

THE
100TH
GENERATION

THE IBIS PROPHECY BOOK ONE

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PROLOGUE:
ORIGINAL SIN

Pharaoh wept in his sleep. Everywhere before his burning eyes the beasts, the winds and waters, and the hills cried out. Pitiless, the Sun Disk rose and smote them, rendering them dumb. Then Seth, iron-eyed guardian of the light, loosed his spear upon the vanquished.

But lo, a humble priest stepped forward, an amulet in his hand, and the spear blade shattered into sparks upon it. Gathering the sparks with the power of his breath, he sucked them in—and spat them out again as words. “*Khetet! Rekhi renusen. Djedi medjatsen,*” blazed into the air and faded.

Pharaoh Meremptah awoke, clutching the bed cloth to his pounding heart. To his chamberlain he called, “Light the torches. Summon the court!” He rose in the darkness, donned the immaculate ceremonial kilt, and strode to the Great Hall. There he sat upon his throne, white-lipped and shaken, while his court assembled.



Roused betimes from his sleep, the priest Rekemheb dressed quickly while Pharaoh’s messenger waited before his door.

His wife, disquieted, stood by him. “Why does the god-king summon you so early?” she asked, laying on his wide collar of lapis lazuli and tying it in the back. “The light will not come for hours.”

The priest looked at his children—the girl, with ochre-stained fingers curled in a fist, and the boy smiling even in his sleep—and his heart was light. “It will have something to do with the New Year ceremonies, I am sure. Be sure to wake the children in time for the dawn.”

He embraced his wife with brief tenderness. "Be full of joy today, as I am full of joy for you," he whispered. Then he turned away and hastened with the messenger along the still-dark streets to the palace. To his surprise, the doors to the Great Hall were thrown open and the court stood in attendance. Palace guards stepped to his side and escorted him down the center aisle to the throne. Bewildered, he fell to his knees at the feet of the god-king, his hands raised and open in the gesture of adoration.

Pharaoh leaned forward on his golden stool. "The gods have given me a vision this night and have revealed their chosen one. I speak his name: Rekemheb, Priest of the Temple of Hathor." Taking up a wide pectoral ornament from the hands of a servant, Pharaoh placed its chain over the bowed head. "This is the sign of thy sacred office. Go now with this on thy heart to prepare for the Opening of the New Year."

Rekemheb glanced up for the briefest moment at Pharaoh's face and caught his breath. Where he had expected strength, he saw fear.

He rose with lowered head and backed down the length of the throne room, eyes searching among the courtiers for explanation. He saw only surprise and confusion to match his own. At the door, the priest turned and hurried along the corridor. At each of the red-painted columns, braziers of burning oil cast trembling semicircles of light upon the stone. Guards stepped aside to let him pass.

As Rekemheb came to the great pylons that fronted the royal palace, he stopped at the last brazier. Drawing the chain over his head, he held the filigree gold plaque toward the flame and studied its sparkling images. At the center stood the sacred Balance weighing the heart of a man, witnessed by the gods of the underworld. Around the periphery, in shallow relief, the forty-two Judges sat enclosed in a vulture's wings. The priest's hand shook, for he held in jeweled miniature the entry into death.

"You do well to tremble, Hathor Priest," a voice said, startling him. He turned to see a man, hook nosed and gaunt, standing in the shadows. The long palette and reed case of a scribe hung from his shoulder.

"I do not know you, sir, nor that whereof you speak," Rekemheb said courteously. He drew the chain over his head again, pulling his priestly side lock up through it.

"But I know you," the scribe replied, holding his palette to his hip like a weapon. "And I will tell your story."

"My story? Of being chosen for the Rebirth of the Year?"

"Of being chosen for the rebirth of the gods. It is a great honor, and you will die for it. Yet a child of your line will bring you forth into the

world again in the hundredth generation. Then you shall be witness to these things: the Balance, the Book, and the bearing of the Child. This is our hope against the Aton, rising in the west.”

“The Aton? But the Sun Disk cult is gone. Its priests are scattered. Surely—”

The scribe laid the tip of a bony finger on the amulet. “Hold fast to this. It is the prophecy.”

Rekemheb stood speechless as the scribe faded into the shadows and then, bemused, he descended the wide steps of the palace. The dawning city was still quiet, for every man was in his house preparing for the New Year festival. The Dog Star had appeared, and in the east, the molten sun cast the street in a comforting orange glow.

Then he saw them, stepping out from behind the granary. Two men armed with spears, and a third one who ought to have been banished along with his usurper god. The Priest of Aton glared at him with iron hatred in his eyes.

Rekemheb bolted, drawing his pursuers away from his house and family. His heart aching, he ran through alleys, along mud-brick walls, over heaps of refuse in the streets.

White-hot, the spear blade pierced his back, throwing him onto the dusty ground. He opened his mouth, desperate to inhale, but no air came. He felt only the searing, nauseating pain of the metal tearing upward through his flesh as the spear shaft fell. He lay paralyzed and choking, and he tasted the frothy blood filling his mouth. Dread hissed over him like locusts as with dying eyes he watched the scorching sun disk rise.

CHAPTER I:
GOD IS GREAT

A *aallllaaaaahh uakbar!*” The faint whining cry of the muezzin that drifted toward them in the darkness told them the city was near.

“*Aaallaaahh uakbar!*” It came again along the breeze as, reluctantly, Valerie Foret slowed her camel. Unbeliever that she was, she had always loved the first call to prayer, imagining bearded muezzins summoning the faithful through cupped hands from atop their minarets. Now she resented it, for it brought them to a halt. She stopped the moment Ahmed did and sat impatiently while his honking camel broke first at the front and then at the hind legs and he dismounted.

The excavation foreman unrolled the prayer rug he kept on his saddle and stepped out of his sandals. Scooping up handfuls of the limestone sand, he purified his hands and feet and turned eastward. “*Bismillah Arrahman Arraheem.*” With open hands cupped to his ears, he began.

Valerie rode a respectful dozen meters farther on, annoyed. She tapped with her knuckles on her knee, recalling the forced rosaries of her childhood. *Ave Marie...Mère de Dieu.* Oh hell. They should have been in Giza by now, instead of a kilometer away from the pyramids. She could see them now in the increasing light, the great tombs of Khufu, Khephren, and Menkaure. In the predawn sky that silhouetted them, they had a majesty they would lack the rest of the day, when the plateau would be crawling with tourists and vendors. Now, mute black monuments to an ancient faith, they towered over the new one.

Restlessly, she laid her booted foot over the crosspiece of the saddle, brushing off the powdery sand that had collected in the folds of her trousers. She took off her hat and rubbed her gritty scalp. Six

months in the sun had lightened her brown hair at the edges and tanned her like a farmer, from her elbows to her hands. She fidgeted. So close, and so much to be done. Derek. She had so much to tell him. Things that would knock him over. And Jameela. Yes, Jameela. She tried to moisten dry lips but had no saliva.

“*Y’alla bina!*” Her foreman was suddenly beside her, brushing sand from the tail of his turban. “You will wish to return to the site right away, I think. I will get supplies today and have camels ready to go tonight.”

“I wish we could, Ahmed, but we can’t leave for two days. As for the provisions, I will get a few things at the souq, but I depend on you for the rest. I have people to visit and an opera to see.”

“Opera?” A slight drawing together of his thick gray eyebrows indicated his astonishment. “You stay two days to see an opera?”

“I know that delays us for another day, but the singer is like a brother to me, and I missed his last visit here.” She looked over toward Ahmed’s leathery, avuncular face, which had grown familiar in the months of the project. “Besides, he’s performing *Orpheus*, about a man who visits the underworld. A good omen for an Egyptologist, don’t you think? By the way, you will need to hire another camel. He’s coming back with us.”

“An opera singer in the desert,” the Egyptian replied with studied neutrality. “Very good.”

Squinting in the half-light, she barely heard him. Giza, finally, had come into sight, a wide gray-brown stain behind the pyramids. She tapped her camel lightly with her goad, urging the tired beast to move a little faster. She felt excitement growing, in spite of her fatigue.

Soon the travelers arrived at the west façade of Menkaure, desert-most of the pyramids. Without looking up, Valerie sensed the edifice that filled space above them, rendering them trivial. Lines of men and boys swarmed toward them, peddlers with their sacks of postcards and plaster sphinxes. “*As salaamu ’alaykum.*”

“*Wa ’alaykum as salaam.*” They passed through them to the next phalanx of “guides” who recited a mélange of facts and fictions about the tombs, and the stablemen, who for a few pounds would snap a photo of a foreigner sitting bravely on one of their emaciated horses. She tapped her camel with her goad again, urging it faster. She hated what the site had become. There was more refuse on the ground now—soda cans and plastic water bottles and countless cigarette butts.

At Khufu she could see Giza clearly under a gray morning haze, its apartment blocks and sooty squalor encroaching like lava upon the pyramids. "It's a pity," she said to her companion. "Egypt swallows up its own history."

"There will be more history, Doctor. God is ever telling His story."

Valerie shrugged. "The Egyptians trust too much in God and too little in themselves, I think."

"*Imshii!*" A rock flew out of nowhere and thudded against her camel. The snorting beast danced sideways, and she spun around to see a boy with a sling hanging open from his hand. She thought, absurdly, of the biblical David.

"Uh!" A second stone slammed into the side of her head. Stunned, she swayed blindly on the saddle, raising her hand to her ear. Bright pain radiated through her head; infantile fears, jagged pieces of memory like shattered glass, showered down on her. Confinement, hard hands thrashing her, a stone floor rising up to meet her. "*Maman,*" the child had whimpered uselessly.

Then sight returned.

As she tottered, a bearded man sprang upward at her, his eyes bright with rectitude. She raised both arms against him, but he seized the cloth of her shirt, yanking her forcefully toward him. She toppled from the high saddle into his arms, and they fell together onto the sand. Furious, she rolled away from him, rose to her knees, and snatched her pistol from her holster. Ahmed, somehow dismounted, threw himself at a second man. A few meters away, peddlers had a third man on the ground.

Panting, Valerie struggled to her feet, still pointing her trembling pistol at her attacker, who had not risen from the ground.

He stared at her, composed, his glance intense, intimate. "You insult God," he snarled, "and your punishment will come."

Her finger tightened on the trigger.

From behind her a small hand reached out and touched her wrist. Dark fingers with milky white nails pressed gently into her skin. "Do not," a woman's voice said softly.

Valerie lowered her arm without taking her eyes from the attacker.

"Lady." A uniformed soldier suddenly stood in front of her, huffing, his carbine across his chest. "You knowing these men?"

Behind him, other soldiers reached into the roil of men and pulled them apart.

“No. Of course not. I am an archaeologist.” She replied in Arabic, to his obvious relief, and pointed toward her foreman. “And this man is my *rayis*. He will confirm that we have just come in from Ghard Abu Sennan, where we are working. With government permission.” She laid her free hand on her shirt pocket, suggesting the letter was there.

“Yes, Captain.” Ahmed nodded to the soldier, who was clearly not an officer. “We have just come from the desert and know nothing of these men. But now, as you can see, the lady is injured and we must hurry into Giza.”

“Yes, of course. Then it is the fanatics. They have been causing trouble at the tourist places. But don’t worry. These will not bother you again.”

“*Y’alla bina!*” he shouted at his men, who fast-marched the three bloodied attackers and the boy toward the causeway. Twisting in the grip of a gendarme half again his size, the bearded one turned back for a moment, his expression unreadable.

Valerie cupped her right hand over the throbbing wound on her cheek.

“Are you all right, Doctor?” Ahmed took hold of the rein and couched the camel so she could remount.

Valerie looked down and realized she still held the grip of the holstered pistol. She let it go finally, flexing her cramped fingers at her side. “My God. I almost shot him, Ahmed. I almost shot a man. This woman stopped me.”

Shielding her eyes against the light of the sun, she turned around to see who had stayed her hand.

She recoiled. A vulture hulked on the lowest block of the pyramid swinging its leathery head left and right, as if noting the outcome of the incident. Savage eyes watched her for a moment, and then the beast unfolded its wings. Black feather-fingers opened at the tips as the creature hopped awkwardly off the block. Within inches of the ground, the wings beat laborious strokes, drawing its mass slowly upward. Finally the creature gained height and banked in a wide arc over the desert.

“I am sorry for this, Doctor. The extremists cry out against foreigners but they are ignorant. They do not speak for Egypt.”

“I know that.” She gingerly touched the cut on her cheek, frowning down at the blood on her fingertips. “I wonder who does.”

Leaving the desert plateau for Giza proper, they made their way southward along the dirt road that paralleled the highway. At the familiar side path, they turned into the squalid patch that was Younis’s stables, and she braced herself for the onslaught to her senses. That she had a headache and an open cut on her cheek did not help.

“Dr. Foret! *Ahlan wa sahlan!*” Rajab called out to her as he came from the stable with a bucket of what seemed to be fresh manure. His brother turned from the water urn by the roadside where he was splashing water on his face and waved as well. She waved back, touched by the boy’s warmth. They were motherless, she knew; Younis’s wife had died of some infection or other, and the family toiled, like millions of the Egyptian working class, in grinding poverty. She wished for the thousandth time that her university budget allowed for an act of charity.

Farther away, a third boy, still a young child, urinated into the center of an automobile tire. The tire, she noted, was one of several leading toward the taxi-garage a half a kilometer down the highway. Its sooty little black-and-white Ladas buzzed past every few minutes on the road behind her.

At the far corner of the property, but not nearly far enough, a square marked out with rocks held the stable’s accumulation of dung. In the early morning its stench was tolerable, but the blanket of flies that swarmed up as Rajab emptied his bucket reminded her why she never stayed long at the stable. Today least of all.

The two dismounted by the side of the stable, and Valerie shifted her knapsack from the camel’s back to her own. She patted all her pockets to make sure she had everything.

Younis emerged from the stable doorway. A man who ought to have been portly at his age, he was instead merely swollen at the middle, his arms and legs still spindly. The bales of hay along the stable wall did not stop him from smoking, and he took the cigarette from his mouth to smile at her with tobacco-colored teeth.

“*As salaamu ’alaykum*, Younis.” She brushed away flies.

“*Wa ’alaykum as salaam*, Dr. Foret.” He took the reins of her camel with one hand and raised the other in a friendly salute rather than shake her hand. She was relieved.

“Take good care of our girls here, Younis. Give them some extra food, a little fruit too maybe. They’ve been hard workers the whole time we’ve had them, and we’ll be taking them out again in two days.”

“Yes, Dr. Foret. Extra fruit. But when they see how fat you keep them, my other camels will stage a rebellion.”

“Then feed them too.” She laughed. “And put it on our bill.”

She turned around to her foreman and pressed a bundle of currency into his hand. “You have the list of supplies for the excavation? Good. This should cover the expenses here and the purchases. I’ll meet you here at dusk in two days. If I need to, can I phone you at Sammad’s?”

“Yes, Dr. Foret. I will be ready. But now, please see to that wound.”

“I’ll be fine, Ahmed. Really, it’s nothing. In two days, then.” She shook his hand, adjusted her knapsack, and set off on the way back to the road. She badly needed a shower, a good meal, and some attention, she thought, and her pace quickened from a walk to a jog. As she hurried toward the taxi-garage, the two sensations came at once, confusing her: the ominous throbbing in her battered ear and the delicious anticipation of Jameela.