adult daughter, whom I have not yet been introduced?»

«Well, if we talk about children lost in a harem, then there are dozens, even hundreds... without the grace of Pharaoh, they are nothing».

«So maybe he decided suddenly to elevate one of them? Or did he have another royal wife, no older than his daughters?»

«What made you think like that?»

«I...» Taor for some reason did not want to confess directly. «Suddenly the choice of a new god must be strengthened by the choice of a new wife, even more radiant than everyone that came before her. Match the sun god».

«This is a clever thought,» Merira paid tribute. «But I'm afraid that the Pharaoh is not interested in women at all: neither the queen, nor the girls from the harem, nor mere mortals».

«So what is he interested in me because someone called my face attractive?»

«Believe me, if Akhenaten were suddenly interested in young men, it would certainly be you,» something in the priest's honey-flowing voice suggested that it was not empty praise. «You see, you are a little like a certain guest who once visited here a long time ago and disappeared forever. But our ruler cannot forget him to this day. Although the resemblance is very distant, you probably remind him of that friend».

«So, therefore, my request was immediately executed, and I myself remained a guest here. In memory of someone I don't know».

«Not really,» Merira carefully took him by the elbow and pointed in the direction of the exit. «We shouldn't stay here long. Besides, you have become too pale, you need fresh air».

Taor felt it himself, his throat squeezed like a stranglehold, as if someone's thin fingers were choking him. This is all from the stale air, he thought to himself, but the feeling of someone's presence near him was truly oppressive. As he left, the young man carefully looked around. The symbols of the old gods were all not scraped off the walls and columns, their clay figures were not removed, and the sculpture with wings in the distance did not depict any of the gods known to him at all. So who was it then? Taor rushed there to look, but the priest's hand held him with unexpected strength. At the first moment, the young man was taken aback, he did not even suspect that the old man still had so much strength.

«Who is it?» He breathed into the void.

«Never mind!»

«I don't know the name of this god».

«This is just a fantasy of an insane sculptor who died long ago. And not God, and not Pharaoh, and not anyone from the royal house. Just an idol».

«I would like to take a closer look».

«Not worth it! He's not here for long. And my advice to you, if you see him elsewhere in the palace, at any new place, just walk by, do not look closely at him, do not linger around».

«I liked him».

«Not for you alone».

Merira, as promised, took him out into the fresh air, using some other entrance than the one through which they had come. From this, the royal palace suddenly began to resemble a labyrinth to Taor. There were so many entrances and exits, connected by a complex of passages and galleries that invariably led to new gardens or huge halls. The pond was the center of every garden, in which the blue lotuses, formerly a sacred plant, bloomed. Is it still sacred now that the gods have disappeared? Freshness emanated from the flowers and water, but the weight of the invisible stranglehold around his neck did not wane.

«A drowned woman was recently found in this pond. They say that the freshness of death comes from water».

Why did the priest tell him this? Taor did not understand, but the pond really gave the impression of a very cold place, in a garden where unbearable heat reigned. The walls of the arches nearby were hot, and the pond looked like liquid ice.

Apple and peach trees grew all around. Taor suddenly noticed a ripe red fruit being plucked from a branch by a golden claw. Drowsiness and fatigue immediately disappeared. He looked at the lush treetops here and there, but no longer noticed any movement.

The garden seemed to be teeming with snakes, although they were not visible. Although a slithering body glowed in the grass, it was bright gold. Are snakes gold? Real snakes, not those that were dreamed of. Taor watched the bright golden beam.

«Do you have friends here at court?» suddenly asked him Merira.

«Just one,» he meant Prince Smenkhkara.

«And those people from the wild tribe, whom you decided to save life, you most likely do not even know by name».

It was more of a statement than a question, but Taor nodded anyway. He did not even know their language and, naturally, could not ask them about their name. There were no translators on the road either. The strange, hissing adverb turned out to be very rare, and it was somewhat frightening. From what he said later, his ears ached.

«You have spared unusual people. They are not like the Egyptians».

«Many tribes and peoples are not like us, take at least the people of Nubia with their dark skin. Nevertheless, the Nubians are now guarding us, standing with halberds at many of the doors of the palace».

«But those recent prisoners with their earthy skin tones... I think they need protection from themselves,» the priest expressed fears.

Taor also saw at the feast how greedily they grabbed food with their claws and pounced on the raw meat of fallow deer and antelope in the kitchen. He attributed this temporary madness to the horrors of war. What peaceful person does not lose his mind from them?

«They will recover over time and will behave like all people,» he tried to justify their behavior.

«And those who didn't behave like people from the very beginning,» Merira reminded carefully. «I mean the man who attacked you on the day you returned. The senior vizier expresses fears, he believes that by encroaching on you, this man insulted the Pharaoh himself, because on that day, as a winner, you represented his greatness and the greatness of his people. The perpetrator can no longer be forgiven. But if you know that asking for his pardon will cost you your own life, you will say it anyway».

«Yes», Taor carefully looked at the priest, he seemed to be testing him.

«But why? What are the others to you? Why are you willing to forget about yourself for the mercy of people you don't even know?»

Taor thought for a second. He didn't know it himself.

«It's just so right,» he said, and immediately someone pressed against his face and looked straight into his eyes, for so long and deeply that it became scary. For just a second, something inhuman and invisible pressed against him, but this second seemed like an eternity. And that's all. No one else is around. Except for the old priest.

Taor sighed as if it were the last breath of his life. Something just happened. Something that irreversibly changed everything. And he could not even understand what it was. But he saw in the rays of the sun a figure with wings at the far arch of the garden. The smooth wall next to her now seemed like a kind of entrance to who knows where. The winged creature collected all the sunlight on itself. It shone. The left hand moved smoothly and drew some unidentified symbol high on the wall – the

same hieroglyph, the meaning of which Taor did not know. And again it was written in blood. But not with the blood of Alais. A headless rattlesnake fluttered in her hands.

Sacrifice yourself

Taor saw her for just a moment, and again emptiness. It was as if an arch, entwined with olive branches, was always empty, but the crushed body of a snake lay under it. It was useless to ask Merira what the symbol inscribed in blood meant. The priest pretended not to see anything. Or he really didn't see anything. Taor suddenly became suspicious. Previously, he was never so wary, even in war, when an outbreak of camp could be attacked at any moment and from any end. There he trusted his sentinels, as well as his own hearing and sensitivity, in case the sentries were cut. Here, in the palace, he suddenly realized that he could not trust anyone, not even himself. After all, even one's own sight, hearing and senses can deceive. He sees what seems to be not. Hears strange hissing sounds from behind, which no one hears except him. He sees a creature that looks like a deity, which everyone worship at night, but about which no one dares to speak out loud during the day, as if he does not exist at all.

What's going on? Intoxicated people forget about the night festivities and sacrifices in the morning? Or has a certain etiquette been introduced, because of which it is impossible to talk about it?

It would be nice to quietly leave the palace at night and walk along the night streets of the city to see what is happening there. In addition, maybe some of the ordinary townspeople will be more talkative. You will need to ask them around. Or, perhaps it is best to take a time and go to the temple of Aton, bring offerings and ask everything from the most silent deity. Suddenly it will be alive.

Taor tried to read their thoughts on the faces of the palace inhabitants. They all looked like deliberately calm masks. It was impossible to determine what emotions were hidden behind them. No facial expressions, no worries. Guests, courtiers, officials, priests – all looked as impassive as the guards at the entrances and exits of the palace. They, in fact, did not hide anything, they just avoided talking on one specific topic.

Taor sensed fear. He knew this feeling well. Over the battlefield, it often hung like a cloud, especially where they finished off the wounded and drove away the prisoners. Where it was decided to live in agony further or die right now. He knew the look of horror in the eyes of those who were about to be overtaken by a smashing blow and nothing could be done. All this was very familiar to him in bloody battles.

Here, in the luxurious setting of the palace, the fear was somehow even more palpable than on the field of the ending battle with all its bloody losses.

Internally, all these people shuddered, outwardly they behaved amazingly calm.

Taor was already thinking about how it would be better to get out of the palace tonight, when he suddenly noticed that Panahesi, anxious about something, was hurrying towards them. His white robes with gold trim fluttered as he walked. There was a scroll in his hand. Taor had a feeling that the grand vizier had long sought him. Could Merira deliberately arrange for their meeting? Somehow, very inappropriately, they ran into him. Taor himself did not want to meet with a long-time ill-wisher, but he had to. He was already prepared for the fact that now a stream of stern speeches would pour out on him.

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