

# Shabtis



***A Tale of Myth, Magic & Domination***

**By Freddie Clegg**

**Cover Picture:** Shabti of Yuya (mother of Queen Tiye, wife of Pharaoh Amenhotep III) from tomb KV46, circa 1390 – 1352BCE, now in the Metropolitan Museum, New York and on display at Met Fifth Avenue. Inscribed with Chapter 6 of the Book of the Dead.

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Not suitable for those under the age of 18.

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## About This Tale

Almost one hundred years ago, in November 1922, Howard Carter opened the tomb of Tutankhamun in the Valley of the Kings near Luxor in Egypt. The tomb had lain largely undisturbed since the death of the king in or about 1325BCE. (I've used the term BCE – 'Before the Common Era' rather than the BC that I grew up with in deference to modern academic practice.) Carter's discovery triggered a wave of fascination in ancient Egypt that has in many ways continued until today; a fascination that I share and that contributes to this tale.

Parts of the following story are set in ancient Egypt at the time of the rule of Queen Cleopatra VII, twelve hundred years after Tutankhamun's reign. Cleopatra was the last of the Greek dynasty of Pharaohs that ruled Egypt after its conquest by Alexander the Great. She was the last\* in a line of pharaohs that stretched back almost 3000 years.

At that time Egypt - or the Kingdom of the Two Lands as it was known - was divided up into a series of administrative areas or Nomes, each ruled over by the pharaoh's representative, a Nomarch.

The story starts in Busiris, a town in the delta region of the River Nile, on the Damietta branch, close to the modern village of Abu Sir Banna. The action moves between there, Alexandria and Oxford in the UK.

The story includes reference to Isis, one of the goddesses of Egypt who (among many other roles) protected women and children as goddess of life and magic. In Egyptian myth, Isis defended her husband/brother (apparently they had begun their relationship in the womb) Osiris, recovering the pieces of his body after he was dismembered and scattered by his scheming brother Seth, and fashioning a replacement penis for the part she could not find because it had been eaten by a crocodile. This allowed Osiris to be reborn as ruler of the underworld and protector of the dead and enabled Isis's son Horus to gain his rightful inheritance. It also touches on the concept of Ma'at; the Egyptian sense of order. Maintaining Ma'at was an important aspect of Egyptian life. Ma'at personified was the goddess of truth, justice and wisdom and a defender against chaos.

There are mentions of some real people in this story (Howard Carter, Lady Evelyn Beauchamp née Herbert, her husband Brograve, Lord Carnarvon and Harry Burton). Some but not all of the actions ascribed to them are real. Their motivations and thoughts are all imaginary.

The modern day story involves around a researcher studying the figures known as shabtis (pronounced "shab-tees"). Most of what I say about them and their significance to ancient Egyptian culture is true. The Griffith Institute, Sackler Library, the Jericho district of Oxford and Ashmolean Museum are all real places. The museum where Angela works and her colleagues are all figments of my furtive imagination, as are all the inhabitants of Busiris.

I have tried to be accurate in historical matters, however this is fiction. There are some notes at the end if you want to explore things further. This tale may, however, make you wonder about the stories behind some of the objects in museums; stories that may not always be displayed on the labels of their cases.

But you probably don't really need to know all that.....

\*Unless you count the two weeks or so that her son, Caesarion, ruled technically between her suicide and his assassination by Octavian (Augustus) at the end of August 30BCE.

## Chapter 1: Busiris - 45BCE

The townspeople of Busiris busied themselves with the day's work, the exchanges of gossip and the observances of custom and ritual that were the common round of existence in their prosperous community beside the Nile. The low, whitewashed mud brick buildings, where most of the populace lived, provided cool shade. Public buildings including fine temples in bright limestone, monumental statuary and impressive obelisks set up in public squares gave a sense of splendour. The markets were noisy with livestock and the streets pungent with the smell of donkey dung. The inhabitants, for the most part, carried themselves proudly as citizens of the birthplace of Osiris, god of the underworld. Their home might be far from the great centres of power at Thebes, Heliopolis and Alexandria but it was still renowned throughout the country.

Nofret, eldest daughter of Ity, the Chief Scribe of the 9<sup>th</sup> Andjety Nome in the Kingdom of the Two Lands, leaned back on a gilded wooden chair. She was sitting under a fine white canopy held aloft on ebony poles. The canopy shaded her from the fierceness of the Egyptian sun. Her arms were resting on the sculpted forms of Nubian lions. She was wearing a long, white, kalisiris robe that clung to her body more tightly than would normally be considered proper for everyday wear. With her brightly beaded usekh collar, her jet-black wig with its centre parting evoking the style of the time of the pyramid builders, and her proud posture – a legacy in part of her Nubian heritage - she presented an intimidating figure, looking almost as though she had stepped out of a carving on a temple wall.

In front of Nofret, two naked men crouched with their heads to floor, bowed in worship, inches from her feet and not daring even to glance up as far as the golden straps of her sandals. Nofret sat impassively, enjoying their veneration. She took particular delight from the fact that these were not slaves. To earn the devotion of a slave was hardly an achievement. What choice did they have? No, these men were freeborn and high born too – one the son of the Nomarch himself, the other a prince of a foreign power. And yet worship her was what they did.

Of course, Nofret had a little help. Even with the beauty she undoubtedly possessed – her name itself meant 'beautiful' - it was not easy to inspire such extreme adoration. She held no rank that would compel a man to behave so. She was not wealthy, certainly such as she had was not enough to inspire fawning behaviour like this. Her help was from the gods themselves.

She looked down at the ring she wore on her first finger. It was solid gold, the gift of Queen Cleopatra a few years before. It was a token of affection and a remembrance of a bawdy night when the two girls had shared wine and lovers. "This ring was endowed with its power by Isis herself," the queen had said. "As Isis gathered up the fragments of Osiris's body so shall the wearer of this ring control the manhood of any that she chooses."

Nofret had chosen many. She had always enjoyed the company of men, especially where their attention was directed to her sexual pleasure. She took delight in using the suppleness of her body to accentuate her own stimulation. More than that, she found excitement in men sexually submitting to her. And somehow, since she had been given the ring, she found it easy to compel them to obey her. She took gratification from the act of bending them to her will and the extent to which she could have them debase themselves. It seemed the ring both gave her the power to do it and drove her to use the power too. She looked down at them men cowering in the dust, thinking they were like scarab beetles pushing the dung ball of the sun across the heavens. Their denigration served to demonstrate her greatness.

Nofret wondered if the queen had a ring of her own. Perhaps that accounted for the bewitching of the Roman, Caesar. She could be admired for that. Whether it was pleasure or political expediency none could say but her actions, even bearing the Roman's child, were keeping the Kingdom safe from the attentions of

Caesar's legions better than an army of men ever could have. It was a clear testimony to the way in which a woman could have power over men.

Nofret clicked her fingers. The two men, knowing the signal and fearful of the consequences of not responding swiftly, obediently got to their knees. She beckoned to her household servant, instructing her to bind the men tightly; fixing their arms behind their backs in the manner of captives of war.

Nofret smiled as the men seemed unable to resist the girl under the cool stare from Nofret's kohl-rimmed eyes. Her servant pushed the men forward, forcing their lips down against Nofret's sandled feet. Neither of the men dared stare up at Nofret nor even look at the servant girl.

Nofret was delighted at the way the men were cowed by her power. Even this foreign prince could not resist the influence of Isis, it would seem. She was amused by the way that the arrogance shown by so many men, seen every day in the streets around the town, in the temples and in the markets was rendered as nothing by the power of the goddess.

Another click of the fingers and her servant brought out a crook and flail, replicas of the ones carried as signs of authority by the pharaohs themselves, symbols of the husbandry of animals and the threshing of grain for bread.

Nofret hooked the crook around the neck of the man nearest to her, dragging him close to her. As she beat him with the flail she could feel his gasps of pain and the bucking of his agonised body through the thin linen of her robe, driving her own lusts to a greater pitch.

The other man, the foreigner, looked on in wondering and fearful anticipation, knowing that once she had satiated herself and discarded the first, she would come for him. It was hard for him to express how transgressive this felt – the use of royal symbols for this purpose was unthinkable – but it was certain Nofret intended the same fate for him, and that he could not avoid it.

## Chapter 2: Oxford - 2021

In the quiet of the Anstruther Museum's laboratory, Angela Baxter, research assistant, was working on her post-graduate project. She was peering through a magnifying glass at a small figurine. She put it down carefully. It was a small mummy-shaped statuette, made of clay with a glassy pale-blue glaze, barely four inches long. On the front of the figure a set of inscribed characters testified to the figure's ancient Egyptian origins.

Angela copied down the inscription carefully. She had handled hundreds of these shabtis, as they were called, in her research. The shabtis were found in tombs. They were placed there as workers, intended to care for the deceased in the afterlife. Even the simplest Egyptian burials had them. Higher status tombs usually had 400 – one worker for every day of the year and one supervisor for every ten workers; even the servants of the dead needed to be overseen. This shabti was from a late period, probably after the death of Cleopatra when Caesar Augustus had absorbed Egypt into the Roman Empire. Angela could see from the inscription that some of the characters weren't even real hieroglyphs. The inscription made no sense. By the time the Romans had taken over in Egypt much of the knowledge of the old language had already been lost. They still made the figures but the inscriptions meant nothing.

The little blue figure seemed to be saying to Angela, "They put me to work for eternity but they didn't really know what they wanted me to *do*."

Angela knew how the shabti felt. She had been working on the inscriptions for several months and her research supervisor seemed to be less and less interested in her work the more that she did. Although he didn't seem to be interested, for her it had become all absorbing. That had been the reason that her last boyfriend, Patrick, had moved out the week before, after a horrendous row between the two of them. He had claimed that the only way she was going to be interested in him was if he got himself tattooed with extracts from the Book of the Dead and laid out in a museum cabinet. She still felt guilty about the argument. She knew it wasn't her fault, but even so, she blamed herself. Maybe his insult suggested that he had taken more interest in Angela's work than she had given him credit for.

As far as the research project was going, she found herself with some sympathy with her supervisor's concerns about whether there was much new to say about the shabtis. That was a problem Angela often had, she knew. She would see the other person's point of view ahead of her own and end up doubting her own judgement. That fed through into her approach to her work and her private life. She would tell herself she needed to have greater faith in herself but somehow she found it difficult advice to take.

She picked up another figure. This one was earlier from the time of Ramses III. It was dedicated to a woman called Tiye. Angela wondered if it might possibly be the Tiye who was one of Ramses' lesser wives. She had conspired to assassinate the pharaoh and put her son on the throne instead of the rightful heir. There were plenty of women in Egyptian history like that; women that were ready to take the initiative and push through their own plans. Sobekneferu the first female pharaoh from a time when it was thought only men could rule. Hatshepsut, arguably one of the greatest Egyptian pharaohs who presided over a time of prosperity and discovery. Nefertiti, famed as queen and possibly pharaoh in her own right. And of course there was Cleopatra. None of them would put up with the way Angela felt she was treated at work and at home. Angela wondered why she couldn't be more like them. She looked up at some carvings on the wall of the gallery she was working in. A woman in a long white robe was making an offering to the goddess Isis. She looked completely in control of her life, completely at ease with the world around her. Completely in tune with the way that things should be – *Ma'at*, the Egyptians had called it. It couldn't have been more different from how Angela felt about her own life.

She stared at the line of clay figures. They provided no reassurance. The more work she did on them the less

she felt she was close to discovering anything new.

She said as much to her boss Hugh Carfax, the museum's curator of Egyptian artefacts, hoping for some support. His response had been both unhelpful and worrying. "Probably just as well. I'm not sure how long we're going to hang on to them. The museum governors want to free up some cash and some space. Those things just fill up cabinets. They're just not the sort of thing that brings visitors in. They just sit in their rows staring out blankly. I mean, they're not telling you much and you're a specialist!"

"Surely the museum wouldn't just sell them off? All right they aren't unique, not even unusual, but it's a good collection of the various types."

"Oh no, not 'sell them off'. What do you think we are? Some sort of eBay seller? No, I think 'de-accession' is the approved term. You and I both know that some of them are worth several thousand pounds. The collection would pay for an extended cafe and gift shop. And we wouldn't have to store the damned things; we haven't got a tenth of them on display. And even those are going back in the stores next week."

"That's inconvenient! Why?"

"Making space for the new exhibition; 'Tutankhamun Centenary'. Now, that *will* bring the punters in."

That depressed Angela even more. There were three thousand years or more of history under the pharaohs but everyone seemed to focus on the boy king who only reigned for 10 of them. The treasures from his tomb were stunning, of course, but there was so much more to Egyptian history than King Tut. Popular exhibitions were fine, she felt, but she didn't see why they should be allowed to interfere with her academic work, much less why less glamorous material should be sold off to fund what she saw as irrelevant additions to the museum.

"I thought you could work on some of the exhibits; come up with some exciting labels to make the most of what we've got. Sex the thing up a bit."

Angela didn't think much of that suggestion either. From what she'd seen of the stuff being assembled, it looked like the project was going to be making a silk purse out of a sow's ear. And, she thought ruefully, if anything needed sexing up at the moment, after Patrick had moved out, it was her own life. "I'd rather carry on with my research project, especially if the shabtis are going any time soon."

"Sorry, Angela, I need you to do this." Carfax passed her a folder with details of the plans for the event. "The museum governors have got high expectations of this exhibition."

Angela was sceptical. She really didn't understand why they should have any expectations at all. It just sounded like wishful thinking on their part. All right, it was certainly a reasonable thing to be celebrating 100 years since Howard Carter discovered the boy king's tomb but the Museum didn't have anything much of its own to show. It certainly wasn't sufficiently famous internationally to have borrowed any of the objects that had actually been in the tomb. The term "band wagon" sprang to mind when she thought of the Trustees' intentions.

Even so, she was going to have to do what Carfax wanted, she supposed, otherwise he would just keep on at her. She didn't feel able to argue. After all it had been decided to hold the exhibition and the work needed to be done. She would just have to try to fit in her work on the shabtis around the things that Carfax wanted doing for the exhibition. She looked at the folder Carfax had given her. She could make the time. After all, she thought, with Patrick walking out, it's not like there's much going on in my private life anyway.

That was one of her problems, she felt, she was always trying too hard to please other people.



When she went to look at the material that was being brought together for the exhibition she found herself, as she had expected, underwhelmed. She was a student of this stuff, she told herself, and even she didn't think it was very interesting. There were some very large, high resolution photographs of some of the artefacts, including the famous gold mask, which were impressive but nothing you couldn't see in any one of a hundred books on the subject. The actual objects available to be included in the exhibition were fairly dull. There were some stone fragments engraved with Tutankhamun's coronation name, Nebkheperura, which had been among the things that led Carter to believe there might be a lost tomb. There were also, on loan from the USA, a few objects with Tutankhamun's cartouche that had been found in a nearby tomb known as KV57. One thing amused Angela. It was a photograph she hadn't seen before. Howard Carter was standing near to Tutankhamun's actual tomb and staring in a besotted way at Lady Evelyn Herbert, the daughter of Lord Carnarvon, Carter's sponsor. For Angela, Carter's expression in the photograph hardly seemed an appropriate look to bestow on his boss's daughter, a woman 27 years younger than he was. If she'd been asked to describe how he looked it would have been love-struck.

The rest of the objects that had been brought together could be best described as a collection of stuff from about the same date that had some sort of connection to one of Tutankhamun's predecessors or successors. Angela wondered for a moment if it could be put together in some sort of time-line, illustrating "Tutankhamun in Context" maybe, but that was probably not going to be "sexy" enough for Carfax.

There were a few pieces that were a bit more interesting though, Angela thought. They were to make up a part of the exhibition entitled, "Tut-mania; How The Discovery Gripped The World". There were examples of some of the products created to exploit Carter's discovery; statues and other reproductions (some more accurate than others) of things from the tomb. There were also some curious items; a cigarette lighter in the form of Tutankhamun's coffin; a lamp based on the figure of the king's head emerging from a lotus flower; a copy of the sheet music for the popular song "Old King Tut"; and perhaps most implausibly an interpretation of one of the Taweret hippopotamus goddess carvings from the tomb with a bottle opener set in the creature's mouth. These at least were genuine items of their time, Angela thought. Maybe there was a story to be put together using them. She looked at an Egyptian revival beaded handbag that would have graced the arm of some bright young thing in the 1920's. It was, she felt, a specially fine piece. She didn't know much about 20<sup>th</sup> century items like this but she could tell the silverwork of the bag's frame had been beautifully executed. She looked in the museum's catalogue to try to find out more and found the object's accession card showing it had been part of the collections since 1937. "Beaded handbag with Horus head pattern and sterling silver frame and chain," the card explained. "Made by Asprey, London, Hallmarked 1923, the gift of Lady Evelyn Beauchamp." There was a reference to a file in the museum's archives. Angela intended to seek it out.

Angela knew the name of the donor. Well, she thought, perhaps this was something she could build a story around. In 1922, before she married, Evelyn Beauchamp had been Evelyn Herbert, daughter of Lord Carnarvon, Carter's patron for the excavations. It was an object that had been owned by one of the first people to enter the tomb; a tangible link with the events of the 1920's that saw the discovery of the pharaoh, the sad death of her father and then her own marriage to Brograve Beauchamp around the time that the object was made.

Angela wasn't sure what made her look inside the purse but when she did so, she was surprised to see the glint of gold. Not quite – she said to herself – the "wonderful things" that Carter exclaimed over but gold nevertheless. She took it out of the bag. It was a ring, and at first glance, from its design, another piece of 'Tut-mania'. Why was it in a bag that Lady Evelyn had donated to the museum?

As Angela stared at the ring she became even more puzzled. The outer part of the ring carried a hieroglyphic inscription that was genuine. It was an incantation to the goddess Isis. The more Angela looked at the ring the more confused she was. It actually looked like something that was genuinely old – not genuinely 1920's old, and perhaps not old enough for Tutankhamun's time from its design but certainly

from pre-Roman Egypt. If it had come from Tut's tomb itself it would have been completely illegal for it to be here and it would certainly be a sensational story for the museum, although perhaps not in the way Carfax might want, but Angela was fairly certain it was from a later period.

As she was holding the ring, the door to the laboratory opened. Hugh Carfax walked in with his usual swagger. He stopped almost at once and then said, in a deferential manner that was quite unlike him, "I'm sorry I didn't mean to interrupt you, Miss Baxter. I can come back later if that would be more convenient."

Angela found his approach odd. Normally he ignored whatever she was up to, certain that his own agenda was more important. She put down the ring. "No, it's all right. I need to go up to archive room anyway."

Carfax seemed to relax, shook his head and went on, "Err, I wondered how you were doing. It's just that I have to talk to the Governors and..."

"I've started but I can't say much more than that, I'm afraid. I have come up with some ideas that might make a bit of a story around the Tutmania part of the exhibit but I won't know if that will work until I check some things out. The rest of it is a bit of a challenge though."

"Oh, good, well, some progress anyway. Sorry to have disturbed you," Carfax said, uncertainly, before leaving.

Angela was puzzled. She didn't understand the new, polite Carfax at all.

## Chapter 3: The Linen Tally

Ahmose looked up from his task. Squatting beside the road, keeping the tally of cloth being delivered to the warehouse, he had a fine view of all that passed.

This morning was no exception. Four of the priestesses from the Isis Temple had graced the street.

They were a welcome distraction on a day that promised little more than the usual round of drivers with their carts loaded with cloth. The beauty of the priestesses was enhanced by the scent of incense as they had passed him on their way to perform the day's rituals. The white linen of their dresses clinging close to their bodies suggested to Ahmose more than it revealed and he was happy with every suggestion that was made.

Perhaps Ahmose had stared at the priestesses for longer than was right. His imagination had conjured ideas of behaviour that might be expected of courtesans and it was hardly his fault if their bodies looked lithe and supple and capable in every way of achieving some gymnastic positions as part of the sexual act. Certainly they were a more attractive proposition than the girls from the farms nearby or the overweight women working on the weaving looms in the property opposite.

Perhaps the thoughts he had were not appropriate to be directed at the priestesses of the temple. But, he told himself, Isis was the mother of Min, the god of fertility, so it was surely only right that her temple servants should bring forth the priapic response that was the signifier of fertility. And he was a young man. Such thoughts were common for a man like him. How could it be otherwise?

Had the girls noticed his appreciation? He didn't know. Nothing had been said. Now, though, another vision was coming towards him, a slender girl, her skin dark and her features those of the women of the far south. He knew her as Nofret, daughter of Ity, the Nomarch's scribe. She was accompanied by two fan bearers, each as beautiful as herself. The fans they carried seemed almost as tall as palm trees that lined the river bank.

As she drew alongside where he sat, she stopped and turned towards him. "You are Ahmose, son of Khamose, overseer of the linen?"

He looked up, startled by her forthright confrontation. He knew she was daughter of the Chief Scribe of the Nome. Her father Ity was respected, a learned man, but she was no high-born woman. She was not entitled to behave in this way. Even so he felt compelled to respond, "I am."

"And you looked upon the daughters of the goddess with the longing of a man?"

Ahmose laughed. "What of it? They may be priestesses of the temple but they are still women. Should a man not look upon a woman now?"

"If they are servants of the goddess, a man should only with the reverence he owes the goddess," Nofret declaimed. "Come with me!"

"I cannot leave my tally-board. Much," the expression he bestowed on Nofret was no less lusting and disrespectful than the one he had given the priestesses, "as I might like to." He smirked at one of Nofret's fan bearers, "Or as much as she might like me to."

Nofret seemed to ignore his insolence. She shook her head and reached out with a languid gesture, her hand inches from his face. "Come with me. Isis orders it. We shall see if your phallus will stand comparison to that of Min. I can tell you that my flail is as potent as his." The sun glinted on the gold ring that adorned

the first finger of her hand, somehow managing to blind him to anything else in his surroundings. In that moment he knew he had to follow Nofret.

Ahmose stood up, abandoned his tally-board and walked in the dust that was kicked up by Nofret and her attendants as they turned back towards the temple. His eyes were glued on the trailing hem of Nofret's robe with all the devotion that a house pet might give to its owner. Neither Nofret nor her servants cast a look back at Ahmose. They were certain that he was following in their wake. Behind them the cries of the warehouse owner, who had realised that his tallyman had abandoned his post, were ignored.

## Chapter 4: In The Stacks

Angela found the file she was looking for in the museum's archive. It was tucked away on one of the shelves in The Stacks, as everyone referred to the line of mobile shelving used to keep the smaller items not on display and the documents referring to the museum's collections. There, amongst scholarly tomes, folders of photographs, and yellowing manilla files, was a box file carrying the reference number from the purse's catalogue card.

Inside, Angela found a small number of documents.

First of all there was a letter with the crest of Highclere Castle, the home of the Carnarvons, at its head. Dated 1928 and addressed to the then curator, it said, "I think the museum might value this purse for your collection, if not now, then in years to come. I hope you will agree it is a fine example of the jeweller's craft. Certainly, Howard," (Angela assumed that Carter was meant by this), "considers it an item in the same spirit of craftsmanship as those he found in the tomb. I carried it on many occasions." It was signed, "Evelyn Beauchamp".

There were other items in the file. At the top was a receipt from Asprey the jewellers for the bag for the sum of £250 – over £4500 in today's money, Angela realised. Then there were four pages of flimsy faded paper on which had been typed a summary of the significance of the imagery in the beadwork on the purse.

Angela was about to return the documents to the file when she noticed two more things. Firstly another letter had got caught on the staple of the summary and then there was a handwritten note on the back of Lady Evelyn's letter. It was easy to see how they had been overlooked. "They say you should never give an empty purse, so I've also put in a small ring that I had from Howard. The thing has caused enough problems. It's probably best in a museum. E.B."

There was nothing to suggest Lady Evelyn had meant by "enough problems" in her letter but it did at least explain the ring's presence.

The other paper was, in some ways, even more intriguing. It was again hand written but this time on a piece of headed note paper from the Winter Palace Hotel in Luxor, Egypt dated September 3<sup>rd</sup> 1923 and saying, "Lady Evelyn, I see you are to marry. I hope you will not mind if I say that, while I wish you and Brograve every happiness, I shall greatly miss your presence in the Valley. HB." Was the letter simply a polite note or did it imply something more?

Angela jotted down some notes and was starting to put the papers back into the box file when she became aware of someone behind her. She turned around to see the moustachioed smile of Sir Arthur Douglas, chair of the museum's board of governors. "Making progress?" he said in the rather sharp military manner that was his normal manner of speech. His rather florid complexion and portly build gave him the appearance of a man with a heart attack waiting to happen but he had the reputation of riding rough shod over anyone that disagreed with him. Angela had managed to avoid having much to do with him, to her considerable relief.

Angela, choosing to bite back her opinions of the board's latest ideas, as she so often found herself doing, simply smiled. "Yes, Sir Arthur."

"Good girl!" he said leaving Angela feeling at one time both patronised and criticised. "Well, keep your head down on old King Tut and everyone will be very happy. Him included I expect."

Afterwards, Angela thought, Sir Arthur's remark could have simply been an allusion to the fact that they Egyptians esteemed the concept of their names continuing to be spoken as their form of immortality. On the other hand it may have been the offensive innuendo she had first taken it to be.

She rather wished that she had had the ring with her. Perhaps, she thought, before dismissing the idea as absurd, it might have had the same effect on Sir Arthur as on Carfax.

After Sir Arthur had gone and the file had been returned to its shelf, she wound the big wheel to close the stacks of mobile shelves. She couldn't help herself enjoying the idea of squashing the irritating Sir Arthur between the shelves as they slid together.

It was as she was leaving the archive room that she bumped into one of the museum's other trustees, Dr. Hollis.

Barbara Hollis had taken an interest in Angela's work and the two had discussed some of Angela's initial views on the work she was doing on the shabtis. Dr Hollis's own specialism was in the Hittite and Mitanni peoples. She had curated the museum's collection of near eastern antiquities and although she was approaching retirement, retained a lively interest in new research. Even though Egyptian archaeology was outside her own area of specialism, she had been happy to provide Angela with suggestions on possible research routes, introductions to contacts and other sources. "Angela, hello," she said in a friendly tone.

She looked tired, Angela thought. "Dr Hollis, how are you?"

"Yes. Fine enough." She pushed back strands of grey hair from her face. "A rather tedious trustees meeting, unfortunately."

"I wanted to ask you something about that. Hugh was saying there might be a proposal to de-accession the shabti collection."

Barbara Hollis snorted. "Yes, 'de-accession' is the word being used. 'Flogged off' is my favoured term. Seems they aren't 'accessible'; don't provide 'straightforward insights into everyday ancient lives'. What he means is that you'd have to use your brain if you looked at them. Very much not his sort of thing."

Angela felt uncomfortable with Barbara's reaction. Hugh was her boss after all, even if she didn't agree with him on this. "Do you think it's likely to go through? If it does, depending on timing, it could affect my project badly."

"Yes, probably, I'm afraid. The boys all seem very keen. They've got their eyes set on cash for a cafe and shop and don't understand that without scholarship you haven't got anything to say to visitors. Unfortunately there isn't a line on the museum's balance sheet that values intellectual contribution."

"Isn't there anything that can be done?"

"I don't know. I've said my piece on it. I'm not sure there's much else I can do. Carfax, Sir Arthur and Deepdale will all vote for it when it comes to it. I'm not sure that it's something we could get a group of banner-wielding Egyptologists to blockade the museum about. And, if we did, the visitor numbers are so bad, I doubt if they'd notice."

Angela nodded glumly. She was probably right but it was depressing that Barbara felt so marginalised.

"How are things going with the Tut exhibition? Hugh said you were working on it."

"OK given the limits of what we have to show."

Barbara nodded sympathetically. "I thought that might be a problem. I might be able to put in a word at the Ashmolean if there is anything they can do, although they are planning their own thing, I think. They might have some pieces with Tut's cartouche that would at least seem relevant. Let me know if you need a contact there. And, call me if I can help with the shabti project. Short of convincing those dinosaurs to hang on to them, I mean."

Angela smiled. It was good to have Barbara's emotional support, even if it didn't sound likely that she would be able to get the sale of the shabtis stopped. Angela despaired about the exhibition project too. It was even crazier to be putting on the Tut show if the Ashmolean was doing something similar two miles across town. They had a considerably better collection of artefacts from the time and much better international contacts. She felt that the Anstruther Museum's event was going to look a bit feeble alongside that of their near neighbour.

## Chapter 5: The Temple of Isis

The Temple of Isis at Busiris was a large complex in the centre of the town. It could not compare in scale or grandeur to the one endowed by Queen Cleopatra at Philae, in the far south of the country but it was loved by the local citizens as the centre in their nome for the worship of the goddess.

Nofret knew the temple at Philae well. It was not far from where she had grown up in Elephantine and where she had been first initiated into the secrets of the goddess. That initiation had helped her to understand how Isis that had saved the God of the Underworld, Osiris, and championed her son Horus in banishing Osiris's evil brother Seth.

Then her father had gained favour with the Nomarch and they had become part of his entourage here in Lower Egypt. Busiris was greener than the land surrounding Elephantine. Sometimes she missed the sharp, arid, rockiness of the lands of the south and the swirling waters of the First Cataract but now Busiris was her home.

Although it was smaller than the temple at Philae, the Busiris temple was well supported by the wealthy of the area. The annual festival and procession for the goddess was as grand as any celebration of Isis anywhere. The temple followed the same plan as that at Philae. Its hypostyle hall was dark and mysterious, its central court ringed by fine columns and brightly painted wall decorations. Beyond these though was the temple's sanctuary, the holy of holies, only open to the priestesses and handmaidens of the goddess.

Nofret was standing in the sanctuary, in front of the statue of Isis and the ship in which the statue was processed each year at her festival. Inscriptions on the walls proclaimed the greatness of Isis and listed her many attributes but were barely visible in the gloom of the sanctuary. Even if they had been fully lit, the inscriptions would have meant little to Nofret. She knew little of the sacred hieroglyphic script. Much of her schooling had been in Greek, the language spoken in the court since Egypt's conquest by Alexander the Great and the everyday Egyptian script, now termed hieratic, bore little resemblance to the hieroglyphs used in the past. To her, the inscriptions on the walls of the temple made the mysteries of the goddess even more ethereal.

Ahmose had followed her, dog-like, through the streets of Busiris until he stood in the temple's courtyard within the second pylon. He was surrounded by the priestesses that he had looked on lustfully before. Now he was cowed, they emboldened, as they gripped his arms. Pushed to his knees, he was urged forward into the sanctuary.

Only once he was within the innermost part of the temple was he permitted to lift his head. There stood the great statue of Isis, sat on her throne, an ankh – the symbol of life – in one hand, her head topped by a vulture headdress and two sinuous cow's horns with the sun's disk between them.

Although the sanctuary was dark a shaft of light shone down from the roof onto the sun disk, glinting with gold. Beside the statue, Nofret stood offering incense to a burner that filled the room with scented smoke. As she stretched out one hand to add more incense to the burner the light caught the bright yellow gold of the ring that had enslaved Ahmose and he bowed his head in acknowledgement of its power.

On either side of Isis statue two naked men stood, their wrists bound above their heads. Their bodies were criss-crossed with the scarlet wheals of beatings. One, Ahmose recognised at once as the son of the Nomarch. The second bore the look of a high-born young man from foreign lands in the north; Peleset or Isriar, Ahmose thought. His skin, where the whip had not cut it, was soft; his hair was dressed in the manner of someone from beyond the Two Lands. The two seemed exhausted, pulled between the pain of their beatings and some sort of ecstatic delight in their situation. They groaned but with a soft, desperate tone



that was driven more by desire than agony. Nofret had enjoyed the attentions of them both; Ankhu, son of the Nomarch and Ba'al Haddu, prince of Peleset, but still she had appetite for more.

Nofret turned to confront Ahmose, gesturing toward him with the finger that carried the ring from which her hypnotic power seemed to spiral out. "Kneel for Isis and obey the will of she who serves her." Then, calling on the god of fertility, so often portrayed with a phallus of extraordinary proportions, she said, "You will show how you compare to Min."

Two of Nofret's attendants – temple servants or 'henutets' - came forward and tore Ahmose's kilt from his waist exposing his manhood. There was little for Nofret to enthuse over. Ahmose could not compete with Min's giant phallus.

Nofret made her disappointment plain, pointing at his shrivelled member and saying, scornfully, "For that you called out to the priestesses of the temple? How could you presume?"

"Forgive me, highness," Ahmose begged. Any man would find himself a poor comparison with Min's erectile vigour but, intimidated by the sight of Nofret, her grim faced attendants and the whip scarred victims bound at either side of the sanctuary, he was failing to display even his normal man's capability.

"Secure him," Nofret ordered and the two henutets seized Ahmose and bound him to a small stone obelisk that stood immediately opposite the statue of Isis. "The servants of the temple will see if you can be brought to a satisfactory state. If you can maintain your potency for long enough, perhaps neither length nor girth will matter as much."

With his hands bound tightly with cow-hide thongs, he could not resist as Nofret's accomplices set to encouraging an erection from the terrified man, using scented oils and the touch of hand, mouth, hair and breast, using their own bodies against his. Ahmose did not know how long it continued. The sun seemed to follow its course across the heavens as first one then another and then a third girl returned to attend to him; each stopping at the very moment when he might achieve orgasm.

As Ahmose's torments continued other henutets played the soft, melodic tunes associated with temple festivals on harp, lyre, sistrum and twin flute. Two more were performing acrobatic dances, as though limbering up for their encounter with the bound man.

Nofret sat on a low couch nearby, watching the efforts of the servants of the temple, observing how each touch added to Ahmose's arousal. She found his response arousing. She watched as the music added to the urgency of his sexual reaction. It was amusing to see how, under the influence of the ring, he was tortured by the sensations but could not break free from their attentions. Each touch or stroke seemed to bring another gasp, another intake of breath, another bucking of the hips that signalled the henutets that they should cease their attentions and allow his erection to subside. The two bound and beaten captives looked on as well, though whether in sympathy for Ahmose or gratitude that the women's attentions were not directed at themselves was not clear.

Finally when Ahmose seemed exhausted, Nofret intervened. "You can be of service to me now." One of the priestesses freed him from his bonds and urged him, on his knees, towards Nofret.

Perhaps Ahmose felt that at this moment his arousal would be sated, that he would be allowed to couple with this woman who channelled the power of the goddess, Isis. If so, Nofret was to disappoint him. "No you can sit at my rear. Try to pleasure me with your touch. It seems unlikely you will succeed but you should be allowed to attempt it. I will attend to my make up." She held up a bright copper mirror in one hand and her kohl brush and palette in the other as Ahmose was set to work stroking Nofret's back and kissing the lower part moving down towards the crease between her buttocks. His cock hung rigid and unsatisfied between his legs but he knew that it would have no release until Nofret decreed it.

She in her turn was torn between her desire to take sexual pleasure from Ahmose's cock and the desire to use his sex to control him. She beckoned two of the henutet to administer to her, diverting her thoughts from Ahmose or the other men.

Ahmose could do little other than try to arouse Nofret so that she in turn would grant him release but it seemed like this was not to be.

In time he became so obsessed with Nofret that he was content to be kept beneath the couch where she lay, bound captive to one of the legs of the couch while she sprawled above him taking her own pleasure or enjoying the touch and caresses of her servants as she chose.

## Chapter 6: The Griffith Institute

In pursuit of the origins of Evelyn Beauchamp's ring, Angela turned to her computer. She knew Carter's record keeping as he cleared the tomb had been meticulous and images of his original record cards together with the transcribed contents were all available on line from Oxford's Griffith Institute. The web site also allowed Angela to view Harry Burton's original photographs of the objects alongside the record cards.

Angela's search at first was fruitless. As far as she could see there was no entry for a ring of the kind that Lady Evelyn had placed in the purse. She wasn't altogether surprised. Even though she was hardly an expert on jewellery in the New Kingdom, the item looked to her to have been from later than Tutankhamun's time.

A trip to the Griffith Institute itself, tucked away in the basement under the Sackler Library, proved no more helpful at first. It was wonderful to be able to leaf through Carter's original drawings from his early years in Egypt and to see the original notebooks of the excavations but none of that gave Angela any help. It might have been helpful to her exhibition work if she could have persuaded the Griffith to loan some but stickers on the relevant folders showed that the Ashmolean had pre-empted her. "Note:" the stickers said, "this item will be unavailable from October to December 2022, on loan to the Ashmolean Museum."

There were files of Harry Burton's exquisite photographs of objects from the tomb, taken in the years after the discovery but there was nothing resembling the ring. Looking at Burton's pioneering images, Angela thought that the "HB" who had written the letter she had found, might well have been Harry Burton. He would have been in Luxor at the time and he was credited with the photograph of Carter and Lady Evelyn that had first caught Angela's eye. Could the two men have both been love-struck with Carnarvon's daughter?

Finally though, she found something tangible. In a small notebook that Carter had kept to record the small antiquities that he had traded to supplement his income in the lean years working for Theodore Davies, was something that looked hopeful.

A line said, "Gold ring, inscribed 'Isis, who bewitches everything' on the face. Possibly late Dynasty 32. Reputedly found in Lower Egypt. Bought in Abu Sir Banna 17/04/15. £5.0.0" in Carter's usual thin-nibbed writing style. Alongside had been added, in pencil "?MM" with a line drawn through it and the final letter "E" also in pencil.

The translation of the inscription agreed with Angela's own reading of the hieroglyphs on the ring. "MM" she thought was probably the Metropolitan Museum – Carter had worked closely with them because of his association with Theodore Davies. There had even been suspicions that some objects from Tut's tomb had ended up with them. If this was from Dynasty 32, it was – as she had suspected - too late by 1200 years for Tut, an 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty pharaoh. The "E" could well be "Evelyn". Satisfied that she had indeed linked the ring to Carter, if not to the tomb, she headed back to the Anstruther Museum.

Sitting at her desk contemplating the ring, she was asking herself what to do about it as Hugh Carfax came in. "So, is that your Tutmania piece?" he asked.

"Yes," she said, "I think it is rather fine and it fits me too." As she spoke she slid the ring on to her finger, extending her hand to show Carfax just what she meant.

The effect was dramatic, instant and surprising. Carfax fell to his knees, a blank look on his face. He leant forward stretching his arms wide along the edge of Angela's desk as though baring his back to someone standing behind him. He spoke, almost chanting. "All praise to she who bewitches everything and to she who carries her sign."

Angela was startled; Carfax did not appear to be joking – in any case she had hardly ever known such a thing. At the same time she felt an uncomfortable delight spreading through her, as though such behaviour was only proper. She was confused. “Please, get up,” she said.

“If that is what you order,” he responded getting slowly to his feet keeping his head respectfully bowed, “as the servant of the Goddess’s hand maiden, I can only obey.”

Carfax’s behaviour was disturbing to say the least. He appeared to be in some sort of hypnotic trance and Angela, scared that she might have caused it somehow, was uncertain what to do. Could waving the ring in his face have had some hypnotic effect? She pulled it from her finger, noticing it felt warm to the touch, and as she took it off, Carfax appeared to recover. “Well, I’m glad you’re making progress on the exhibition,” he said as though nothing strange had happened. “I’ll let you get on.”

After Carfax had left, Angela thought more about what might have happened. She wasn’t someone that placed much store by the speculations of mysticism and magic involving Egyptian antiquities and writings on the so-called “curse of Tutankhamun” made her angry. She knew that ideas of magic were important to the Egyptians though and that Isis was a focus for many of them. There was also something strangely familiar about the look that Carfax had on his face as he had stretched himself forward on Angela’s desk. She remembered where she had seen it before. It was the exact same calf-eyed expression that Carter had on his face in the picture of him and Evelyn outside the pharaoh’s tomb.

Could Carter have given Evelyn the ring, imagining it would entrance her in some way. If he then discovered that he was the victim rather than the beneficiary of the enchantment how might that have affected the two? Had Harry Burton been afflicted in the same way? Was this what Evelyn had been referring to when she had said that the ring had ‘caused enough trouble’?

She put the ring on once more. Could it somehow have caused Carfax’s behaviour. Why not? Isis had been the great love goddess, forerunner of Greek, Roman and Christian focuses of worship. It was a strange sensation that she felt. It was as though the ring was allowing her to channel an ability to compel men to acknowledge the sexual power of women, to force them to accept that female sexual pleasure was a right of the woman and a duty for the man, that to give their bodies in the sexual service of the female was the greatest task that they could perform. She knew she had to compel them to this as the way of them achieving their destiny as servants of Isis, to have them fall at her feet, worship her body, suffer under her whims. She felt herself feeling more taken over by the desire to compel men to worship at her feet, It was a disturbing sensation that she did not feel entirely in control of.

She took the ring off again and the fog of lust began to fade. She found herself distressed by the experience, as though her body and her mind had been taken over by something alien, endowing her with powers and desires that were nothing she had ever felt before. She felt confused and a little frightened by her own response.

Even so, when she came to leave the museum for home that evening, and without stopping to think about it, she slid the ring into her purse.

## Chapter 7: Beyond the Second Pylon

In the dark of the temple's inner sanctuary, Nofret sprawled languidly on a couch. Kneeling at her side, one of her bewitched male acolytes was holding a tray that carried a thin pottery mug of a beer brewed from barley and sweetened with honey. Another was crouched by her feet, massaging them with scented oils. A third slowly waved a fan of ostrich feathers providing her with a cooling air. A fourth, Ahmose, the subject of her despising look was prostrate on the cold stone of the sanctuary floor in front of her, having been ordered to her presence.

Nofret was angry. Ahmose had failed in the simple mission she had given him. Obedience was not too much to ask, she felt.

"Perhaps I should feed you to Sobek – the teeth of the crocodile might be a righteous punishment – or you could be crushed by Taweret. Would that be fair for failing in such a simple task?"

The prospect of being thrown to the hippopotamus goddess was no more attractive than the crocodile but he could not deny Nofret. "More than fair, Handmaiden of Isis." The man didn't dare lift his head. He barely dared to ask to be spared such a fate. "I just beg for more time."

"Begging is a just course for those that have failed. But I expect more. Isis expects more. There must be atonement. Crawl closer. Keep your head to the floor."

As the man reached her she lifted her feet from in front of him and placed them down on his head, pressing his face into the dirt of the temple floor with soles of her sandals.

Nofret sneered at the cowering man beneath her feet, knowing that he could not resist the power of the ring. It was not his fault that he was weak and foolish, she thought, but she was no less contemptuous of him for that. The more she wore the ring, the more she saw the weaknesses of men, the more she knew that women had to take control of their destiny as Isis had done for Osiris.

She became bored. Some time in shackles might persuade him of the need to meet her demands. Then, when his vigour and desire to please were restored, he could be of use again in her bed. She summoned two of the temple servants, young women learning the rituals of Isis. "Take him and chain him. Secure him as the captives of Ramses on the temple and lead him to the small kiosk. He can await me there."

In normal times, Ahmose could have thrown off the two young women with ease but his will and strength were sapped by the power of the ring. He could only submit as they dragged his elbows close together behind his back and chained them there. Then with a halter around his neck he was led off like a dog as Nofret smiled with satisfaction.

From the side of the sanctuary Medhu, Overseer of the Temple Servants, watched as the man she had once taken to her own bed was humiliated beneath the feet of Nofret and then dragged away. Should she take advantage of her power in this way? This Nofret was no priestess. At times she seemed to use her power to defend the goddess but at others for her own pleasure. Should she use the temple for the satisfaction of her carnal lusts? It seemed that this was not in the right order of things; the way that the gods had decreed for ritual to be carried out for millennia. Contradicting the order of things put at risk the great cycles that made the country what it was; the daily passage of the sun, the monthly changing of the moon and the annual flood that brought the wealth of the harvest. To disturb the natural order by subjecting men to these rituals perhaps would lead to disastrous crop failure or social turmoil. It was an offence against Ma'at; the natural order that sustained the kingdom.

## Chapter 8: Arrest

Weni Asyut looked back at the group of men that he led. They were tough, reliable, steadfast and committed to their work. Asyut was responsible for the nome's Medjay. An elite force, the Medjay were charged with policing royal palaces and tombs; promoters of Ma'at – good order – across the land. They were a group that could be relied upon to enforce the will of the pharaoh and the priests of Amun. Proud of their Nubian heritage, they stood with stony faces, concerned that their mission was taking them into areas where their usual tactics of enforcement might not be sufficient.

Like all Egyptians, they had a healthy respect for magic; all the more so when it was reputed to be the magic of Isis herself. Here, though, the accusation was that magic being used to disturb Ma'at. The traditions of government were being disturbed. The good order of administration was being subverted. Such action risked disrupting the ability of the state to ensure the continued prosperity of the land. It needed to end but magic misused was still magic.

It was early. The sun had not yet got beyond the horizon. The dark shape of the Temple of Isis would be the first to be hit by the rays of the sun as it crested the horizon to start its daily journey across the heavens.

The group of Medjay were standing beside a comfortable house close to the banks of the Nile awaiting their moment.

"Chief Scribe!" Weni Asyut pounded with his staff on the threshold of the house. "Your daughter must come with us. She is accused of desecration of the Isis temple and plotting against the Nomarch."

On her sleeping pallet on the roof of the house, Nofret heard Weni's cries and knew there could be no escape. She looked at the ring on her finger. She knew that its power was great but it would not defend her against an entire Medjay company. With testimony from any of the men, it would condemn her. Without it, she had a chance of defending herself.

She slid the ring from her finger. As its power ebbed from her she felt the fear of the Medjay well up inside her but she stayed to her purpose. Looking around the roof platform she saw a small crack in the whitewashed mud brick wall and wedged the ring into it so that it could not be seen. She had barely finished concealing the ring when Weni appeared on the roof, her father at his side and his troops behind him.

"Nofret, daughter of Ity, you must come with us," Weni announced.

"For what reason?" Nofret stood tall, confronting the group of men. The sun, just cresting the horizon, glinted on the gold and lapis-lazuli of her earrings. Some of the Medjay looked concerned. She could imagine they had heard of the power of the Isis ring. "And on whose authority?"

"The authority of the Priests of Amun. You are accused of offences against Ma'at, attempting to corrupt the sons of the Nomarch, and sacrilegious use of the Temple of Isis."

"Who accuses me?"

Nofret's father watched in wonder at his daughter's defiance. It would never have occurred to him to question the Medjay in this way.

"Medhu, Overseer of the Temple Servants and daughter of the Keeper of the Nomarch's Stable."

This was dangerous, Nofret decided. Medhu was in a position of influence and she had been abandoned by

Ahmose when he had found himself under the spell of Isis and Nofret. Now, Nofret knew that she had been right not to bring the ring, Medhu would not be affected by its power. On the other hand she had little choice but to go with the Medjay.

“Very well, we shall find the truth. I shall accompany you.”

Head held high, Nofret walked ahead of the company of Medjay towards the Nomarch’s residence. To any observer it would have seemed more that they were her escort than her guards.

Medhu watched with a look of triumph. Nofret would pay for her insolence in despoiling the temple with her behaviour.

## Chapter 9: Collecting Antiquities

It was early in the spring of 1915. Saeed Abanoub was sitting, sipping mint tea in a cafe near the centre of Abu Sir Banna. The heat of the day was fading and the village was starting to come to life as the evening call to prayer echoed out from the nearby mosque. He was no longer a young man. He was happy to watch as others went about their work.

A motor car – still a rare site in these parts - made its way along the street, its horn urging villagers to move out of its path. Saeed Abanoub could see it was a British army car; going from Abbousir to Cairo, he assumed. They were just the latest foreigners to trample across his country. He wasn't sure if they were any better or worse than the French. The car stopped and two men got out. One, in army uniform stopped by the car. The other, a bluff looking, moustachioed fellow walked across to the cafe where Saeed Abanoub was sitting. He spoke to the cafe owner. There was some discussion. Money passed from the Englishman to the cafe owner and the cafe owner pointed at Saeed.

The Englishman came over. "Can I join you? Our friend over there," he nodded towards the cafe owner, "says you can help me."

Abanoub was surprised. The man spoke good Arabic; colloquially, not like someone that had learned it in class. Abanaoub spoke some English but saw no need to use it. "I help who I can, InshaAllah."

"He says you find things, old things. Or you know people that do. He says you sometimes have things to sell. Sometimes I like to buy. Things that have been found. Old things."

"Trading of antiquities is illegal."

"Of course. But some old things, well, it may not be clear if they are genuine antiquities. When things are found, in the ground, in the fields. You might sell them with a clear conscience. Without fear of consequences."

"I have some things. Found in the fields. The river winds back and forth here. No one is sure what was where but Busiris – Djedu - is supposed to have been nearby. A friend of mine found these beads and these small shabtis. He would be pleased to receive a price for them."

The man took them and looked closely at them. He put his head on one side, stroked his moustache and then shook his head. "No, my friend. I don't think these were found here. I think I could buy these in any tourist shop in Cairo. I'm looking for something of greater worth, something that would command a higher price than the few copper malleem these would attract. But perhaps the cafe owner does not know you. Perhaps you do not find the things he says you find."

Saeed Abanoub reacted with wounded pride but he recognised the man's knowledge. "I know these fields better than any man but they are not rich. Too many years of ploughing, ripening corn and barley, too many floods. The Nile is not kind to history."

"And you have nothing from the fields?"

Abanoub looked at the man carefully. He was persistent. He doubted that he was a government spy or a policeman. And he knew enough about antiquities to see what was tourist junk. "I have something. But I was not planning to sell it. I think it is very precious. I found it where some old crumbled buildings can just be made out. Mud bricks return to the river, you know. This was wedged in a crack in what was left of a wall." He reached inside his pocket and pulled out a knot of cloth. Unfolding it, he showed the Englishman



the gold ring that he had discovered the day before.

The Englishman took it and looked closely at it. "Yes," he said. "This is old. I might buy it. If your price is fair."

The two men embarked on the verbal joust that accompanies so many deals in the Arab world. Offer and counter-offer meandered back and forth, much as the course of the Nile itself does. Eventually when it seemed that neither side could be reconciled to paying so much or accepting so little, a figure was mentioned that each seemed content with. The Englishman parted with a pound note and a few gold piastre coins and the ring was his. The two men shared another glass of mint tea, talking of places where such things might be found.

In the car, the Englishman's colleague was waiting impatiently. He blew on the car's horn. "Come on, Howard," he called, "we need to get on."

## Chapter 10: Oxford - Jericho

Angela had spent a productive afternoon as far as her project on the shabtis was concerned. She had managed to catalogue another thirty of the figures and, she thought, she was getting closer to devising a way of categorising the various inscriptions that each carried.

She hadn't, however, made any progress on the material for the exhibition. In spite of the fact that it was quite against the museum's rules she decided to take a few pieces home to work on. A small plastic box was all she needed to hold a few of the smaller items she was in the process of labelling. The ring was amongst them.

'Home' for Angela was a flat in Jericho. It took her about 30 minutes to walk there, up St John Street and across Wellington Square. She got indoors and scowled at the contents of her fridge, only now remembering that she had intended to shop for food. Dinner looked like it was going to be a can of baked beans emptied onto some buttered toast with an accompanying mug of tea or can of soda if she was feeling reckless. There was a takeaway place at the end of the road but she wasn't sure she could even be bothered with that. She turned on the radio. Some pop music she didn't quite recognise was playing. She took out the few things she had brought home and laid them out on her table. The ring in its small clear plastic box with the white label on the side seemed to be blinking at her. She couldn't work out where the light it appeared to be reflecting was coming from.

There was a knock at the door. She opened it, unsure if she wanted company. Standing on the threshold, looking dishevelled, was her boyfriend of a week ago, Patrick. "Hi," he said.

"Hi," Angela responded. "You're drunk."

"Hmm, maybe. A bit." Patrick leaned against the door frame, a friendly grin on his face.

Angela didn't feel inclined to indulge him. She had decided soon after his departure that it was no bad thing. "You moved out. Remember? You were tired of the old statues and funny picture writing. They're still around."

"I thought we might try again."

"I don't think so, Patrick."

"Ah, come on. Let's talk at least."

Angela could only hear the lyrics of Dua Lipa's 'New Rules' running through her head... 'One, Don't pick up the phone, you know he's only calling 'cos he's drunk and alone'. "I don't that's a good idea."

"Sure it is." He pushed past her into the flat and pulled a bottle from his jacket. "Come on. Have a drink. Relax."

"Patrick, I really don't want to talk."

"Sure you do."

It was one of the things about him that had annoyed Angela more than anything else and probably the main thing that had decided her that she didn't want him back. He could never just accept that that what she said was what she wanted. It had been the same problem if they were discussing what movie to go to, what sort of food they should eat or whether or not Angela fancied sex.

“Patrick, can’t you just do as I ask?”

“Come on. It’s only one drink.”

Why was it so difficult to get him to do what she wanted, Angela thought. Then she remembered the box of things she had brought home from the office, the ring and the curious way that Carfax had appeared to respond to it. As Patrick was fumbling around in the kitchen looking for glasses for their drinks, Angela found the box, pulled out the ring and put it on her finger. She felt a warm, sensual feeling pass through her. She sat down and waited for Patrick to reappear. As Patrick entered the room he underwent a transformation every bit as dramatic as the one that Angela had seen with Carfax. He fell to his knees, bowed his head and offered one of the drinks to her.

Angela, intrigued by the effect that appeared to be a consequence of her wearing the ring, took the glass from him but left him kneeling, motionless, clutching his own drink. “Lay down,” she said. “On your face.”

He responded immediately but slowly as though in a dream. “Yes, exalted one,” he said as he did as she asked.

He stayed still and silent which Angela thought a real benefit as she relaxed with her drink. “Tell me,” she said, wondering if there was a way to puzzle out what was happening with the ring, “what do you know of Isis?”

“Isis, Mother of Horus, Wife of Osiris, Queen of the Throne, Mother of the Gods, Great of Magic, Lady of Abundance, the Myriad Named,” Patrick began reciting in a trance like manner.

“Enough,” Angela ordered. It was extraordinary. She couldn’t have imagined Patrick being able to recite such a list – she would hardly have found it easy to do herself. Somehow the magical power of Isis was being projected into the man prostrate at her feet. She needed to think and having a man stretched out on her living room floor was no help.

“Stay there,” she ordered. She took another sip of her drink. She felt curious. Perhaps it was the alcohol, perhaps an effect of the situation. Perhaps, even, it was an effect of the ring. She found sexual desire welling up inside her, a desire to take Patrick to the bedroom and ride his cock until he gasped for release, a need to rake her finger nails across his back until it was raw. That was his destiny, she was certain, a sexual plaything for her, an object to slake her lust, to worship her as she should worship Isis. And when she had done? A servant for her household use? Her own, animated, shabti, to serve her as she needed but in this life, not in the life beyond; his head between her thighs, and his tongue upon her sex; his hands on her breasts caressing as she desired; his cock swallowed up by her cunt and used as long as if was rigid enough to pleasure her. The sexual urge was almost overwhelming.

Angela tried to get a grip of herself. She tried to regain control of her emotions. It took a considerable effort of will to push her sexual urges to the back of her mind. She twisted the Isis ring on her finger. This was not the time for sexual excess, whatever the ring seemed to be driving her towards.

Patrick remained sprawled on the floor. “Let me worship your feet,” he begged, crawling towards her and reaching out. “Let me honour your body with mine.”

His desperate move decided her. She looked down at Patrick. “Get out. Go and forget you were here. Do you understand?” Angela wasn’t sure how he would react but he got to his feet, nodded and obediently left without a word.

Still, even after he had left Angela felt consumed by sexual desire. She looked around the flat trying to find anything, an object that could substitute for Patrick in slaking her lust, in filling the void she felt in her cunt,

but she knew that no object would satisfy in the way that forcing sex from a man would. Perhaps she should go after him, she thought?

She slowly realised such thoughts were complete madness. Somehow she managed to push the control of her mind that the ring seemed to be exerting into the background. It was only after she managed to summon the will to slide the ring from her finger that she felt a sense of normality returning. She sat still for minutes, half expecting him to return once the effects of his enchantment by the ring had worn off, but, to her growing sense of relief, he did not.

## Chapter 11: A Journey North

Nofret felt anxious. The trial was not going as well as she had hoped. The testimony of the woman, Medhu, had been graphic; lurid even. One of the cleverer judges by Nofret's estimation had, at her instigation, probed Medhu, asking if she was motivated in her accusations by jealousy. She had denied it and the words of the other women seemed to support her story. Nofret knew that if she had been found with the ring, she would have been certainly condemned. Even without it the court still seemed to be favouring Medhu.

Then, on the third day of the trial, before the court had started taking evidence from the men, word was received that the Pharaoh, Cleopatra herself, wished to consider the case. So, Nofret - not quite a prisoner but not a free woman either - together with the Nomarch and their escort, had embarked on the Nomarch's ceremonial barge for the journey north to Alexandria on the Mediterranean coast.

At that time, the grandeur of the city of Alexandria, the seat of the pharaohs for the last 250 years, was only second to that of Rome. The approach to the city with its fine buildings and the masts of ships in the harbour ready to sail the great blue expanse of the Mediterranean Sea beyond would impress anyone. However, sat on the Nomarch's elegant barge, Nofret did not feel able to enjoy the spectacle. The company of three Medjay officers and the Nomarch himself and the uncertainty over what lay ahead made sure of that.

She was apprehensive about what was to come. True, she had been a friend of Cleopatra but that had been some years before. They had shared indiscretions and even lovers. They had both known the delights of wine and the pain of the following morning. They had both schemed and made free with the privileges that an heir to the throne might take advantage of. Even so, Nofret was sufficiently worldly wise to know that friendships rarely survived in the face of political expediency. Worse still for Nofret, it had been Cleopatra that had given her the ring that she was accused of exploiting; she would know its possibilities. If she remembered giving it to her she would know that Nofret was capable of exactly that which her accusers said of her.

Nofret stared at the Medjay officers guarding her. Even without the ring, Nofret knew she had power over men but this was not the time to try to exert it. She sat modestly under the canopy of the barge ensuring that nothing she did should excite accusations that she was trying to influence her escort. It amused her that a woman's sexual power was such that the weakness of men could be turned off and on so easily. For now, it suited her that those around her should feel she was no threat.

The barge came alongside the dock at the Royal Harbour in Alexandria, close to where the queen's own river craft were moored. The Nomarch's boat that had looked so grand at the port in Busiris looked shabby and poorly decorated compared to the gold-sheathed, brightly painted vessels of the queen's fleet. The gulf between Nofret's world in the delta and this centre of power and commerce could not have been more stark.

Back in the city, the walls of the Great Library, a centre of world learning, could be clearly seen. Beyond the port, on its own island, the towering structure of the Pharos, the lighthouse judged one of the wonders of the world alongside the Great Pyramid, stood marking the safe haven of the port for sailors.

Even the sounds of the place were different. Here the shouts and talk of those on the harbour was all in Greek. Nofret heard one boatman curse in Egyptian as he caught his arm on a spar but apart from that there was none of the language that was used for everyday speech in Busiris.

A group of Roman soldiers stood nearby. It was the first time Nofret had seen any of these foreigners that now seemed to have such influence in the world. Their uniforms were impressive. Their troop leader wore a

shining breastplate and a helmet with a great feathered crest. Scarlet tunics under the polished leather of their armour and hard-bitten faces peering out from between the cheek-pieces of their helmets gave the group a determined look. They would fare well in any fight, Nofret thought, but beneath those tunics? She doubted that they were any less subject to the magic of Isis than were Egyptian men.

As the crew moored the Nomarch's barge, a group of court officials appeared on the quayside, greeted the Nomarch and invited him and Nofret to accompany them.

The palace fronted directly on to the harbour. Nofret had no chance for sightseeing as they made their way along the dockside. She was too busy thinking about what her encounter with the authorities here might bring. She was not so naive as to think that her youthful friendship with the woman who was now queen would give her any immunity from the law but, on the other hand, why had the Pharaoh Cleoptara summoned them?

The party wound their way through corridors and courtyards until they arrived in a columned hall twice as large as the hypostyle hall of the Isis temple at Busiris. Here though the style was Hellenistic. There were none of the fat papyrus plant shaped columns that she was so familiar with. These were tall, fluted and thin, capped with extravagantly carved capitals. And, there were none of the hieroglyphic inscriptions she found so familiar. Here the decoration was in opulent tables and chairs, elegant marble statuary and graceful bronze incense burners that filled the air with scented smoke.

From a door at the far end a small group emerged. A finely dressed individual, with sharp dark features was accompanied by two others who Nofret took to be scribes.

"Nomarch, welcome to Alexandria," the man said. "And this is the woman in question?" He nodded to Nofret.

"Yes, Vizier," the Nomarch responded.

Nofret wasn't sure whether to be comforted by the appearance of the Vizier or not. The Vizier was the queen's representative in all civil administration matters. He had authority of the courts and authority over almost everything except the queen herself and the priests of Amun.

"She has..." the Nomarch began.

"I am familiar what has been said about the matter," the Vizier responded. "You will, of course be concerned for the reputation of your son and for the integrity of the temple of Isis, but you will know that the Goddess acts in curious ways. There is also a matter of state to consider." He turned to the scribe hovering behind him, stylus and wax tablets in hand. "There is no need to record this part of our discussions."

"A matter of state, Vizier? Surely this is just a matter for the Nome court. The Medjay are confident they can bring the action to a successful conclusion."

"Successful for whom, though? If what this woman is accused of is true then the son of the Nomarch has submitted to magic. Is it wise that such a thing should be spoken of? Better perhaps that some sexual indiscretion took place. After all that is hardly unknown for young men." The Nomarch looked uncomfortable. He wasn't sure where this was leading but it was sounding like he would not get the support he wanted from the Vizier. "And then, there is the delicate matter of Ba'al Haddu. At present we have discussions with the ruler of Peleset. It might not be – ah – convenient for a prince from there to be seen to be involved in something that might be seen as an act of religious sacrilege in a temple of ours. You will understand that the needs of diplomacy sometimes take precedence over local concerns."

The Nomarch saw which way the wind was blowing. "Indeed, Vizier, that is why you pursue your role and I mine."

"And why you need to suppress any concerns that may arise within the Nome. Your son, I take it you can control? The man Ahmose?"

"He is to be married to the girl Medhu, who is Overseer of the Temple Servants. Her father is one of my staff. He will not be anxious to have his humiliations further debated."

"Good. Then we are agreed. You will restore Ma'at in the Nome by these measures. If none have been punished no offence can have been committed. The woman Nofret will remain here. You will inform your scribe, her father. The queen has need of an advisor in the ways of Isis when so many see her as the embodiment of the goddess. She will fulfil that role. It is a great honour." he looked towards Nofret, "I take it that you accept that?"

"Of course, Vizier," Nofret responded, thinking that Cleopatra must have remembered her after all. It was, so far, a rather better outcome than she could have hoped for and – she looked around at the grand building that surrounded her – there were worse places to be than the royal palace in the second city of the world. There was still the matter of the ring, though. It looked like there would be no opportunity to return to Busiris, it seemed. Nofret would be sorry that she would be unable to retrieve it but no doubt Isis would take care of whoever found it. "What ever the queen wishes," she said.

## Chapter 12: The Isis Stela

Angela was not sure when she realised that she was completely losing control when using the ring.

Was it when Patrick came to her flat that the ring ceased to be an object of antiquarian interest and became a tool for her own use? She knew that the feelings she had experienced then had an almost narcotic effect. Not only empowering in the moment but creating a desire to go on and on using it. There was no doubt in her mind that using the ring was addictive.

She could not put it to one side though. As part of the work she was doing for Carfax, she was still investigating the relevance it had for the Tutmania part of the exhibit with the links it had to Burton, Carter and Lady Evelyn.

She knew that her interest was no longer simply academic, though. She was becoming more and more interested in how she might make use of its powers for herself. But, at the same time, she was wary of the power that the ring seemed to endow.

She was standing in the museum's entrance lobby. She looked up at one of the museum's permanent exhibits, a stone tablet adorned with an image of the winged figure of Isis. Beneath the figure, Angela could translate the hieroglyphic inscription, "I am all that has been and is and shall be; and no mortal has ever lifted my mantle." Perhaps the inscription was a warning not to seek that power, not to seek to learn too much of the mysteries of Isis. She would try to keep her attention focussed on work and ignore the ring's apparent powers.

She tried to bring her thoughts back to the more immediate needs of the exhibition. As far as her work for that was concerned, she had found little more about Lady Evelyn and the ring. There was nothing to suggest Evelyn's marriage had been anything other than conventional. Angela had found a wedding photo and beyond the difference in the height of the two – Lady Evelyn barely came up to her husband Brograve's shoulder – they seemed nothing other than a loving couple of the time. There had been precious little to suggest any sexual liaison between Lady Evelyn and Carter before her marriage. An entry in the diary of Arthur Mace, Carter's assistant, remarked that she and Carter were "very thick" with one another but beyond that she could find no evidence of any relationship in any of Evelyn's letters nor in the trivialising, gossipy diaries kept by Harry Burton's wife, Minnie. Perhaps Evelyn had never really grasped the ring's power. Perhaps her "enough trouble" note was simply an expression of exasperation at what she may have seen as the coincidence of Carter's and Burton's attentions, especially as her father had died around that time.

Angela told herself that she had to accept that she had reached a dead-end as far as the ring and the exhibition was concerned. She had managed to create a set of labels for some of the artefacts that stitched together some sort of story and some notes for the exhibition's guide book too. That would have to do.

Relieved to have decided that she had finished with the exhibition, she returned to her work with the shabtis. She had better get on with it, she thought. The museum's trustees were meeting at that moment to decide what would be done about Carfax's proposal to "de-accession" them. She had every reason to expect that they would agree to it.

She opened a box labelled, "32nd Dynasty: Tomb of Nofret at Taposiris Magna, Daughter of Ity, Chief Scribe to the Nomarch of the 9<sup>th</sup> Nome". She looked at the box, thinking how sad it was that this woman was known only as the daughter of someone. Surely she must have had a life that meant more than that? As so often, the label on the box asked more questions than it answered. If this woman was related to the Nomarch of the 9<sup>th</sup> Nome, in the Nile delta, what was she doing being buried far away at Taposiris, on the



Mediterranean coast?

Inside the box were six blue faïence shabtis. Angela laid them out on the desk in front of her.

She was impressed. They were finely moulded with sharply incised inscriptions, some of the best examples of their kind that Angela could remember seeing. They were all the more remarkable for coming from the tomb of the daughter of a minor noble. Objects like this would usually be associated with an elite burial of the royal household. How could the museum even imagine selling objects as beautiful as these to fund a cafe and a shop, she thought.

The shabtis seemed to stare at her in an accusatory manner. "And you are going to let this happen," one seemed to be saying. "When you could use to power of Isis to prevent it," said another. "The daughter of Ity would not permit it," said a third. "We serve Nofret, daughter of Ity, in the Duat, so that she has eternal life," said the fourth. "We must not be separated. Will you abandon her?" the last two said in chorus, "or will you see we are not disturbed; that peace and order, Ma'at, is preserved?"

Angela found it neither surprising nor upsetting that she was confronted by these small statuettes. They were the protectors of Nofret. Of course they would want to preserve their ability to serve their mistress?

"Use the power of Isis to preserve Ma'at," the shabtis seemed to say.

Angela opened her handbag. She took out a small box. Within it, the gold of the Isis ring glinted. She took it and, compelled by the urging of the shabtis, slipped it on her finger. The shabtis together appeared to bestow a smile of approval upon her.

At once she felt the power of the ring surging through her, giving her a deep feeling of barely controllable lust and an urgent desire to see that the shabtis were no longer threatened. She had used the ring to defend herself against Patrick, she would use it again to defend the shabtis. The power of her lust would subjugate those that sought to disturb the eternal peace of those the shabtis served and through the disruptive force of sexual desire, Ma'at would be ultimately restored.

She got to her feet, a look of serene self confidence on her face.

The governors were meeting in the museum's wood panelled conference room. The group were seated around the rooms massive oak table. Sun light streamed in the the high windows that lined one side of the room. A portrait of the antiquarian Adrian Anstruther, founder of the museum, looked down at the assembled group from its position on the far wall.

Angela headed towards the conference room in a determined manner, striding up the wide oak staircase that led up from the museum's entrance lobby. She threw open the two tall oak doors that gave entry to the room and, startled, the four trustees turned towards her.

"Ms Baxter," Hugh Carfax began, "what is the ..."

"Isis speaks through me," Angela declaimed, "the shabtis must stay." She extended one arm towards the group pointing at Sir Arthur at the head of the table. "You must accept the will of Isis."

A shaft of sunlight hit the ring on Angela's accusing finger and seemed to reflect light back into Angela's face.

Barbara Hollis stared, thinking that Angela had taken leave of her senses but was then even more surprised by the reaction of her fellow trustees. All three got to their feet. "We must accept the will of Isis," they intoned in unison. Together they knelt down and lowered their foreheads to the deep pile carpet of the

conference room. "The will of Isis."

"And you will preserve Ma'at. The shabtis will remain."

"We will preserve Ma'at. The shabtis will remain."

Barbara looked on in astonishment as the trustees submitted to Angela's instructions.

Angela stood staring at the other trustees, her right hand extended with the ring glinting on her second finger. The men seemed transfixed, not daring to lift their faces from the floor. To Barbara the expression on Angela's face was one of that seemed to embody triumphant contempt for those before her.

"Remember, it will be as Isis wills it," Angela decreed.

"As Isis wills it," the men chorused.

Angela surveyed the men and then closed her eyes as though trying to dismiss the sight before her. Barbara saw her biting her lip as if, deep in thought, she was trying to regain control of herself in some way. She turned on her heel and was gone in an instant.

Barbara was even more confused when Angela withdrew as quickly as she had appeared and the men resumed their seats at the table as though nothing strange had occurred. The three of them seemed a little distracted, as though they were trying to remember something important but could not quite grasp what it was.

Barbara responded to the strange events of the previous few minutes, thinking that if Angela had indeed enchanted her fellow trustees, then the least she could do was to give them the opportunity to comply with her wishes. She took the opportunity of the lull in discussions to make a suggestion. "I wonder if we should reconsider the de-accession proposal," she said. "I do think it would be damaging to our reputation to be seen to be removing such a collection from public view."

"Quite right, Dr Hollis," Sir Arthur replied without even seeming to hesitate. "I believe that would be the best approach."

"Indeed," Carfax said after only a moment.

"I completely agree," said Professor Deepdale.

Barbara was bemused. Only minutes earlier, all three had been vehemently opposed to any suggestion that the shabtis should be retained in the collection. Now it was as if any such suggestion was beyond consideration. By whatever mechanism, Angela's demand had prevailed. That, Barbara thought, was entirely consistent with the Egyptian concept of Ma'at – good order would be maintained and unnecessary change would be avoided.

Sir Arthur looked around the table at the trustees. "In which case, that is confirmed. The shabtis will remain." He stopped for a moment and seemed to consider the consequences of his remarks for the first time. His brow furrowed. "I fear the other projects will have to be put on the back burner until we can find an alternative source of funding." His colleagues nodded. No one else spoke and Barbara felt content to let things come to their own conclusion. Sir Arthur took a handkerchief from his pocket and wiped his forehead. "Now if there is no further business," he said, "I think I would like to close the meeting. To be honest, I don't feel entirely well."

## Chapter 13: The Veil of Isis

Angela was sitting at her desk. She had taken off the ring and it sat back, in its box, on her desk. She was more than a little shocked by what she had done and not entirely certain of whether or not it had really had the effect she had hoped. She took comfort from the fact that the shabtis on her desk appeared to be regarding her with a benign expression. Perhaps all would be well.

She repacked the shabtis from the tomb of Nofret in their box. The cool of their faience coating contrasted with the heat that seemed to have emanated from the ring.

She tried to distract herself from the questions asked by the events in the conference room. She went back to cataloguing the shabti inscriptions, trying to see if she could learn anything from the changes in different inscription types over time. Some carried little more than the name of the deceased and that of Osiris, other might carry an entire statement of offering; commending the deceased to Osiris with offerings of bread and beer. She felt perhaps she was retreating from her actions into the comfort of the work she knew well but she felt unable to confront the implications of the power of the ring, if that was indeed what it was.

She told herself that she could control it; that she could choose when to take advantage of its power. She said to herself that it was ridiculous to imagine that it was anything other than an attractive gold Egyptian ring from around the time of Cleopatra.

Dr. Barbara Hollis came in. Angela looked up. She felt embarrassed by how she had behaved in governor's meeting and she felt worse because Barbara had evidently been completely unaffected. Barbara seemed completely unconcerned, however. "You'll be pleased to hear that the Trustees decided to change their mind regarding the shabtis."

Angela was pleased and more than a little surprised that the effect had been so immediate.

"And, is that the ring that we can thank for convincing them?" she said.

"Err, yes. I guess so. I don't really understand what is going on with it."

Barbara smiled. She picked up the ring and turned it over in her hand, peering at the inscription. "That's the thing with magic – or science for that matter – you don't need to understand for it to work. It's hard to know which cultures were more obsessed with it, the Egyptians or those further north in the Levant. In any respect it was central to all those societies. Maybe there was something in it. Or maybe it was all a coincidence."

"I seem to be experiencing a lot of coincidences at the moment."

"Well, I would recommend ignoring them unless they are to your disadvantage." Barbara smiled and put her battered leather satchel on the desk. "Still that wasn't really why I wanted to see you." Barbara opened case and pulled out a sheath of notes. "I came across something that might be relevant to your research. How is your Greek?"

"Not as good as my hieroglyphic."

"Well, let me summarise it. This is the transcription of a papyrus. Part of the Oxyrhncus collection. It's fragmentary – so many of them are – but it seems to be a court record; mid-first Century BCE from context. I came across it because it relates to a prince, Ba'al Haddu. He was from Peleset, what we now call Palestine. He's very much in my patch but we don't know much about him; that's why I noticed this. It seems that a woman outside the court was accused of using magic against this prince to enslave him."

Angela furrowed her brow, disturbed by the implications of the papyrus. "Surely it's not an uncommon claim from someone that finds themselves in a relationship that might not be approved of by others," she said hoping to find a more rational explanation.

"That's true but what made this interesting was the claim that the woman had called on the powers of Isis, even though she was not a priestess of the temple, and several men had testified that she had ensnared them. It was done using a ring that had bewitching powers. While we are talking of coincidences, it seems that this might be another."

"Do we know what happened to her?"

"Sadly the papyrus is incomplete. There are records of interrogations and the testimony of the Medjay that they had failed to find the supposed ring but no account of the court's final decision. And the woman is not named."

Angela picked up the ring. "Could it be this ring?" she said.

"We cannot know. Don't worry though," she said with a smile, "the Medjay are unlikely to come for you after all this time. It is curious though that this ring's power seems to have brought its owner as much trouble as benefit. Perhaps these things should no be used too freely."

Angela knew what Barbara meant. The power that the ring appeared to bestow could be beneficial but it came at a cost; the cost of a loss of control and an abandonment to lust that might have unintended consequences; the sense of progressive addiction to its use. She wondered what continuing to use the ring might drive her to do.

She had thought of taking Patrick back, enslaving him with the ring as her personal shabti. There was no doubt that was a bad idea; she could still remember the all-absorbing nature of the desire that had accompanied her use of the ring. It could so easily destroy her, destroy anybody, leaving her the slave of her own lusts. And besides, even an enslaved Patrick didn't sound like much of a proposition. If she was going to abandon herself to lust, she would find someone worth abandoning herself for.

Even so, she had enjoyed the freedom bestowed by the ring; feeling she could pursue her own desires without concern for others. But perhaps when the stela said "no mortal has ever lifted my mantle" it meant that no mortal could approach a knowledge of Isis without succumbing to her power.

"You are right," she said to Barbara after thinking for a bit. "I think this object is best returned to the archives after the exhibition. Some aspects of its story would be better left untold."

"It's a conundrum. Scholarship would say that a full account of it should be given. On the other hand it is hard to think of a way that such an account could be given without attracting derision. I suspect that the Ma'at of our closeted academic world would be disturbed by the idea of such a thing."

Angela smiled in agreement. She knew how conservative university circles could be.

Barbara went on, "I'm not sure how you will feel about this but perhaps, the greater good will be served by the ring's apparent nature remaining hidden."

"Yes, I am sure you're right," said Angela. "I think it is not up to us to try to raise the mantle. This aspect of Isis should remain veiled."

"At least for as long as my fellow Trustees seem to be following a sensible course," Barbara said with a smile. "It might be wise if it was stored where you can find it again. Just in case..."

“And,” said Angela, thinking that she would almost certainly have to face another confrontation with Patrick at some point, “even if I’m not wearing the ring, it doesn’t mean I cannot summon my inner Isis. Having seen the benefits of standing my ground, I don’t think I’ll be back-tracking on that any time soon.”

**THE END**

## **Review : Oxford Weekly Courier**

### **Exhibition “Tutankhamun Centenary” at the Anstruther Museum**

If you thought that the days of old fashioned museum collections with dull objects in dusty cabinets were over then you haven't visited the Anstruther. No doubt it's academically worthy but it can't compare as a visitor experience to other local museums.

Still, they are trying hard with this new exhibition celebrating 100 years since the opening of Tutankhamun's tomb in 1922. The staging of this introduction to the world of the boy king is interesting and the curators have done a good job in explaining the events of the time and their significance, especially to popular culture. The trouble is they haven't got much to show. Don't come expecting to see the golden mask or anything from the tomb. The examples of the popular “Tutmania” reaction are more interesting. If you are interested in that period in Ancient Egypt you'd be better off at the Ashmolean's “100 Years of the Boy King” exhibition to be honest! Two stars.

## A Few Notes

While I was writing this tale I picked up a few bits of research that might be of interest to readers. You don't need any of this to enjoy the story but if you are interested in the real world facts behind the fantasy you might find some of this useful.

All of the Egyptian characters (apart from Cleopatra and the other pharaohs and their wives that get mentioned in passing) are figments of my imagination, as are Angela and the others at the museum. Carter, Carnarvon, Lady Evelyn, Brograve Beauchamp, Harry and Minnie Burton were all real people and some of the actions and comments attributed to them are true.

Chapter 1: Although for a lot of the time the average Egyptian wore little, Egyptian clothing could be surprisingly complicated. Nowadays Egypt is famous for its cotton but this is long before cotton was available in the Near East. Linen was the usual cloth. Wool and leather were rarely used by Egyptians, although those of Greek or Roman heritage (especially the ruling elite which was of Greek origin) may have done so at the time of Nofret. Footwear was mainly made from papyrus or palm leaves but it was common, for non-elite individuals at least, to go barefoot.

Chapter 2: About shabtis: University College London seems to have done most of Angela's research already (although the Anstruther collection may add more detail). Find out more about them on the UCL web site: [www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/museums-static/digitalegypt).

Tiye did indeed conspire to murder Ramses III and the assassination plot succeeded. Examination of Ramses III's mummy shows he had his throat cut. However, Tiye's plans for the succession did not succeed: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiye\\_\(20th\\_dynasty\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tiye_(20th_dynasty))

The idea for the Anstruther Museum's commemorative exhibition came from a real one that I went to a few years back. The Ashmolean did an excellent job on Tut-mania: [www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-28403598](http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/entertainment-arts-28403598)

Of course, the Anstruther is not the first to try to profit from Tutankhamun's tomb while not having much to go on. In 1923, within six months of the discovery, anatomist Grafton Elliot-Smith (later to be implicated in the Piltdown Man scandal) published a book titled, "Tutankhamun and the Discovery of His Tomb". Of the 133 pages of the book less than a quarter are directly related to the subject and of the 22 illustrations not one is of any object from the tomb!

Chapter 3: Nofret refers to the fact that her flail is no less potent than that of Min. The god of fertility is often portrayed carrying a flail. [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Min\\_\(god\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Min_(god))

Chapter 5: For some of the erotic positions described see: Turin Papyrus 550001 discovered in Deir el Medina, the village of the workmen for the Valley of the Kings.

Henutet is a genuine term for a female temple servant. I imagine a group of them going out to celebrate before the marriage of one of their number. That would be a hen-utet party, I imagine. :-)

Chapter 6: The Griffith Institute really does have Carter's notes and Burton's photographs available on line. You can explore them here: [www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/](http://www.griffith.ox.ac.uk/discoveringTut/). I had the opportunity to examine some of the originals during a visit – quite an experience.

- Chapter 8: Strictly speaking the Medjay aren't known to still be performing their policing role as late as the 30<sup>th</sup> Dynasty. They are more associated with the 18<sup>th</sup> Dynasty, i.e. the time of King Tut. On the other hand I don't think a specific successor to them has been identified so I have decided they will do for this tale.
- Chapter 9: The maleem was one thousandth part of an Egyptian Pound and a piastre a one hundredth part. If Carter paid one pound and sixty piastres for the ring in 1915 it would be an equivalent of £165 today. A bargain, even without knowing its powers!
- Chapter 12: What would Nofret's tomb be doing in Taposiris Magna, 50km from Alexandria and a long way from her home in Busiris? Well, there has been speculation that Cleopatra was buried at Taposiris Magna and, while it seems unlikely to me, it would explain why one of her courtiers, as Nofret obviously became, might be buried there. But, of course, Angela doesn't know that. It would be interesting to know the date of her death. Did she go on in service to Cleopatra until the end of her reign, 15 years after this tale is set? Was Nofret involved in some way with Cleopatra's affair with Mark Anthony? And how would the history of the ancient world have changed if the enchanting powers of the ring had been brought to bear on Cleopatra's involvement with Octavian (later Caesar Augustus) after the Battle of Actium?
- Chapter 13: The Roman author Plutarch refers to a statue of Isis at Sais (about 60km as the Ibis flies from Busiris) in Egypt which carried the inscription "I am all that has been and is and shall be; no mortal has ever lifted my mantle"
- The Oxyrhynchus collection of papyri were discovered at the town of the same name about 160km south of Cairo. They were found in 1896 in rubbish dumps from the late Egyptian / Roman period. They include ancient great works of literature and everyday things like official correspondence, census-returns, tax-assessments, petitions, court-records, sales, leases, wills, bills, accounts, inventories, horoscopes, and private letters. About 100,000 papyrus fragments are housed in Oxford; the biggest collection of classical manuscripts in the world. Less than 10% of this material has been published to date. Who knows what delights await?