

Free Sample Chapter of Thutmose which can be purchased on amazon.com and barnesandnoble.com in soft cover and ebook formats.

AMARNA

Chapter 1: Tell el-Amarna, 18th Dynasty c 1350BCE, the heretic pharaoh Akhenaton

I entered his life - a quiet woman running errands for the royal family.

Thutmose, Overseer of Works and Sculptor, carved in the ways of his ancestors: barely three, his chisel work a marvel; at six apprenticed; at fourteen a master with his own studio; at twenty-three given the pharaoh's studio and permitted, then encouraged to leave the ways of his ancestors and see the world in a new way.

The workrooms were new to me. I carried a tray of delicacies of fresh fruits, newly baked marsh birds, breads warm from the ovens as well a finely brewed beer, wondering at what I would find. The man in charge sat quietly in the courtyard, intent on his work. Thutmose.

Instantly I was aware of him, sought to catch his attention. My movements grew more languorous, my chin rising to show my profile in its most advantageous, amused as I readied for the seduction game. While not dull in the Pharaoh's service, I longed for some sign that still I was of this world. Swaying my body against the fine linen of my robes, knowing that he, too, was amused and stirred as I caressed myself with the linen, I looked about to be polite. The only sculptures I had seen before I came to the Pharaoh's new city were massive, proclaiming victory over foes, counting the hands or penises of foreigners killed and the triumph of the Pharaoh.

Then - so shocked that I forgot my garments of linen, my ways of being like my surroundings - a carved head of the Pharaoh's beloved Nefertiti, lines outlining where inlays would show her eyebrows, her eyes still empty awaiting jewels, all of the limestone brimming with life.

"Did you do this?" I stared and could not prevent the revealing command.

Had those large rough hands formed such delicate beauty?

“Yes.”

He waited, almost indifferent. He knows what he has done, thought I, he knows what he is, so very sure of himself. I could almost hear him thinking ‘so little time, I must not waste any of it, I must get back to my work.’ His hand, momentarily stilled at my interruption, rose with the brush which was seemingly part of him; part of the sweep of his muscular brown arm, the strength of his brown back gleaming in the sun, the sturdy legs tensed as all his concentration was on the head he shaped. Like all the men in this hot land, he wore nothing but fine linens to cover those parts that all people cover. Frequent bathing in ponds and the great river as well the sweet oils used lavishly kept him smelling fresh.

I delivered the messages and then, slipping back into my other self, said

“I must not delay your work; I will leave this tray for you, and return later for it.”

Already he was gone, all his being concentrated on the head he shaped. He seemingly ignored the apprentices who painted lotus, rushes, marsh birds on the walls of the compound; but I could see he was the master, the young apprentices watched his every move, trying to absorb his genius, trying to please him.

Thus we started, he aware that all that others saw of me was a disguise, I aware that his undisguised self, so clear to me, few around him would see and value. I brought messages and trays of fresh foods, and took back the empty trays and tantalizing reports. Returning to the royal enclosure, I would be sent back sooner, ostensibly carrying messages again, but really so I could bring back news of what I had seen. At first it was just once a day, and then my visits became more frequent.

He worked incessantly. I became a familiar sight around the workshops just as I was in the royal enclosure, and carrying messages became more common until I was the only one who

carried them. Gradually, he permitted me to watch him work, to see him as he created, to hear him muttering, to watch as he took his tool and made a quick mark; that turned out perfect, to me, if not to him. His work deepened swiftly and the beauty he created seemed to come straight from the gods, or the one god, Aten, if one believed with the Pharaoh. The royal family came more frequently to the workshop, and were pleased.

One day, he pulled a stool next to him and gestured for me to sit. Silently I watched him work, week after week. Gradually I realized that he sensed my reactions to the work unfolding from his hands. A twitch of a shoulder muscle, a leaning forward to make a mark on a piece of plaster, the irritation quickly concealed when an apprentice approached to ask a question, or just to look. And then it seemed he worked where I most wanted him to, the arch of an eyebrow, the line of a bird in the rushes. Sometimes I was tempted to point a finger at what needed changing or emphasis, and that thin proud mouth, showing little of his interior world, would quirk with humor and he would indulge me by working with his brush at that spot.

After much time passed, he disturbed our intent silence,

“You are not of our people; does it not make your heart ache to live alone among us?”

Just as in his unfolding art, he went to the essence.

“Yes.”

“Have you no lover to share the nights with?”

“No, it is too dangerous.”

This man would be contemptuous of evasions or half truths; now was not the time for disguises.

“Why dangerous?”

“Who could I trust when I am so close to the royal family? If I have to leave quickly, could I bear to leave part of my heart here? Would not that hesitation mean danger?”

“Yet, that first day when you came, you were willing, and I know you still are.”

“That first day I was amusing myself, as were you. Now it is different - for you too.”

“You are becoming part of my work, I need you by me.”

His rough voice was full of certainty and pain. Hearing that pain and acceptance, questions spun in me. Did that not mean he, too, was aware of danger all around him, and in the very air? Was he protecting me? Himself? It is his land. He must see dangers that I am not aware of. The dangers that come from being close to the powerful, as I am, and as he is, swirl around us. Faces that conceal meanings, soft words that are meant to deceive, secret ambitions, not so secret ambitions.

“You honor me.”

He hears the force behind my words, even though his people have a different code of honor.

“For the moment, I am favored by the Pharaoh and he grants me vast resources because what I make of them pleases him.”

“For the moment.”

“Yes”

“And when that moment is past?”

“I must not lose this time to do my work; I must continue as I have begun.”

Am I willing to give up a bit of my precarious safety for this man, for his work? Do I have a choice, or did I make it when I sat by his side as he worked, and did I go further along

that road from which, for me, there was no way back, the longer I sat by him. For is it not his great gifts and the way he uses them that draws me deeper into danger?

“Who do you share your nights with?”

I have to ask, womanly curiosity overcame my pride.

“My children do not have the gift, so they and their mother are far away in
obscurity - safe.”

“So you too are alone.”

I am glad, it can be just the two of us for a time.

“At night I think of you, and where we can be together that no eyes will see, and
then how I thirst to see you un-robed, so that as I work with you beside me, I will be
aware of your unadorned self. ”

A quick warm look, I hope un-noticed by those around us.

“Meet me at the pond when the moon shines above the palms.”

Not quite a demand, nor yet a plea, yet this contained man has said the words.

“Yes, I’ll be there.”

A vow.