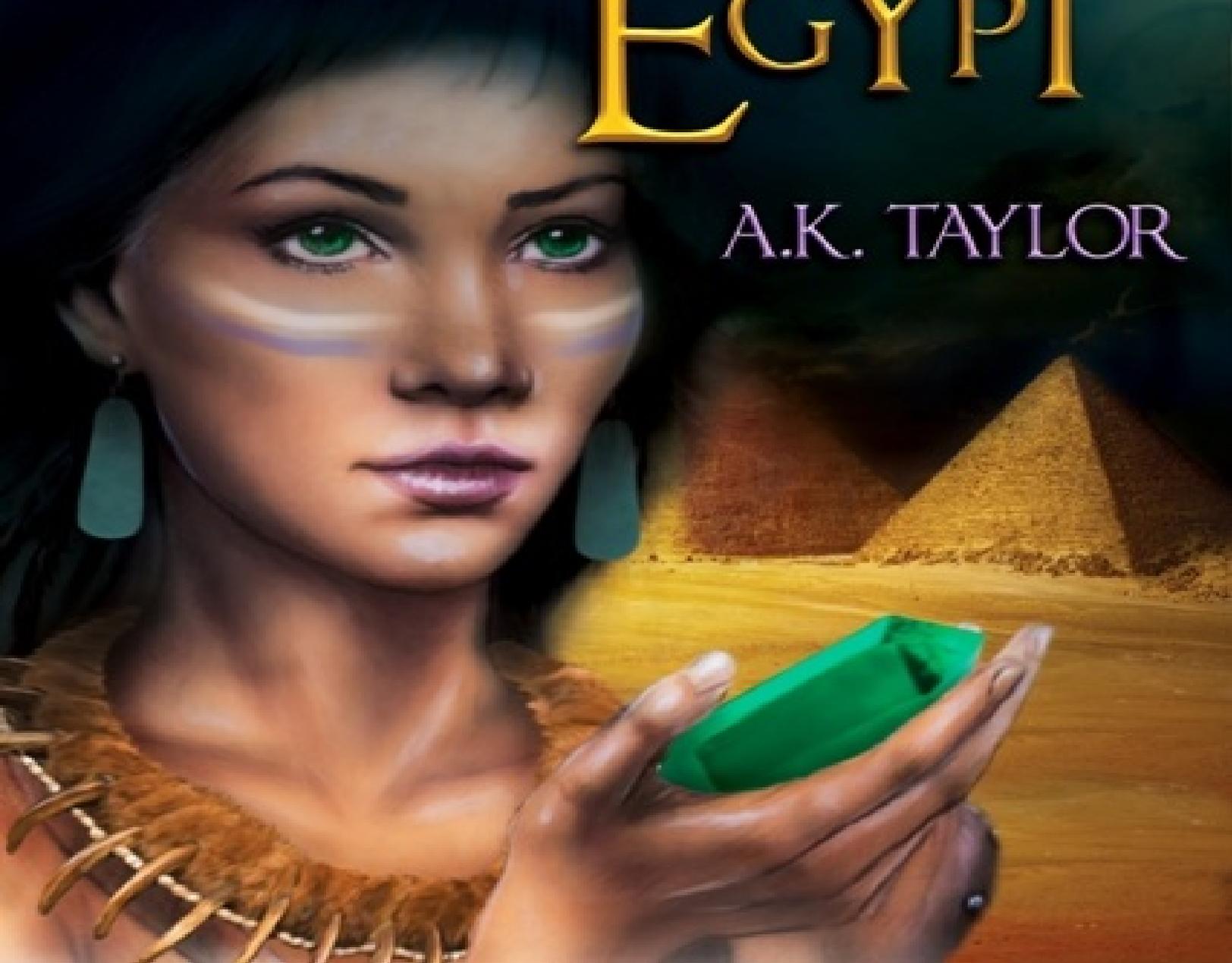


NEIKO ADVENTURE SAGA

BOOK TWO

ESCAPE FROM ANCIENT EGYPT

A.K. TAYLOR





Chapter 1

Light flashed as Neiko stumbled from a portal. Her office was just as she'd left it, with a wide oak desk and a rolling chair, and a tall lamp in the corner, but now a layer of dust coated it. Papers and bills lay strewn around in complete disarray due to a hectic three-sided life.

Three years. Three years of hard adventuring had passed, and what did she have to show for it? Dark circles under her eyes, frayed nerves, and zombie like appearance and gait. A twenty-one year old shouldn't be subject to such stress; it just wasn't right, but not every normal twenty-one-year-old was a Chosen One of both a hidden land and another universe.

She peeked out of her blind. Warriors were still stationed outside her house, keeping watch. The Seven Chieftains and Seven Tribes council had to keep her under guard at all times for her own safety against their enemies the Crackedskulls, the Cursed Tribe, and their monarchs.

"None of my friends are doing anything, so I guess can update my logbooks—there's nothing else to do right now." Neiko sighed as she slumped in her office chair behind her desk. She had a tendency to talk to herself while alone. "I seriously need a break—I would like to go to a movie or something besides being stuck here. At least the Tribes built me this house and removed dodging my parents from the equation." She grumbled as she plopped two composition books on the desk and ran her hands through her hair. "Now I don't have to explain lapses in time or why I was about past 2 a.m. or worry about them getting hurt. I wished I could visit the Five Lands and not worry about getting kidnapped there, too."

"I guess I'll start with Hawote business first. There's not much to update on here," Neiko said as she opened the book to a blank page. Hawote was the hidden land that coexisted with the United States, Canada, and Mexico.

October 19th , 2001

It's been three years since Francesco was kicked out of the Tribes, and Eagle Claw has taken over as Grand High Mohican, but there are still moles in our ranks. Who would have guessed there were more? I think Francesco was

just the chief-mole. Raven is daily turning up the heat and Outsiders can get hurt. He's putting more battle pressure on the Seven Tribes. It won't be long before he does more home invasions and/or public attacks.

P.S. The chieftains, my friends, and my enemies are starting to ask a lot of questions about my unexplained disappearances and unaccounted and unexplained lapses of time. I am told not to say anything. There is too much at risk. My world would be destroyed or worse—consumed by an other-worldly evil that I don't even fully understand...

Neiko pressed the pencil's eraser against her lips. "I guess I'm done with that one. Now to catch up on the Five Lands," she said, closing the other logbook, tossing it aside, and opening up her top secret logbook on the Five Lands.

October 19th, 2001 Earth Time/The year of the Eagle Second Quarter of the Year: Waning Crescent of the Red Moon Their Time

The Attack Pack and I were successful in stopping Menes and his two dumb brothers from stealing the Tiger-eye of Luck from Mudara in the Great Plain in Qari. Ever since he has taken the throne as First Pharaoh, he has been trying to equip himself with powers and talismans stolen from others when he has unspeakable power at his fingertips. He has essentially become a petty thief. It's for everyone's benefit that he's such a dunce to not know what he has in his family. I know where the stuff is, but he doesn't know. The ancient city of his forefathers has almost everything he needs, and I found that on my first trip there which was 300,000 years ago their time. Raven has his Eye of Cygnus, and he'd never be able to get that. From what more I've heard about Osiris' (his father) past, I wouldn't believe he would let such an idiot come into the world and rule. My how the mighty clan has fallen! Osiris and the entire land calls Menes a disgrace and a laughingstock. When Menes leaves a threat, everybody laughs. If this is the future of the mighty clan that brought fear to the Five Lands years ago, everybody could retire early, but we must always remember the Dark Pharaoh...

On a personal note on Osiris: so many others and I would have believed Menes would have been the one to exile Ramses when I exposed him as an impostor and what he really was—which was both good and bad by the way. Anyway, back to the point. After finding out he wasn't the blubbing mess we thought he would be, SOMETHING, I don't know what, stirred in his soul that day—I know since I was there that day courtesy of Menes. Something dark.

Something sinister. Something consuming. Was it vengeance? Was it something else? What stirred in him that day reminds me of that movie The Grudge—I hope it's not that serious. So what happens now? Only time will tell. I just hope the sleeping demon that everyone says Osiris was has not been awakened!

Now on the subject of Ramses, the Dark Pharaoh. My how times have changed. Maybe exposing his true identity wasn't such a good idea after all. He makes me pay for that daily in his pursuit of me. He's not showing all that he is, but it's enough to send the entire Five Lands into a clamor of fear. I fear, too. I have a threat over my head. He's going to make me permanently vanish someday. How, when, where, and all those questions no one knows—myself included. I know it's also a promise—he doesn't bluff. He and his minions are creating havoc all the time, especially Quicksilver, the Silver Assassin. I remember when he was human. I was there when Ramses turned him into those demon things called Shadow Warriors. I have yet to figure out what they are exactly, and rumor has it he has an entire army of them. Great Spirit be with us!

P.S. On the subject of transporting back and forth from Earth to the Five Lands. The constant switching between two different space and time continuums seems to have an effect on the passage of time. On their time a watch is tactically useless, so I must use their devices and time keeping crystals for time there. Watches work fine here on Earth. I don't really understand how magic works. Forget about astrophysics—I am not sure if astrophysics rules work the same there as it does here. My friend Sito, the brainiac, would know, but he's been missing for eleven years—presumed dead. There are so many times his ideas and inventions could have aided us in our fights with the Crackedskulls—he may have been a help in the Five Lands. I wished I knew what happened to my pals there. Going on a tangent, so signing off for today—

Neiko's secret Indian phone rang—the one that hardly ever rang, the one that *she didn't* want to ring right now. She bolted downstairs. She hesitated as she reached it, groaning and mumbling to herself, and slowly extracted the phone from the end-table drawer beside the couch.

So much for a quiet evening, Neiko grumbled in her mind. “Hello?” she asked the caller with a puff of breath.

“Hi, Neiko, how do you like your new house?” asked Phoenix, Neiko's best friend in the Desert Storm Falcon tribe—her tribe.

Neiko's face contorted in confusion. *No emergency?* she thought, but said, “Oh, I love it! I'm so glad the Tribes built it for me. It's the dream house I always wanted—loft upstairs, log cabin--everything. I was so ready to be on

my own. Xartna and Sigma really know my style,” Neiko replied, referring to the house plans. “There’s no emergency? Why didn’t you call on the regular phone?” Neiko asked.

Phoenix paused and, in a sheepish tone, said, “I didn’t realize I used the wrong phone. I’m sorry about that, Neiko. But that’s good—I’m glad you love your new home. Well, will you come over to my house? Where were you? I called for hours, but you weren’t there. Why does it sound like you just run a marathon?”

Neiko had to think fast. “I had to run errands, you know how that is. I’m outa breath because I had to run downstairs from the office since I thought there was an emergency. I was writing in my logbooks—officer stuff. I really need to move the secret phone *upstairs* or get another one. Yeah, I’d love to come over. I need to get out of this house before I go stir-crazy,” Neiko said, changing the subject before Phoenix asked any unanswerable questions.

Phoenix chortled. “See ya at seven, and I’ll have dinner ready. I’ve invited Hawk, Eagle, and Monchiska to come over too. I wish Sito and the others could also be here,” she said with sadness seeping into her voice.

Neiko bit her lip. “I know. I wish I knew what happened to them eleven years ago—I was just thinking about them myself. You still love him after all this time?” she asked, remembering the disappearance of Sito, his twin brother Tito, and their two friends Mactalon and Panthero. Neiko also remembered how much Sito’s disappearance devastated her best friend, and Neiko had to help her friend through it countless times. Neiko hoped she wasn’t having another relapse. Neiko didn’t have the energy left to give at this point.

“Yes. You know we were childhood lovers,” said Phoenix with a longing sigh.

“We’ll talk more about it when I get there, okay?” said Neiko as she tried to muster up the strength for her grieving friend.

“Sure,” Phoenix said, choking back the tears.

“I’ll be there soon, just hang in there,” Neiko said and hung up, showered, and changed clothes. She stuffed her buckskin clothes and war paint into a gym bag to take along just in case. She just never knew when the Crackedskulls may pull something and she needed to put on her warrior clothes. She checked with the warriors outside and they escorted her to her friend’s house.

When Neiko arrived at Phoenix’s house, everyone else pulled in at the same time. They all sat down and ate homemade enchiladas. It wasn’t necessarily a normal Indian meal like deer meat, but it was always good

anyway.

“I heard you’ve been going through one of your sad spells, Phoenix,” said Hawk, and he shoved a huge bite of the enchilada into his mouth.

“Yes, I’ve been thinking about Sito again. He’s been dead for eleven years,” Phoenix said, starting to choke up.

“We never confirmed that the four of them are dead--they just vanished into thin air,” said Eagle, trying to keep a positive frame of mind and arguing the matter. “We just presumed them dead.”

“There has to be a logical explanation because people don’t just disappear into thin air without a trace—especially four good warriors like them,” said Monchiska, trying to comfort her. “It just doesn’t make sense, and still doesn’t for that matter.”

“I guess so. Let’s play rummy, shall we?” said Phoenix as she shook off the pain of his memory and wiped her eyes.

I want to get to the bottom of this and solve this mystery once and for all, mused Neiko to herself as she pitied Phoenix and hid her own sadness. She could only imagine what Phoenix could be feeling; she tried to imagine how she would feel if a similar thing happened to Monchiska. She wanted to know what happened and to make the perpetrator pay if it was the last thing she ever did before someone made her disappear.

Before Eagle passed out the first card, Little Bear, Phoenix’s father, ran in.

“Everyone, prepare for battle. The Crackedskulls are attacking the Mohicans and Sparras. Eagle Claw has been captured!” he said.

Everyone jumped up. Neiko grabbed her gym bag from the kitchen counter and ran to the bathroom. Everyone else was went to their cars and pulled their clothes out of trunks and back seats and went into other rooms. Everyone ran out the door, piled into Little Bear and Phoenix’s cars prepared for battle. The two vehicles peeled rubber on their way to the small territory in the northeast side of Hawote.



Chapter 2

The other five tribes came to the battle site and bailed out of the cars. The Crackedskulls were running amok, destroying homes, cars, buildings, property, and chasing the Mohicans and Sparras and terrorizing them. Great Spirit knows what could happen next, and the chieftains weren't going to sit around and find out before sounding the alarm. The remaining five tribes let out a shrill war call to let them know of their presence and charged under Neiko's direction. The small force of plundering Crackedskulls tried to retreat, but the Indians smashed into them. The Crackedskulls fought savagely, but the angry Indians' hunger for retribution was greater. The Indians wounded quite a few and killed a couple with clubs, slings, bows, spears, and tomahawks—they used native weapons to keep things quiet and not draw attention from Outsider authorities. The Crackedskulls answered back, and Indians were injured.

"Neiko, go and find Eagle Claw while we hold off these goons!" said Pike as he hit a Crackedskull across his eyes with the handle of his tomahawk.

"Righto, Pikey boy," Neiko said with a salute and knocking out a two Crackedskulls as she broke through and headed to Eagle Claw's house which was in the center of the territory.

The house was on fire, and Eagle Claw and his family were screaming as the flames got dangerously close to them; they were tied up and lying in the floor.

"Neiko, call for help. You can't do this alone!" Eagle Claw screamed from within as he wriggled.

Neiko looked and saw that they were fairly close to the entrance, and she saw a way to get to them. There wasn't much time. If she left to get help, they would be dead in a few minutes.

A few burns and some soot on my skin is a small price to pay for helping out a comrade. I'll just take another shower, she thought as she balled her fists and swung her arms like she was preparing for a long jump as she psyched herself up for what she was about to do.

She put her dagger in its sheath, took a deep breath to prepare for the risky operation, and ran into the burning house. She jumped over and ran

around the flames. She crouched low to stay below the smoke and hot, toxic gases overhead. She made it to them and freed them from their bonds, leading them to safety as they dodged falling pieces of the smoldering roof. All of them heard the roof beginning to crackle and sag. They jumped out of the door, and the roof caved in just behind them, sending embers and sparks flying. They scrambled off the covered front porch before it decided to crash down upon them, too.

“Well, at least you’re safe—but, I’m not so sure about your house,” said Neiko, helping them to their feet and brushing off the ashes and soot from her clothes, hair, and skin. The black grime seemed to smear and mix with her sweat and war paint.

“Never mind the house. I’m glad you came because that could’ve been us in there!” Eagle Claw said, trembling at his close call. “I am certainly glad you didn’t listen to me and were stubborn just like always,” he added with a good-natured and grateful smile.

Neiko looked around as more Crackedskulls came out of the woods, closing in on them. “Oh great. This is nice,” she grumbled as she saw one hundred armed Crackedskulls with Karo, the General and supreme commander of the ground force in the lead. “Don’t look now—we’re not out the woods yet. I think this situation just got a whole lot worse,” Neiko said, gripping her quarterstaff tightly with both hands.

Eagle Claw looked around as the Crackedskulls closed in.

Eagle Claw’s wife began to panic and gather her young kids around her like a mother hen as the older ones prepared to fight regardless if they are only armed with fists and courage.

Deatheagle, the high commander of the Winged Warriors, and his two subordinate commanders surrounded them in the back.



“Well, well. I expected to find you here, Neiko. You are so brave and heroic that you are predictable. Well, the trap worked. Get them,” Karo said with fiendish and conquering grin.

“What do we do with them, sir?” asked one Crackedskull.

“Take Neiko to Prince Bloodhawk. But, as for these other rats, take them away and kill them like we intended to do in the first place,” Karo ordered.

“I don’t think so, stinkweed!” said Pike with an insulting jeer that was just like he also said “Surprise!”.

He had two hundred Indians behind him with their bows drawn and clubs raised. They fired on the Crackedskulls further from the apprehended hostages and wounded thirty-five. The Indians came from behind them, and the ground-force Crackedskulls were surrounded. The winged warriors flew away, and some of the infantry retreated. They then closed in and knocked out all the Crackedskulls that remained except for Karo.

“All right, pig dung, you go tell Raven if he tries another cheap trick like this again, then we will visit it back on him one thousand fold. Get outa here before we change our mind,” Pike menaced as he thrust his spear at the general, and Karo ran off.

The Indians raised their weapons in triumph as they shouted and trilled

their voices in victory calls. To everyone's surprise this battle was over just as quickly as it started. Raven must be getting sloppy.

"Everyone, let's return home. We will celebrate this victory tomorrow night!" said Xartna, and everyone chanted as they left. The Mohicans and Sparras left with the other tribes so that they could find a place to stay the night and begin the preparations for rebuilding.

* * *

Neiko returned home late that night and went to her front door. She took her dirty tennis shoes off. The wood of her new front deck felt good to her tired feet. "Ohhh, that shower is calling my name and will feel sooo good," she said, closing her eyes and craning her head to stretch her neck and thinking about that hot, steamy water hitting against her tired muscles. She was glad she specifically asked for a massaging showerhead for her shower when the Tribes built her house.

She dug around in her pocket for the key. She had to get into the house first before she could get into that shower. She finally found the key, but then she dropped it on the mat.

"Aww, darn it!" Neiko grumbled as she bent over to pick it up with a grunt.

"Nice evening, isn't it?" came a familiar voice from behind her.

Neiko looked around, and Francesco was standing on her porch, smirking.

"Why are you here and what are you so happy about? We kicked your butts so bad tonight," Neiko said with cynical tone and a sideways grin. "Go away. You're not wanted. If you're still here after I get outa that shower, then your carcass is toast," she said with an ominous tone. She was tired and cranky and totally not in the mood for his antics or whatever messed-up scheme he was cooking up or whatever his purpose was for being here.

"I wouldn't be so satisfied about that victory tonight. And you are still painted for war—how nice. This will be the last battle you will win against us because you won't be here any longer," Francesco said, still smirking. The smirk became more dark and sinister by the second. "Second of all you're shower will have to wait—permanently. You won't be enjoying another hot shower ever again where you're going. You'll have plenty of the 'hot' part."

Neiko looked at him like he was mad. "What is that supposed to mean? What are you gonna do—kill me?" she asked with a sarcastic snort. "They probably have showers in heaven, but where you're going they don't. You'll stink like rotten eggs, burning sulfur, and soot in hell," she shot back. "In

about two seconds I'll send you on your one way ticket if you don't beat it."

Francesco snorted and grinned like he had become Satan himself. "No. Remember when I said I would get you back for my humiliation and your sorrows would be one hundred fold? Here is that moment—your time has now come, Admiral. Don't tell me you honestly think you're that self righteous."

Neiko burst out laughing. "Just you being here makes me sorrowful," she slandered. "Why are you here anyway? I could beat you up with one hand tied behind my back! I'm not self righteous at all for your information. I think Karo and Deatheagle have more honor than a traitorous scum like you any day. Since you won't get lost, let's have at it—mano y mano," she said, dropping her key back into her pocket and putting up her fists like she was in the mixed martial arts octagon.

Francesco looked at her like she was nothing more than a Neanderthal that solved everything by hitting it with a club. "I'm not here to fight you! I'll let you figure this out on your own. And there is no way back," Francesco said as he pulled out a green crystal from his pocket. "It will be the same for you as it was for them..."

Neiko looked at it with surprise and raised her right eyebrow quizzically that asked "Hey, neat—what's that?". "Oh, are you gonna frame me like last time? Ha! That won't fly this go 'round. And what do you mean there's no way back...and who is the 'them' you're talking about? What kind of new toy is that anyway?"

Francesco said nothing as he rubbed the crystal. It began to glow. He mumbled chants, and it glowed brighter and brighter. Then he thrust his hands up and waved the crystal toward her. A green light surrounded her, and she disappeared.



Chapter 3

Neiko's vision turned from the green light to the world spinning around her in dizzying speed. Neiko wasn't moving, but she felt like she was in freefall—like someone had cut the cable from an elevator, and she was plummeting with it. Descending in what—space and time? The evergreen and colorful deciduous vegetation of the Hawote woodlands changed to a desert with a river with some greenery and palms nearby. The cool autumn air of Hawote in October transformed into stifling, searing, dry heat. Pyramids, sphinxes, and strange statues spun around her after her house, porch, and front yard disappeared within the vortex. It was nighttime in Hawote, but the sun rose and set as time flew by—from west to east—backwards. Beneath her bare feet the wood from her front porch turned to nothing then into hot, soft sand.

Neiko's world stopped spinning, and the sun was high in the sky. Neiko watched the sun to be sure it didn't move again. Wherever she ended up, she guessed the time must be about high noon there judging by the sun's position in the sky after a few moments of observation. The heat was intense, and she discovered she must be somewhere far from home. "Where?" was the ultimate question. A gust of wind blew the feathers in her long, black hair. Her hair wrapped around her face, and she brushed it back. Sweat beaded out on her body, and she tugged at her shirt and headband. "Phew! It's hot out here! Where am I—Death Valley?" she asked. Death Valley was the only desert place she thought of off the top of her head. She had never been there, but she'd read and watched TV programs about the place. She looked around, and a city was only a few feet away. She could see the buildings down below from the high dune where she stood. She took a deep breath and fingered the fringed sheath of her knife to reassure her confidence—without thinking and by instinct. Then after a few more seconds, she trudged down to the city in the soft sand from the dune to go find some answers.

Neiko entered the city still dressed in her buckskin, decorated warrior clothes and painted for war. As she took in the sights and from the confusion, she had forgotten she was armed. Her machete was sheathed to her back, and so was her knife on her side. Incense, perfumes, and music filled the air. She didn't recognize any of the smells, but the music seemed to be like Egyptian

reenactments in movies. The buildings were white alabaster covered in brilliant wall paintings. Some men rode on camels like horses and others led them by a leash. Chariots cantered by. Neiko looked around in amazement. This ruled out Death Valley, Arizona. Neiko lifted her eyes to the sun to get a bearing on north. North was as good of a direction as any to begin a search for answers. After her eyes fell from the sun and to the north, she could see the Pyramids of Giza towering in the distance. She recognized them instantly. She had seen enough pictures and documentaries on the monuments—they were unmistakable. Even though they were miles away, they towered above the city and in view. This definitely wasn't Death Valley.

In that case I can get on the first flight home, she thought. She believed that she had landed in Cairo. This city came to mind because it's the only one close to the Pyramids of Giza. Then she realized she didn't have any money as she put her hands in the pockets of her buckskin shorts and only felt the house key. She had left her wallet in the car back at home when she left from Phoenix's house after the battle.

"Well, I can probably make up some story that I was abducted or something—which is sort of true. Really funny, Francesco. I guess you meant no way back since I'm broke. I'll hitchhike back to Hawote if I have to. I'll scrounge around to see if I can find some change for a pay phone on the road," she remarked to herself, and maybe the phone book would have some information on where to find an airport or something. But, then again, would the phonebook be written in English or Arabic? It was a chance she had to take. The worst that could happen was not getting anywhere.

Neiko began walking to find help, change, a pay phone, the U.S. Embassy, an airport, or whatever she could find first. After a few more minutes of exploring, she recognized the clothing of the people: white linen kilts, some wore robes and fine jewelry, some wore headcloths while others did not. No one seemed to be dressed like the Arab residents of 21st century Egypt. "Why is everyone dressed like ancient Egyptians?" she asked herself. She wondered if this was some sort of a cult or a weird secret society that lived like the Amish in Cairo.

A small group of armed soldiers marched in front of her, but they didn't pay any attention to her. They carried swords, shields, spears, and were dressed in ancient Egyptian armor. She had seen it in books and movies. They weren't carrying guns or dressed in desert camouflage BDUs like Egyptian soldiers of the 21st century.

She headed farther in to the marketplace. It was obvious since people had shops and bazaars selling goods. People were yelling and haggling. People

thrust things at Neiko trying to entice her to buy. Neiko put up her hands and shook her head. She couldn't understand a word anyone was saying. Funny, no one seemed to be selling T-shirts, souvenirs, or that type stuff for tourists. Quite frankly, no one seemed to be selling any maps.

Neiko walked up to a man who was a merchant at a bazaar. He was selling all manner of fine jewelry. Heavy collars, bracelets, necklaces, arm pieces, earrings were on display. All gaudy like the ancient Egyptians liked. "Excuse me, can you tell me where I am? I seem to be lost. Do you know where I can find a map or where the airport is? A phone?" she asked as she made her hand like a phone and put it to her ear; her thumb the earpiece and her pinkie the mouthpiece.

The man looked at her startled because of her strange appearance and because he couldn't understand her. He was dressed in linen like everyone else and sported some of that same Egyptian bling since he was a successful jeweler.

"That's a little out of style, don't you think? I mean, guys don't wear eyeliner...and, that skirt and that sheet on your head are not how people dress nowadays. People dress like ancient Egyptians only on Halloween. Last I checked it was still three weeks away," Neiko said to the man as she shook her head.



The man chattered in a language she didn't understand—God knows what he was saying to her. He thrust at her a fine scarab necklace. Neiko looked at him puzzled with her right eyebrow raised. The language didn't sound like Arabic since she watched a lot of action movies. Neiko put up her hands and shook her head and signed "map" and "phone" and spoke the words in every language that she knew of but got nowhere.

"Never mind," she said, throwing her hands up in defeat and walking off with a frustrated sigh. "Okay, that is no language I know. I can usually tell, but it's not anything I've heard before except in a few movies."

Neiko stopped a scantily clad woman. She was topless with hardly anything to her loincloth. "Pardon me, do you speak English? Greyhawk? Cherokee? Blackfoot? Or how about Spanish?" The woman looked at Neiko like she was an alien from another planet. "You need to get some clothes on, girl, before you get charged with indecent exposure," she said as she had unknowingly come across an Egyptian dancer. "Strippers wear more clothes than that when walking down the street in Vegas—or so I've heard or saw in the movies!" she mumbled, shaking her head. Neiko watched a lot of TV when she wasn't busy busting Crackedskull heads or going on quests in the Five Lands.

“Okay, I’m getting nowhere fast,” Neiko grumbled as she looked at sphinxes and animal-headed gods. The Pyramids grew as she headed north. Neiko walked through the streets of the city looking at everything, and many people looked at her because of her foreign appearance. Some people stared. Many young men gawked at her beauty. Neiko found it annoying and tried to ignore them. *These people act like they’ve never seen an Indian before*, she thought as she twisted her mouth and shook her head. After some time it dawned on her that there was no trace of modern day technology. She hadn’t even seen a car in the past hour which unnerved her. Neiko bit her lip as a weight began to grow in the pit of her stomach at this realization.

“It seems like ancient Egypt, but how in the world did I get here? Or, is this just some place he made up to make it look like...I—no, this has to be; I’m sure of it. But, I also need to find out where and when I am. I guess Cairo is definitely out. I think it was built later...if this is ancient Egypt, then I know there is a pharaoh here somewhere, and I know how they treat outsiders. I don’t know how they would feel about Indians—most people don’t like us anyway. And, who is the pharaoh? Now I know what he meant about me not returning. Well, I figured out what country I’m in at least—if that’s even the case—” she mused, and then her thoughts were scattered because a group of men stopped in front of her blocking her path. She hadn’t noticed them since she was in her own little world.

At the head was a rich man, clothed in fine clothes, gold and jewels. He motioned for his men to fan out to seal off her possible escape routes. Seeing her armed, some of other men drew their weapons. He looked at her closely—very closely. He rubbed his hands together and grinned like he had just found gold. There was another glint in his eye that she didn’t like—the kind of look when someone is obviously checking you out. Neiko understood *that* very well.

Neiko looked at him with a frown and a cocked eyebrow. Her hand went to her knife, but she didn’t draw it. Her insides told her to run, but she was so startled and confused she was immobilized like a deer blinded by headlights before they get run over. There were also too many of them to take down by herself, and she was surrounded in a tight circle.

But before Neiko could react, the man pointed at her and started barking commands to his followers. They were on her in seconds. They grabbed her and bound her wrists in front of her as they disarmed her. She tried to resist them, but it didn’t do any good. “Hey, what gives?” Neiko asked as they dragged her along behind the man.

* * *

Neiko was taken to the man's house and put in a cell with three other men. The dungeon reeked of urine and BO. The floor was nothing more than trampled sand. Cells lined the hallway, and it was fairly dark. Very little light came in through the tiny windows in the cells in the late afternoon sometime before dusk. Then they shut the door and locked it and walked away laughing and chattering.

Neiko yelled at the men, saying, "C'mon, gimme a break! I didn't do anything to you! I didn't steal your horse—or whatever you're accusing me of! Let me outa here!" she shouted from in between the bars and pushing on the door in aggravation.

The men didn't pay her any attention as they continued to walk away, laughing and talking.

"He didn't lose a horse. He just acquired another slave," said one of the men in the cell in English. He was covered in smudges, dirt, and had long, stringy, and ratty black hair. The man looked remotely like a Native American. His skin was not the golden bronze like the rest of the Egyptians—a red hue showed through his tan.

"Aye, I bet he will fancy this one because she's gorgeous which won't be good," said another.

"Hey, she's an Indian. Do you think she looks familiar, Mactalon?" asked the third.

Neiko looked at the men like her ears were playing tricks on her. Her mouth gaped open and she raised her eyebrows. "How do you know about Indians and how to speak English? And—how come you have a name just like one of my long-lost friends?" Neiko asked, perplexed. All three of these men had seen their better days, but in some ways they seemed almost familiar—like older versions of the boys that had been missing for eleven years.

"That's because Mactacon's my name. I am an Indian along with my pals here—Tito and Panthero. Nice to meet you, dear lady—it's nice to see an Indian again. But why are you here in Egypt?" asked Mactalon as he nodded her way. Neiko's buckskin clothes and appearance was unmistakable to him.

The three off them were in servants' clothes: plain linen kilts, and no shirts. Their appearance was homely because of their filthiness. Their hair was long and stringy, and strangely enough they didn't have beards, a tell tale sign that they were Indians. They looked as they hadn't bathed in weeks. They were covered in dust and had shackles on their ankles.

"Well, Francesco, the ex Grand High Mohican, sent me here. It's nice to

see you guys aren't dead. I'm Neiko—do you remember me?” she asked with her eyes filled with hope.

The three looked at her closely and remembered the young warrior child. “Neiko? What a fine young woman you have turned out to be—and beautiful too! So why did the GHM send you here?” asked Tito.

“Because I exposed him for whom he really was—a dirty rotten traitor. Also, he was actually a Crackedskull who somehow wormed his way up to the top after he was adopted into the Mohican-Sparra. He used that to spy for Raven all these years. My being here is his revenge. I bet Raven and Bloodhawk will be mad to know that he did this. So where's Sito and what's your story?” Neiko asked with a shrug.

“Well, I have no idea where my brother is. We uncovered a plot by the GHM to send classified logs to Raven, and he disposed of us—the exact same task you were going to do but we stopped you, remember?” asked Tito as he shifted to a more comfortable position on the dusty floor.

Neiko nodded and couldn't imagine what might have happened if she was sent away instead. She shuddered at the thought.

“The three of us came together, but Sito got separated from us upon arrival—how—I don't know. We tried looking all over Egypt for him but had no luck in finding him. We came here and have been enslaved by Kenes—that's the rich jerk you met today,” replied Tito.

“Where are we, and do you know who the pharaoh is?” asked Neiko as she hooked her thumbs in her belt loops and leaned against the wall.

“We are in Memphis right now—the old capital city of Egypt—it's still a booming city though. I heard that Seti I passed on recently and his son Ramesses took the throne about three months ago. Boy, Egypt is perilous in these days for foreigners and slaves,” Panthero replied shaking his head.

Neiko looked at them with disgust with a “you've got to be kidding” look. “He wouldn't be THE Ramesses—uh—Ramesses II by any chance, would it?”

“Yup. The one and only Ramesses the Great,” chimed Tito.

Neiko slapped her hand on her head and groaned. “Of course—Francesco's personal role model. He had a thing for this guy and knew a lot about him. It is on the borderline between an obsession and a fetish, if you ask me. He sent you here during Seti's reign, right?”

“Yep. We've been here for eleven years—and been serving Kenes for ten and a half. We spent six months trying to find my brother. We work in Kenes' gardens from sunrise to sunset--normally, but I hate to see what your service will be,” said Tito. “That pretty face is going to get you into a heap of trouble here.”

Neiko shrugged indifferently. “Things could be worse. I mean, we could be making bricks or statues for that tyrant Ramesses—”

Tito put up his hands and shushed Neiko. “Don’t go around saying his name like he’s your next door neighbor--that isn’t done here! You only speak his name in reverence out of his presence!” Tito warned. “Furthermore, you don’t talk bad about him behind his back—he finds out quickly somehow, and it’s his personal pet peeve. I don’t know how I know that, but trust me!”

Neiko shrugged and scratched her head with “so what” written all over her face.

“Well, everyone loves him except for people like us,” said Mactalon.

“Is Sito still alive?” asked Neiko.

“Yes. Sometimes he’s happy, but oftentimes he’s extremely sad. We feel each other through our twin telepathy, and he feels my pain,” said Tito.

“What’re the only places you haven’t looked?” asked Neiko.

“The only place we haven’t gone is Thebes. Thebes is where Pharaoh is until he gets his new treasure cities built, and they will be finished in about another five years or so. We came to Memphis to avoid any confrontations from both Seti and Ramesses in Thebes. That was the last place we were going until we were captured and enslaved,” said Mactalon.

“When we get outa here, that’s where we’re going. Don’t try to stop me because I ain’t scared of no pharaoh, especially when we mean him no harm,” Neiko said, folding her arms.

“Okay, you are the same as we remember you. How old are you now, and have we missed anything?” asked Mactalon beaming with curiosity.

“Well, I’m twenty-one now. You missed when I was promoted to admiral, my graduation from high school, and the recent battle that took place before I got sent here that was a washout for the Crackedskulls—we spanked them good,” Neiko replied with a sideways grin.

“Wow! We missed all of the important milestones in your life. And look at you, an admiral,” said Panthero shaking her hand. Indian ranks were different than other known military ranks.

“Yeah, and things seem really sticky now since then. You were young kids when you were sent here too, right?” asked Neiko.

“Yeah, Tito and Sito were twelve, and Panthero and I were thirteen, while you were eleven. We five were the future special warriors, and we started out young too. At least you were able to fight one last battle before you left,” said Mactalon with a wishful sigh.

“Well, I was glad to fight one last battle, too. I wanted to be there to watch the fall of Raven and Bloodhawk, and be the admiral to bring them down.

Seems to me like Francesco is a little more unstable and dangerous,” said Neiko as she bit her lip.

“I agree. He seems a little in left field to be looking up to Ramesses like a god or whatever,” joked Mactalon with a snort.

“I know! You oughta have seen his house! He had pictures of the guy everywhere and used his name as the password for his secret stuff in his computer. It looked like Ramesses lived there and not Francesco!” Neiko exclaimed.

“Neiko, again—a word of advice—do not say the name of Pharaoh in public or where anyone else can hear you out of reverence because it’s bad. I would hate to see what Pharaoh would do to you,” warned Tito. “Only say it around us where only we can hear you. That’s what we do.”

“Okay, thanks for the advice—these people act like he’s Jesus or something,” she said with an apathetic shrug and an “I don’t care” look on her face. The others snickered. “I know he hates most outsiders, but how does he feel about Indians?” asked Neiko.

“Close enough. It’s like Amon-Ra incarnate,” said Tito. He and his twin brother, Sito, and father were experts on ancient Egypt. “I don’t know, and I don’t really want to find out because I don’t think he knows about our kind, and I plan to keep it that way,” Tito said with dread and shaking his head.

“I would assume he would send the four of us to Goshen and not think twice about it,” replied Mactalon.

“Where?” asked Neiko, fanning her hands out with an “I’m lost” look on her face.

“Oh, that’s the place he’s building his treasure cities, and that’s where most of the labor gangs are,” answered Mactalon. He only knew since it was the kind of place Tito mentioned to avoid in the beginning.

“Oh yeah! I remember that name now—” Neiko said nodding, but she was interrupted because a man rapped the bars on their door with the handle of his whip.

“Go to sleep,” he snapped at them in Egyptian, but turned and left.

Neiko looked at him with her mouth hung open like she had just said “Huh?” silently.

“Time for bed,” said Panthero as he stood up to go to a pallet in the floor in the back left of the room.

“Can you understand them?” Neiko asked, scratching her head.

“Yeah, if you live in a place long enough, you kind of pick it up. But Sito and I were better prepared because we studied this language as a hobby, remember?” said Tito as he fluffed his pillow and plopped down.

“Oh yeah, and Francesco knows the language and can write in hieroglyphics,” Neiko said standing there and looking for a place to lie down.

“Shut up!” snapped the Egyptian. Apparently he hadn’t left the hallway and still heard them talking.

Neiko turned around. “Okay, okay, don’t get your panties in a wad!” she snapped angrily with her hands on her hips.

The others winced because they knew this could cause trouble.

The man didn’t understand what she said, but he could sense the hostility of her remark. He started to unlock the door with a look of annoyance on his face. He was going to deal with this impudent slave and tell Kenes about this little upstart. But Tito stood up on her behalf by stepping in between them and putting up his hands in surrender.

“She didn’t mean it, and we were just going to bed,” he told the man in his language. “Right, Neiko?” he asked her in English.

She nodded as she slid behind Tito further but peeked from behind his back.

The guard looked at her and then at Tito and then walked away. Everyone released their held breaths.

“If you are going to make it in Egypt, then you have to control that temper of yours,” Mactalon scolded as he thrust his finger into her shoulder. “It’s dangerous for a slave to have a short fuse—definitely a pretty one. Besides, anyone who is not Egyptian is inferior—remember that—and they won’t hesitate to do what they want to you,” warned Mactalon.

Neiko nodded silently as she twisted her mouth.

They all lay down and went to sleep.