

# The Hidden Oasis

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Extract

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THE  
HIDDEN  
OASIS



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2153 BC – EGYPT, THE WESTERN  
DESERT

They had brought a butcher with them out into the far wastes of *deshret*, and it was a cattle-slaughtering knife rather than a ceremonial one that he used to cut their throats.

A savage implement of knapped yellow flint, razor-sharp and as long as a forearm, the butcher went from priest to priest expertly pressing its blade into the soft angle between neck and collarbone. Eyes glazed from the brew of *shepen* and *shedeh* they had drunk to dull the pain, their shaved heads glistening with droplets of sacred water, each man offered prayers to Ra-Atum, imploring Him to bring them safely through the Hall of Two Truths into the Blessed Fields of Iaru. Whereupon the butcher tilted their heads backwards towards the dawn sky and, with a single, firm sweep, slashed their necks from ear to ear.

‘May he walk in the beautiful ways, may he cross the heavenly firmament!’ the remaining priests chanted. ‘May he eat beside Osiris every day!’

Blood spattering across his arms and torso, the butcher

lowered each man to the ground and laid him flat before moving to the next priest in line and repeating the process, the row of bodies growing ever longer as he went about his business, blank-faced and brutally efficient.

From a nearby dune top Imti-Khentika, High Priest of Iunu, First Prophet of Ra-Atum, Greatest of Seers, gazed down at this choreographed slaughter. He felt sorrow, of course, at the deaths of so many men he had come to know as brothers. Satisfaction as well, though, for their mission was accomplished and every one of them had known from the outset that this was how it must end, so that no whisper should ever be spoken abroad of what they had done.

Behind him, in the east, he sensed the first warmth of the sun, Ra-Atum in His aspect as Khepri, bringing light and life to the world. He turned, throwing back his leopardskin hood and opening out his arms, reciting:

*'Oh Atum, who came into being on the hill of creation,  
With a blaze like the Benu Bird in the Benben shrine at Iunu!'*

He raised a hand, fingers spread as if to clasp the narrow rim of magenta peeping above the sands on the horizon. Then, turning again, he looked in the opposite direction, westwards, to the rearing wall of cliffs that ran north to south a hundred *khet* distant, like a vast curtain strung across the very edge of the world.

Somewhere at the base of those cliffs, in the thick mesh of shadows that the dawn light had yet to penetrate, was the Divine Gateway: *re-en wesir*, the Mouth of Osiris. It was invisible from where he was standing. And it would have been to an observer positioned right in front of it, for he,

Imti, had uttered the spells of closing and concealment and none but those who knew how to look would have been aware of the gateway's presence. So it was that the place of their ancestors, *wehat er-djeru ta*, the oasis at the end of the world, had guarded its secrets across the endless expanse of years, its existence known only to a select few. Not for nothing was it also named *wehat seshtat* – the Hidden Oasis. Their cargo would be secure there. None would find it. It could rest in peace until more settled days should come.

Imti scanned the cliffs, his head nodding as if in approval, then he pulled his gaze back, to the warped spire of rock that burst from the dunes some eight *khet* from the cliff face. It was a striking feature even at this distance, dominating the surrounding landscape: a curving tower of black stone bowing outwards and upwards to a height of almost twenty *meh-nswt*, like some vast sickle blade ripping through the desert surface or, more appropriately, the foreleg of some gigantic scarab beetle clawing its way up through the sands.

How many travellers, Imti wondered, had passed that lone sentinel without realizing its significance? Few if any, he thought, answering his own question, for these were the empty lands, the dead lands, the domain of Set, where none who valued their lives would ever dream of venturing. Only those who knew of the forgotten places would come this far out into the burning nothingness. Only here would their charge be truly safe, far from the reach of those who would misuse its terrible powers. Yes, thought Imti, despite the horrors of their journey the decision to bring it west had been the right one. Definitely the right one.

Four moons ago now that decision had been taken, by a secret council of the most powerful in the land: Queen

Neith; Prince Merenre; the *tjaty* Userkef; General Rehu; and he, Imti-Khentika, Greatest of Seers.

Only the *nisu* himself, Lord of the Two Lands Nefer-ka-re Pepi, had not been present, nor informed of the council's decision. Once Pepi had been a mighty ruler, the equal of Khasekhemwy and Djoser and Khufu. Now in the ninety-third year of his reign, three times the span of a normal man's life, his power and authority had waned. Across the land the nomarchs raised private armies and made war on each other. To the north and the south the Nine Bows harried the borders. For three of the last four years the inundation had not come and the crops had failed.

*Kemet* was disintegrating, and the expectation was that things would only get worse. Son of Ra Pepi might have been, but now, at this time of crisis, others must assume control and make the great choices of state for him. And so their council had spoken: for its own protection, and for the safety of all men, the *iner-en sedjet* must be taken from Iunu where it was housed and transported back across the fields of sand to the safety of the Hidden Oasis, whence it had originally come.

And to he, Imti-Khentika, High Priest of Iunu, had fallen the responsibility of leading that expedition.

'Carry him across the winding waterway, ferry him to the eastern side of heaven!'

A renewed swell of chanting rose from below as another throat was cut, another body lowered to the ground. Fifteen lay there now, half their number.

'Oh Ra, let him come to you!' called Imti, joining in the chorus. 'Lead him upon the sacred roads, make him live for ever!'

He watched as the butcher moved to the next man in line, the air echoing with the moist whistle of severed wind-pipes. Then, as the knife sliced again, Imti turned his eyes away across the desert, recalling the nightmare of the journey they had just undertaken.

Eighty of them had set out, at the start of the *peret* season when the heat was at its least fierce. With their cargo swathed in layers of protective linen and lashed to a wooden sled, they had travelled south, first by boat to Zawty, then overland to the oasis of Kenem. Here they had rested a week before embarking on the last and most daunting stage of their mission – forty *iteru* across the burning, trackless wastes of *deshret* to the great cliffs and the Hidden Oasis.

Seven long weeks that final leg had taken them, the worst Imti had ever known, beyond even his most terrible imaginings. Before they had even reached halfway their pack oxen were all dead and they had had to take up the load themselves, twenty of them at a time yoked together like cattle, their shoulders streaked with blood from the bite of the sled's tow-ropes, their feet scorched by the fiery sands. Each day their progress had grown slower, hampered by mountainous dunes and blinding sandstorms, and above all by the heat, which even in that supposedly cool season had seared them from dawn until dusk as though the air itself was on fire.

Thirst, sickness and exhaustion had inexorably reduced their numbers and when their water had run out with still no sign of their destination he had feared their mission was doomed. Still they had trudged on, silent, indomitable, each lost in his private world of torment until on the fortieth day out of Kenem, the gods had rewarded their perseverance



with the sight for which they had so long been praying: a hazy band of red across the western horizon marking the line of the great cliffs and the end of their journey.

Even then it was a further three days before they reached the Mouth of Osiris and passed through it into the tree-filled gorge of the oasis, by which point there were only thirty of them still standing. Their burden had been consigned to the temple at the heart of the oasis; they had bathed in the sacred springs; and then, early this morning, the spells of closing and concealment recited, the Two Curses laid, they had trooped back out into the desert and the throat-cutting had begun.

A loud clatter snapped Imti from his reverie. The butcher, a mute, was banging the handle of his knife against a rock to attract his attention.

Twenty-eight bodies lay on the sand beside him, leaving just the two of them still alive. It was the end.

‘*Dua-i-nak netjer seni-i,*’ said Imti, descending the dune and laying a hand on the butcher’s blood-drenched shoulder. ‘Thank you, my brother.’

A pause, then:

‘You will drink *shepen?*’

The butcher shook his head and handed over his knife, tapping two fingers against his neck to indicate where Imti should cut before turning and kneeling in front of him. The blade was heavier than Imti had imagined, less easy to control, and it took all his strength to lift it to the butcher’s throat and drag it across the flesh. He sliced as deep as he could, an explosion of frothy blood arching outwards across the sand.

‘Oh Ra, open the doors of the firmament to him,’ he

gasped, manhandling the body to the ground. ‘Let him come to you and live for ever.’

He arranged the butcher’s arms at his sides and, kissing his forehead, trudged back to the top of the dune, feet sinking into the sand almost up to his knees, the knife still clutched in his hand.

The sun was now just a fraction off being fully risen, only the very bottom of its circumference still flattened against the line of the horizon; even at that early hour its heat caused the air to buckle and throb. Imti gazed at it, eyes narrowed as if calculating the length of time it would take to elevate itself completely, then he turned west, towards the distant spire of rock and the dark mass of cliffs beyond. A minute passed, two, three. Suddenly, he lifted his arms to the sky and cried out:

*‘Oh Khepri, Oh Khepri,  
Ra-Atum at the dawn,  
Your eye sees all!  
Guard the iner-en sedjet,  
Hold it in your bosom!  
May evildoers be crushed in the jaws of Sobek  
And swallowed into the belly of the serpent Apep,  
So let it rest in peace and silence,  
Behind re-en wesir, in the wehat sehstat!’*

He turned once more towards the sun, threw the leopard-skin back over his head and, again struggling with its weight, drew the knife across each of his wrists.

He was an old man – sixty years and more – and his strength swiftly drained away, his eyes dimming, his mind

clouding with a confused procession of images. He saw the girl with the green eyes from the village of his youth (oh how he had loved her!), his old wicker chair atop the Tower of Seshat at Iunu, where he had used to sit at night observing the movement of the stars, the tomb he had had made for himself in the Necropolis of the Seers which would never now hold his body, although his story at least had been left so that his name would live in eternity.

Round and round the images swirled, weaving in and out of each other, merging and splicing and becoming more fragmented until eventually they faded altogether and all that was left was the desert, the sky, the sun and, from somewhere nearby, a soft fluttering of wings.

Initially he thought it must be a vulture come to devour his corpse, but the sound was too delicate for such a large creature. Looking groggily around, he was surprised to see that on the dune top beside him was a tiny yellow-breasted bird, a wagtail, its head cocked to one side. What it was doing out there in the emptiness of the desert he had no idea, but, weak as he was, he smiled, for was it not as a wagtail that the great Benu had first manifested itself, calling in the dawn of creation from its perch atop the mighty Benben stone? Here, surely, at the very end of things, was confirmation that their mission was blessed.

‘May he walk the beautiful ways,’ he murmured. ‘May he cross . . .’

He failed to finish the sentence, his legs buckling under him and pitching him face forward onto the sand, dead. The wagtail hopped about a moment, then fluttered up onto his shoulder. Raising its head to the sun, it started to sing.

NOVEMBER 1986 – KUKESI AIRSTRIP,  
NORTH-EASTERN ALBANIA

The Russians were late for the rendezvous which meant that the weather window was gone. Thick racks of cloud streamed eastwards across the Šar mountains, blackening the late afternoon sky. By the time the limousine eventually pulled up at the airfield gates the first snowflakes were drifting down and in the two minutes it took the vehicle to speed out to the waiting Antonov AN-24 and come to a halt beside the boarding steps at the rear of the plane, the flakes had worked themselves up into swirling flurries, powdering the ground with white.

‘*Verfluchte Scheiße!*’ muttered Reiter, dragging on his cigarette and peering out of the cockpit window at the thickening storm. ‘*Schwanzlutschende Russen.* Cock-sucking Russians.’

The cockpit door opened behind him, revealing a tall, dark-skinned man in an expensive-looking suit. He had slicked-back hair and smelt strongly of aftershave.

‘They’re here,’ he said, speaking in English. ‘Start the engines.’

The door closed again. Reiter took another drag and started flicking switches, his fat, nicotine-stained fingers moving with surprising dexterity across the instrument panels in front of him and above his head.

‘*Schwanzlutschende Ägypter,*’ he spat. ‘Cock-sucking Egyptians.’

To his right, his co-pilot chuckled. He was younger than Reiter, blond, handsome save for the heavy scar that ran across the top of his chin parallel to his bottom lip.

‘Spreading sunshine and goodwill wherever you go, Kurt,’ he said, twisting in his seat and gazing out of the cockpit’s side window. ‘How is it possible for one man to contain so much love, I ask myself?’

Reiter grunted but said nothing. Behind them their navigator was leafing through his flight charts.

‘You think we’ll get off in this?’ he asked. ‘It’s looking pretty bad.’

Reiter shrugged, fingers still dancing over the instrument panels.

‘Depends how long Omar Sharif spends fanning around out there. Another fifteen minutes and the runway’s going to be buried.’

‘Then?’

‘Then we get to spend the night in this godforsaken shit-hole. So let’s just hope Omar gets his skates on.’

He hit the starter buttons. With a sputter and a whine, the twin Ivchenko turboprops blasted into life, the propellers slicing at the snow-filled air, the fuselage trembling around them.

‘Time, Rudi?’

The co-pilot glanced at his watch, a steel Rolex Explorer that had seen better days.

‘Coming up to five.’

‘They’ve got till ten-past and then I’m shutting down again,’ said Reiter, leaning sideways and drilling his cigarette out into an ashtray on the floor. ‘Ten-past and that’s it.’

The co-pilot twisted round further and craned his neck, watching as the man in the suit descended the boarding steps, a chunky leather holdall clutched in his hand.

Another man followed him down, this one wrapped in a heavy coat and scarf. The limousine's rear door swung open to meet them and the man in the suit disappeared inside, his companion taking up position at the bottom of the steps.

'So what's the deal here, Kurt?' asked the co-pilot, still gazing out. 'Drugs? Guns?'

Reiter lit another cigarette and rolled his head, vertebrae clicking.

'Don't know, don't care. We pick up Omar in Munich, fly him here, he does whatever he's got to do and then we take him on down to Khartoum. No questions asked.'

'The last no-questions-asked job I did some bastard tried to cut me a new mouth,' muttered the co-pilot, reaching up and touching the scar underneath his bottom lip. 'I just hope they're paying us well.'

He threw a glance over his shoulder then returned his gaze to the window, watching as the limousine's bonnet slowly disappeared beneath a thin carapace of snow. Five minutes passed, the car door swung open again and the suited man re-emerged. His holdall was gone. In its place he was now clutching a large metal case, heavy to judge by the way he was struggling with it. He handed it to his companion, another case was passed out to him and the two of them trudged up the boarding steps into the plane. A moment later they came back out and collected two more cases before once again clambering back up into the Antonov. The co-pilot caught a momentary glimpse of someone inside the limousine, swathed in what looked like an ankle-length black leather coat, before a hand reached out, slammed the door and the vehicle sped off.