

**KINGDOM
OF THE
RIVER THRONE**

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CHAPTER ONE
ARAR-NU-T

For many generations to come, it would be said that the heat of the summer sun had never borne down on the Royal City with such oppressive force as it did that fateful day after the great summer festival in the twentieth year of the reign of the noble Queen Meni-Mahtt. Perhaps it was a sign that the great mother goddess, Neter-Mut, was becoming impatient with the Lioness Queen's continued resistance to her divinely prescribed ritual abdication. Or, perhaps, it was simply just a fluke of the fickle summer weather. Most residents of the city prayed it was the latter, for none wished to face a repeat of the horrid drought which had brought famine, shame, and ruin upon the Kingdom of the River Throne only forty years before.

For the people of this great island citadel of Arar-Nu-t, life had been good for the past year. The farms which lined the broad, sluggish river Nesheff had

produced a summer harvest of unusually rich bounty thanks to the previous year's high floods and a sophisticated irrigation system which belied the relatively primitive tools which the workers in the fields possessed. Copper was the metal of choice for tools in these lands. Iron was little more than a myth, a divine gift sent down from the heavens only to rot away into orange dust before even the greatest of the desert smiths could find a way to work it.

Arar-Nu-t had been built on the profits to be had from trading copper along the great length of the Nesheff. The mines of Hemt to the west of the city tapped into some of the richest veins of ore to be found in all the lands along the river. Despite centuries of digging, the veins just seemed to go on and on, offering the Queen and her industrious people a virtually unending supply of this extremely lucrative commodity.

As the highly useful copper made its way out of Arar-Nu-t, silver and gold flowed in to take its place. These metals made up for their relative lack of utility with their entrancing natural beauty, a property which made them the choice material for object of status and ritual throughout the Royal City. More importantly, perhaps, these magnificent metals could be used to purchase that one precious metal which seemed to elude even the most skilled of the Queen's royal prospectors: tin.

The lack of significant native tin supplies was the Kingdom's one real weakness and it was a dire weakness indeed, for there could be no forging the real utilitarian metal of choice without it. No tin. No bronze. And without bronze, the armies of Queen Meni-Maht would find themselves at a fatal disadvantage in battle against the many foreign adversaries whose mineral wealth was typically less abundant, but far more usefully balanced.

Only bronze could be forged into bright, sharp daggers which didn't simply bend when striking the weapon of a foe. Only bronze could be formed into vicious serrated spear tips which didn't immediately lose their edge. It armored the heads of the warriors against blades and blows. It armored the sides of their grand chariots and the chests of the great desert horses which pulled them into battle. It meant safety for the people of the Kingdom of the River Throne, and it meant safety for the lucrative trade that secured their place at the very heart of the known world.

If there was always a shortage of tin within the Lioness Queen's lands, the shortage of wood was more like a famine. Wood was a resource which had always seemed to be just outside the River Throne's grasp. The great groves in the north and the vast forests across the southern sea had always been held in the hands of foreign rulers. Gold and silver could buy this precious

resource, as it could tin, but it could never be shipped in sufficient quantity to sate even the most fundamental of needs. As a result, its trade was kept exclusively in the hands of the throne, both as a means to judiciously ration the scarce resource, and as means to keep even the most wealthy and independantly mided residents of the Royal City firmly dependant upon its ruler.

Despite these difficulties, the Kingdom of the River Throne could boast one thing which no other land could. Arar-Nu-t was home to the only true temples to the first-born daughter and son of Neter-Mut: Abehti-Mahtt, the lion goddess of feminine dominance over man, and Anrit-Aatru, the bull god of masculine dominance over woman. As with so many such siblings, these divinities were eternal rivals, and the contest of wills and rituals which occurred among and between their respective priesthoods served to define much about society and the manner in which the Kingdom was governed.

During times of peace, Arar-Nu-t and the Kingdom of the River Throne were the exclusive domain of Queens. Ordained as a priestess of Abehti-Mahtt, these women were the rulers of hearth and home and possessed virtually unlimited power within their lands. Under their rule, justice was harsh, but fair, and they sought to ensure that society was stable and free from

the conflicts that always simmered between the rival divinities and their respective temples.

During times of war, however, the Kingdom would come under the rulership of a King, an ordained priest of Anrit-Aatru whose sole purpose was to enslave the Queen and lead the Kingdom's armies against the nation's foes. Justice would often be quite brutal in these times, and the conflict and debauchery which simmered between the priesthoods of the various divinities would often boil over and consume many citizens both willing and otherwise.

No King of the River Throne had ever ruled for more than three cycles of the seasons, for there was no place for a King and his insatiable lust in times of peace. It was a King's obligation to give up the throne in celebration of a war's end, in favor for the eternal pleasure of his enslaved Queen's body. Together they would enter into a divine union, one transfigured into the image of the mother, Neter-Mut, and the other into the all-surrounding image of her progenitor-god paramour, Heh-Hehi.

That Queen Meni-Mahtt had gone twenty years without a war was almost unprecedented in the history of the Kingdom of the River Throne. That she had also gone twenty years without falling to the ever-present carnal temptations of Anrit-Aatru was almost as unusual. Almost. A few High Priestesses of Abehti-

Mahtt had managed to keep their divine desires in check for longer, but they were few and far between.

The current Lioness Queen's recalcitrance, much to the Kingdom's detriment, was giving her foreign rivals much too free a hand in important affairs abroad. If she could not respect her own traditions in her own lands, after all, then how could she possibly be trusted to respect treaties and trade agreements? And, to make matters even more complicated, her resistance to divinely inspired lust was making the bull priests restless for change.

Rumors of plots and conspiracies abounded. Some had even come to believe that the priests of Anrit-Aatru were planning with a foreign enemy to start a war to force the Queen's reign to end. Thankfully for the common folk of Arar-Nu-t, the oppressive heat ensured that even the most raucous priests of Anrit-Aatru were hiding in the cool shadows of their dark temple, far too beaten down by the blazing sun to engage in much more than an occasional bellow in the general direction of the Royal Palace and the grand Temple of Abehti-Mahtt which stood alongside it.

Relaxing in cool places was the order of the day not only for the bull priests, but for all of the Royal City's people. No rational person would dare to venture out into the impossibly hot, dusty streets, still littered with the varied and colorful detritus of the previous day's

celebration. Those few that did were largely the unfortunate and abused servants of particularly cruel or uncaring masters, sent out into the deadly heat on errands of little importance, to destinations unlikely to offer either respite from the heat or whatever pointless object or service they had been sent to obtain.

One such master was an unusually corpulent man named Mahtep. His vile temper and love of the whip had made him one of the most reviled merchants Arar-Nu-t's trade quarter. Three had died by his hand already. He had been fined and even imprisoned by the royal guards for his insatiable cruelty. Such was his powerful influence in the tin trade, however, that they could do nothing else without directly endangering the very peace and security of the River Kingdom.

If Mahtep's trio of surviving servants had hoped that the heat would render his obese body too lethargic to carry out his irrational cruelties then they were quite mistaken. Two of them were granted a relatively easy punishment. They were ordered to fan his family without pause for the seemingly unending hours of searing daylight. The other was much less fortunate. She was sent to begin carrying jugs of water up from the river, to keep his already full cistern overflowing for no real reason other than to make her endure pain. Pain and worse.

Perhaps Mahtep was pleased with his plan to have the sun torture his victim in his stead. Perhaps if had known the price he would be compelled to pay for this act of astonishing cruelty, he would, for the first time in his life, have thought twice.

CHAPTER TWO

SCARRED BEAUTY

Anett might have been called beautiful were it not for her nearly gaunt figure and her horribly tangled mop of jet black hair. She wore nothing more than a shabby, torn and nearly see-through linen dress which left one of her rather modest breasts quite exposed to any who had the inclination to ponder such a sorry sight. It was a sight made all the sorrier by the many ugly scars which covered every inch of her exposed, deeply burnished skin. Each of these bore silent witness to the horrible cruelty of her wild-tempered master and his equally maladjusted rabble of a dysfunctional family.

The dark, sunken eyes through which Anett had looked upon the world for nearly nineteen years were deeply worn with burdens unimaginable to most of Arar-Nu-t's people. Even the poor who lived in the slums which surrounded the pornographic temple of Arnit-Aatru had far better lives, a fact of which she was

all too aware, for she had once called those dank, depressing environs home. That was seven years ago, before she had become an orphan with no other family in the city to take her in and raise her as their own. So much had changed since those peaceful days when she knew freedom. She was little more than a slave now, permanently indentured to her vile master, with no prospects in life other than the hope of dying a peaceful death somewhere quiet where her cruel master could not find her.

Her master, Anett knew, had very different ideas. The indentured servants of Mahtep died painfully and slowly by his unrelentingly violent hand. The scars upon her body were just one sign of his brutality. The state of her attire was another. But, it was the scar in her mind, of knowing what could have been and of knowing what was certain to come, which hurt her the most. It was a scar that no one else could see and the inescapable pain was slowly becoming too much for her battered soul to bear.

It was a more physical burden which Anett was forced to bear on this particular day. Upon her bruised and battered shoulder was her master's largest and most ornately decorated earthenware jug. She could not imagine how she was supposed to carry the filled container back to her master's house not once but many times over, let alone to do so without damaging it

in any way. She had long ago become accustomed to Mahtep's cruel games but this was something entirely new. This was no excuse to reach for the whip. This was something else. Something dark. Something truly sadistic.

“How am I expected do this? It is just not possible! It is just not possible!” Anett moaned softly to herself as she struggled toward the river. Everything around her seemed to oppress her very will to live. There was the heat, of course. Then there was the light which turned the whitewashed mudbrick houses into blazing infernos of blinding luminescence. The stench of spilled beer from the past night's final celebrations assaulted her nose. The buzz of the countless flies which now flocked to the beer stained cobblestones was nearly deafening.

Anett's heart sank as each successive step made it ever more painfully obvious that her task was one which really and truly could not be completed. The only possible conclusion began to sink in. “He wants me to die like the others. He wants me to die and feed these flies like a diseased whore of the street. That is my real duty as his servant this rule of the sun. To die and rot in the street.”

Anett bit her lip and staggered on. She tried to think of some way she could outsmart the insidious Mahtep. Perhaps she could beg for aid from one of the river-watchers who's job it was to keep the crocodiles from

lurking about the water gathering places. They might have sympathy and give her refuge from the sun. They might even help her bring back a jug of water once the day faded into twilight and they were relieved of their posts. If not that, then they might at least might know where a helping hand could be had. But then, she realized, they would almost certainly expect some form of payment. Her master would certainly refuse. She herself had nothing to pay them with save her deeply scarred body. Death from the heat was a more palatable option than that.

Anett's mind wandered to that fateful day, seven years before, which had turned her into a virtual slave. She remembered how a priestess of Nesheftt, the River Maiden, had come to her and told her that her mother had been taken by a priest of Arnit-Aatru. How he had blessed her mother and made her into the image of Neter-Mut. How he had then surrounded her in the image of Heh-Hehi. Together they had been taken down into the tombs beneath the city, to lay forever in eternal union and bliss.

At the time, nothing that the priestess had said had made any sense to Anett. All that she knew was that her mother was gone and that the priestess had taken her and sold her for a paltry sum to the vile Mahtep. If she had know better, she might have objected. She might have run away and found a more sympathetic soul who

might have found her a path to a better life. But she hadn't. The priestess had called it all a great divine blessing, and she had believed it without question. Priestesses weren't allowed to lie... were they?

CHAPTER THREE

DESPAIR

Anett looked toward the river and began to think of her future. A tear ran down her cheek. "I cannot endure this life that is no life at all," she whispered to herself, closing her eyes. She began to contemplate casting herself into the river to drown in the embrace of its divine patron who's priestesses had once called her blessed. "The priestess of the River Maiden placed me in the hands of Mahtep. Why should I not go the goddess now and cast myself into her most blessed and divine embrace? Would she not take me away from this horrible world and convey me into the paradise beyond? Would she not give me this justice for the wrong of her priestess? Surely she would! Surely!"

The despairing young woman now stopped and placed her jug down in the middle of the empty street. Had the priestess really lied? Or had the priestess told

the truth, and this horrible life was indeed the sort of thing the River Maiden considered a blessing?

Another path entered Anett's mind. If she could not trust the River Maiden, then what of the god who had taken her mother and made her into the image of the blessed divine mother Neter-Mut? Would he not give her the same honor?

Anett looked up into the vivid blue sky, her arms stretched out toward that vast realm where the mother of the gods made her home. "Why?" she begged, tears cascading down her scarred face. "Why can not you take me as you took my mother? Most divine and holy Neter Mut! I beg you! Am I not blessed with your favor? Have I not suffered in this middle-world enough? Please! I beg you! I cannot go on! Send a priest of the bull to take me! I beg you! I beg you!"

Anett closed her eyes tight and waited, though she did not truly know what it was she was waiting for or what it might feel like when it came. All she knew that when this blessing came, it would be pearly-white. That was the beautiful substance of the great goddess herself, a substance which was so entralling that few who laid eyes on those made into her image could resist the desire to be made likewise.

"Oh blessed mother of all things!" the young servant cried out in anguish as the blessing of Neter-Mut she

desired failed to come upon her in the form of a priest of Arnit-Aatru or otherwise. Desperation filled her heart. Every part of her soul was now focused into her plea for deliverance. "Please! Please take me! Please take my body and make it as yours is made! I cannot go on! I beg you! Take me!"

Anett sobbed as it became quite apparent that however much Neter-Mut might have supposedly blessed her by taking her mother, it was not a blessing which could be called upon by the begging of even so blessed a mortal as she. She wiped the tears from her face as she turned from the sky to her blistered feet. "What is the use? No one cares in this world or the next," she choked out as she looked to her master's accursed water jug. "No one. No one at all."

A look of harsh determination now came over Anett's face. She looked back to the river and its increasingly inviting offer of freedom in death. She slowly brushed a loose strand of hair back over her shoulder. Then she made her decision. "My master only wants me dead. The mother goddess will not have me in this world for her offering, so... so I shall go to the river and in it I shall go to the over-world and offer myself to her there!"

Anett shook herself off and started toward the shimmering water with a sense of power and purpose the likes of which she had never before felt in her long,

sad life. For the very first time since that fateful day when she had lost everything, she had made her own choice. She had chosen her own path. No one could stop her. Where she was going, no one could send her back. After seven years of unrelenting horror, she was finally free.

CHAPTER FOUR
EMERALD EYES

As alone as Anett might have believed herself to be in the sun-scorched street, her anguish had not gone unnoticed. A pair of piercing, deep green eyes gazed out from a shaded alleyway which led away from the opulent homes of the merchants and toward the walled royal citadel which filled the very heart of Arar-Nu-t. They were focused on the suicidally determined young woman as she passed on her way toward her meeting with death and its promise of eternal freedom. To say that their owner was a very unusual wanderer in this quarter of the city would have been the greatest of understatements.

“What is this?” a strange, purring, feminine voice called out from the darkness in a tone akin to that a mother scolding a misbehaving child. “Is this a wayward servant who refuses to honor her master with honesty and faithfulness in her actions?”

Anett stopped short. Her heart raced as she slowly turned toward the strange, almost unnatural voice. “Leave me alone! I just want...” she began to retort as a feeling of rage welled up within her. She was not about to let anyone interrupt the blissful feeling of freedom which filled her soul. “I just to... to... to...”

Anett’s voice faded into a hoarse whisper as the mysterious stranger stepped out into the light. The horrified young servant gasped in shock and fell to her knees, shaking from head to toe in abject terror. She bent over until her nose touched the ground. She dared not even to look at the feet of the holy image which now towered over her, such was the divine visage which had presented itself so suddenly and forcefully before her.

The priestess of Abehti-Mahtt loomed over the frightened young woman, staring down at her with a mixture of curiosity and contempt. Her lush tan fur seemed to shine of its own accord even in the bright sunlight. Her leonine facial features here drawn into an intensely intimidating scowl. Her long tufted tail twitched back and forth impatiently as she awaited the wayward servant’s reply.

One visiting Arar-Nu-t from some distant foreign land might be forgiven for thinking the priestess dressed in the fur of a wild beast. In a costume so perfect that one might mistake it for being the woman’s

own living body. But this was no costume. Just as Neter-Mut would bless a woman by making her into her own image, so too would the Mother Goddess' own progeny. The priestess didn't simply appear to be a lion-woman. She really was one, a genuine daughter of Abehti-Maht in form as well as in name.

As if the priestess' leonine image were not unsettling enough for mortal eyes, her clothing presented her with a truly unearthly visage. It was as if someone had made vivid green emerald into liquid and spread it over the priestess' body in the form of a one piece bathing suit that extended all the way up the priestess' neck. More of this emerald substance was spread around the priestess' upper arms, wrists, and ankles, and it even formed sandals beneath her feline feet. All of this reflected the sunlight into countless intense green rays which played and danced over the whitewashed walls and dirty gray cobblestones with every little of its wearer's movements.

Anett again found herself sobbing with complete and utter despair. The world seemed to be coming to an end around her. Her freedom had now gone as quickly as she had discovered it.

“Well? What have you to say for yourself, wayward servant?” the priestess of Abehti-Maht demanded, tapping her tall, emerald tipped staff on the ground in a highly intimidating fashion. “Do you think it is truly

right and dutiful to simply leave your master's beautiful bottle here in the street and run away? Why would you even begin to think such a dishonorable thing to be acceptable?"

"I... I just want to die," Anett choked out as she began to openly weep at the priestess' feet.

The priestess stopped tapping her staff. Her expression softened ever so slightly. "Why?" she inquired. "What aspect of this mortal life could possibly displease you so much that you desire to leave it before your divinely appointed time?"

"My master beats me," Anett sobbed, tears pouring like a river from her quaking eyes. "He beats me for doing nothing wrong. He whips me for doing what I am told. I never disobey him. But he beats me. All his family beats me! All except the one... his eldest son. He does not beat me but all the rest do! All fifteen of them! It has been seven years. Seven years! I pray for the mother goddess to take me as she took my mother! To make me her offering! But she does not. I cannot go on any longer. I just want to die."

The priestess frowned as her eyes focused upon the prostrate young woman's horribly scarred back. "There is truth to your words in the marks of the whip which lie so heavily and in such number upon your body," she observed, sighing with a deep, feline rumble. For a

moment she hesitated to continue. Her expression belied her uncertainty as to whether or not it was her duty to assist this horribly abused servant. “Perhaps... perhaps then, it is your master which fails in his proper duties, as far too many are so careless to do in these difficult rules of the sun, when the Sun Hawk tries so hard to conquer all that is land and sky.”

Anett quivered as the priestess stepped toward her. She did not even dare look at the emerald sandaled feet which now rested only inches from her eyes, lest she offend the priestess of the most powerful of her people’s divinities. She could only hope that the priestess would allow her to continue to the river and cast herself into it as she now so desperately desired. “Please... please just... let me... let me go,” she choked out as her voice began to fail completely. “Let me... let me die.”

“No,” the priestess purred softly as she made her own very difficult decision. She leaned over and gently ran her fingers through the terrified young woman's long, tangled hair. “I do not know if it is my obligation to aid you, but... but allowing you to suffer further... that is not the way of Abehti-Mahtt. You shall have no more of this cruel and honorless master. You shall also think nothing more of seeking death before your divinely appointed time. That I command!”

Anett shook as she felt the priestess' fingers slide down around her left ear and along her jaw. She could feel the priestess' breath upon her forehead. She could smell the exotic scent of the temple as it seemed to surround her in a protective cloud amid the stench of street. The biting flies which had been hovering all around the street fled, leaving the air so perfectly quiet that she could hear her own heart beating.

“It seems to me that you were made a servant by an act of the eternal and blessed Neter-Mut, so you shall remain in this middle-world until such a time comes when Neter-Mut is ready to have your body made into her image,” the priestess declared. “But you shall not fear the whips of lesser masters in what remains of that life. From this rule of the sun forth, you shall serve the temple of Abehti-Mahtt and do all that is desired of you. But do not fear. Abehti-Mahtt is kind to those who serve her with honor and respect. Abehti-Mahtt also protects those who serve her with honor and respect. You shall be untouchable to those of the unordained masses who might presume themselves to be your superior, no matter how wealthy and powerful they might think themselves to be.”

Anett shuddered and fell completely silent. She didn't know what to make of the priestess or her declaration. The priestess of the River Maiden has

certainly lied to her. Would the word of the priestess of the Lioness be any different?

“So it has been spoken, so it shall be done,” the priestess declared as she took hold of Anett’s shoulder with one hand and began to pull her up onto her feet. “Stand and look without fear upon the face of the Goddess Among Gods who delivers you from your long nightmare.”

Anett rose, but could not bring herself to do more than take a momentary glance at the priestess’ leonine face.

“You shall come with me now to the great and blessed Royal Temple,” the priestess declared. “There you shall follow me into its inner halls, forbidden to all but those who serve Abehti-Mahtt. Within you shall learn of your place and the duties which you will be expected to perform.”

Anett was utterly terrified at the very prospect of going with the priestess into the most forbidden place in all of the River Kingdom. Many had entered the temple before under such circumstances. None had ever come out, save those very rare few who had been blessed by Abehti-Mahtt to wear her face and do her will in the mortal world. “I... I...” she stammered as the priestess lifted her chin and stared straight into her teary eyes.

She knew she had no choice. There was no refusing the demands of a priestess of Abehti-Mahtt.

The priestess smiled softly as she drew the young woman toward the dark alley from which she had come. "Please do not be afraid, my pretty young servant," she purred warmly. "Abehti-Mahtt does not beat or abuse the ladies of her most mysterious and divine temple. You shall find no pain or feel no want in its glorious halls. But... your eyes. Your eyes tell me that you do not believe what I have told you. I do not blame you. But you must come with me now, and quickly. We must enter the walls of the forbidden temple grounds before your absence is noticed and chase is given by those who we both desire so greatly to avoid."

Tears dripped down Anett's face as she followed the priestess into the darkness. She looked over her shoulder at the jug she had left behind, wondering if it might have been a better decision to continue enduring the beatings of her master than the unknown horrors which might await at the unforgiving hands of the priestesses of Abehti-Mahtt. To her considerable shock, the ornate jug lay in many pieces upon the street, shattered by some unknown force. Confused and frightened by this sign, she turned back to the alley and followed the priestess upward, toward the center of the city and the massive temple which towered above it.

TO BE CONTINUED