

Chapter 1, Duat

Bill woke from the deepest sleep he had ever experienced to find his boring, utilitarian popcorn ceiling replaced with a starless expanse of night sky so black that his eyes strained to find focus. Bolting upright, he expected to find that he had somehow passed out on the lawn while trying to erase the memories of a bad day, frat boy-style. In fact, he found he was in bed. Almost certainly someone else's bed. A very small canopy bed framed by four aged wooden posts and dressed in delicate curtains of sheer fabric bathed in cool moonlight. The worn fabric waved gently in a light breeze that carried a slight chill and a scent of the ocean.

Bill involuntarily jolted with a burst of adrenaline and nearly capsized his bed. "What the hell?", he shouted at the startling discovery that he was adrift on a bed in the center of a small, rickety boat. Suddenly terrified by his situation and with no idea how he arrived there, he twisted around rapidly, looking for an escape. He only found an infinite black sea on every side of the boat and no land in sight. The water was as tranquil as smoothly polished obsidian, deep, black, and barely disturbed by Bill's panicked bouncing around in the boat.

Surrounded by perfect tranquility and with no apparent escape, he slowly settled back into a calmer state of confusion and wonder. Bill was a practical man. *Maybe I'm dreaming? Or this is the most fucked up prank ever.* He knew there was a logical explanation. He only needed to wait for it.

The sea was so still that it appeared almost solid, like Bill could almost walk across it to freedom. He tested the idea

by reaching into it. The surface reacted more like gelatin than water. It felt strangely warm and vaporous. Bill removed his hand and stared at it in confused horror. It was completely dry. *How is this even possible? This has to be a dream.* He thrust his hand into the strange water again as deep as he could reach and found no hidden bottom.

Something brushed his hand down below, giving him a mild static shock as it passed. "Shit!" Nearly tipping the boat over, he jumped back onto the bed and quickly inspected his still miraculously dry but otherwise unharmed arm. That's when he discovered the tattoo.

Written in thin black letters across the inside of his left forearm was the word *tewet*. A nonsense word he had never heard before. He tried in vain to wipe the ink off only to realize that it was permanent. *Oh please, no, no damn it! Wipe off, wipe off, wipe off.* He never wanted a tattoo before and certainly didn't want to start with a stupid one. He felt more violated by this than any of the other far less probable elements of his situation. Only thoughts of lawyers and laser removals kept him from sinking his own boat in anger.

Looking beyond the tattoo, he discovered that someone had changed his clothes as well. *What? What the hell am I wearing?* He found himself dressed in what looked like short-sleeved white pajamas made of canvas. The shirt and drawstring pants were each made from a single piece of cloth with no visible seams or markings. Though thick and mildly rough to the touch on the outside, they were so comfortable that he could hardly feel them touching his body. His hands, feet, and head were totally bare and he was a little embarrassed to find he wasn't wearing

underwear. *Great. I'm in a cult.*

This appearance was a stark contrast from his normal life. Having lived the solitary existence of a hardcore computer nerd, he usually lived in one of two states. At home, he wore the same standard American weekend jeans and tee shirts that he rarely replaced since reaching adulthood. At work, he barely forced himself into the lower acceptable limit of casual business attire. At thirty-five, he was just starting to see and feel his age catching up to him. Though not horribly out of shape, the first scars of a life spent with computers and television were just visible around his midsection. He was usually as clean-shaven as time and fleeting patience allowed and he kept his hair deliberately short and uncomplicated ever since his teens, when he realized that cruel genetics would keep him cowlicked far beyond the talents of even the best Hollywood stylists.

He would have been ecstatic to find that he now had perfect hair and not even a hint of stubble except that it meant someone had *done this* to him. This was done against his will as he slept. Strangers touched him. Tattooed him! He had been defiled and couldn't remember any of it. He wasn't sure if he wanted to.

Forcibly calming himself, Bill focused on what he could observe. *I'm smart. I'll figure this out. What are the facts?* The boat was tiny, only large enough to accommodate the bed. In front and behind him, the edges of the boat curved up slightly above the water's surface and terminated in stylized lotus flower carvings. Despite having no discernable propulsion system, Bill was certain the boat was smoothly sailing at great

velocity toward the only source of light on the sea. The line where the sky met the sea was indistinguishable except for a gigantic blue moon, half obscured by the horizon in front of the boat.

Maybe it's on an underwater track? Of course, that's what zapped me! But what's the point? And how would I get here? I don't live near any water this big. Wait. Where the hell am I going? A sense of dread overtook him as he realized that unseen forces were taking him somewhere against his will. He began to fear that the middle of an ocean was the destination. *Is someone trying to kill me? What an elaborately stupid way to do it.*

"Hello?" The sound of his voice was deadened by a complete lack of reverberation, like shouting into a vacuum. Disturbed by the eerie sensation, he decided not to do it again. Worse, he realized that nothing else made much sound at all, including the weird dry water.

Silhouetted in the half circle of the blue moon on the horizon, a small black square appeared. It rapidly grew larger and, within a minute, the square completely outgrew the moon. Bill recognized that he was approaching a building on the water. Several torches mounted in front of it showed that it was a monolithic structure. The only visible face was a large stone wall, almost square but slightly tapered in at the top. He felt a mix of relief to be reaching land and fear of what might be waiting for him there.

The boat sailed up to the edge of a stone pier in front of the building and halted with no surge of inertia. The entire

pier formed a large half-circle and rose two feet up from the water. The mooring space was divided into seven separate docks. Tall torch posts carved as spiraling serpents spitting fire skyward from their mouths marked the divisions.

Bill's boat docked in the center space. There were four more empty boats, identical to his, randomly parked in the other spaces. Only two slots remained empty. *Okay. Now what?*

He carefully climbed across the bow of the boat and onto the stone floor. It was like a small man-made island, built with enormous sandstone blocks. Bill felt loose sand from the unusually warm blocks stick to his feet as he walked. Though the structure had an ancient style about it, both the pier and the imposing wall in front of him looked newly built. Other than the boats and torches, the only other features immediately obvious in the shadowy and flickering light were a door-shaped outline engraved into the wall and a symbol carved above it. The symbol was nothing more than a perfect circle resting on a short horizontal line.

"Okay, I get it!" he shouted at the building. "What do I win? Show yourself, Ryan Seacrest!"

A slight shuffling from a dark corner near the edge of the wall made him jump nervously. He turned and awkwardly prepared to fight as two huddled figures came into focus. One was a woman seated on the ground, wearing the same white clothes that he did. She had her head lowered onto her knees and her arms covering the rest of her face.

Beside her sat a tall, black dog like a sentry guarding its

master. It was lean and shiny with short black fur that reflected a deep blue iridescence like raven feathers in the torch light. With a sharp pointed face, tall ears, and well-defined muscles, the dog possessed a beautiful but unnaturally angular quality. It looked more like a sculpture than a real animal. A thick gold necklace wrapped around its long neck like a collar. Unlike any dog Bill had ever seen, it sat perfectly still with its mouth completely closed. It never blinked its marble black eyes nor wagged its whip-like tail as its head followed his slow and careful approach. Bill found the creature both marvelous and powerfully intimidating.

The woman slowly raised her head and stared up at him with an expression of genuine despair. As she relaxed her arms, Bill saw that she also had a tattoo. It said *sekha*.

Without any introduction or warning, she simply asked, "Am I dead?"