

Nelly Weems, Come Home

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OUTSIDE THE HALL OF MAAT, A HORDE OF ANGRY SPIRITS POUNDED UPON THE doors. It was like a deafening thunder, this constant pounding, and Anubis, fingers raised to his temples to try and massage away a ripping headache, went to the window.

His black head, with its slender, elongated nose and flopping jackal's ears, sieved past the window's curtain, his round, pebble-like eyes peering at the throng of spirits below. The spirits, ghosts of the dead, were nothing more than a swarm of humans, some carrying travel bags, others clad in their finest attire, others wearing book bags, comfortable jeans, and hiking shoes. Some were young, some old, some alone, others accompanied by hordes of family and ancestors. They were all crammed together outside the Hall of Maat, a throbbing blanket of faces that stretched out to the horizon. When Anubis appeared at the window, his human body and jackal's head silhouetted against the curtains, all of the ghosts turned their attention away from beating down the Hall of Maat's front door with identical, frazzled expressions on their faces.

Anubis stretched his arms before him, palms outward, indicating that he wanted silence. The shuffling, muttering, and movement of the crowd immediately quieted.

Clearing his throat, Anubis said, "I know you're all getting kind of antsy . . ."

"That's right!" one voice yelled, and a dozen more voices echoed their agreement.

Anubis cut them off. "But you'll just have to be patient. I promise, all of you will be judged and have your chance at the afterlife..."

A sour-faced woman near the front of the crowd batted her palm against the outside of the building, "I didn't do three years of chemo just so I could die and wait in a crowd for eternity! Why aren't you letting anyone in?" Those around her nodded and began to thump the building as well. The thrum of their pounding rattled the walls.

Anubis tried desperately to be heard over the thunder. "We've run across a little snag in the operation . . . Nothing to be concerned about!" he added quickly, seeing the faces open their mouths to protest. "Just a little snag is all. We'll have it taken care of in no time, and then we'll start letting people in again."

"When will that be?!" a middle-aged man with a beard cried out.

"We've been waiting here forever!" somebody else added.

"I say, if they're not gonna let us in, we force our way in!" another voice yelled.

There were cries of agreement, and the entire crowd surged forward like a wave, bearing down upon the door.

Sighing and shaking his head, Anubis retreated from the window. He slowly tromped down the narrow stairs until he stood in the main entranceway, a vast, splendid, gold hall lit by glowing white archways and draped in fine red tapestries. At the end of the hall, the walls widened out into a circular dome. At the top of the dome was a single skylight, a round opening that let in a cylindrical beam of sunlight. Seated at a long, circular table in the shadow around the sunbeam were forty-two judges, some scowling, some nervously fidgeting with their ebony robes.

Basking in the warm, golden center of the sunbeam was a white marble table, legs carved into identical bird claws. Beneath it, something dark and large shifted irritably but stayed out of sight. Atop that table was a scroll, a quill and inkpot, a butcher's knife, a blood-stained cutting plate, and a gleaming silver scale. Beside the table were two wood stools. Atop one of those stools perched a white ibis, its milky blue eyes blinking at Anubis expectantly. The judges, sallow-faced and lips pursed, watched Anubis approach, their arms crossed over their chests.

"So?" one of them asked.

"They're a little edgy," Anubis answered. He took his place in the center of the room, beside the marble table and the ibis. There he stood stoically, his

hands clasped behind his back. He caught the eye of the ibis, and they exchanged apprehensive glances.

Another judge gazed at the walls, where the flames of a few lit candelabra quivered from the pounding outside. "Are we safe?"

"Perfectly," Anubis assured. "They can't get in, no matter how hard they try."

"Still," another judge sighed, "we can't let them wait out there forever. Perhaps we should let just one in, to quell them a bit."

"And what would we do with the one we let in?" Anubis asked. "Tell them, 'So sorry. We can't judge you because Maat's missing, and we have no way to weigh your heart?' Be serious."

"She said she'd be right back," another judge muttered.

"Well, something's obviously happened. It isn't like Maat to shirk her duties like this."

"And if we wait much longer," another judge added, uneasily pointing at the sunlight in the center of the room, "her dad's gonna have a fit."

The other judges nodded, murmured their agreement, and stared at the golden beam of sun with uneasy awe.

A dignified-looking judge with a white goatee and thick, deviled brows stood and announced, "We must send someone to find out what's happened and bring our girl home."

"Hear, hear!" the judges applauded, pounding their fists on the polished tabletop.

The white-bearded judge turned his focus to the ibis perched beside Anubis. "I nominate Thoth. As her consort, he has the best chances of finding Maat, locating who's responsible for her delay, and having Maat punish them accordingly."

"Hear, hear!" the judges bellowed in unison.

Anubis turned to face the ibis. He bowed his jackal's head slightly and whispered, "Good luck. Bring her home safely."

The ibis blinked and dipped its graceful head. Its slim neck curled, its wings stretched, and it took flight, a white beacon that soared in circles around the vaulted room before crossing the sunbeam to the dome's ceiling, where it disappeared out the opening and beyond sight.

What a terrible day this is going to be, Nelly Weems thought as she, the only senior, boarded the bus to school. Her black, pink-streaked hair was pulled back in a ponytail. She wore a torn, red hoodie draped over her favorite black anarchy T-shirt, a pair of paint-splattered jeans, two dozen clinking silver ban-

gles, dark red lipstick, thick purple and black eye shadow, and five silver hoops: three in one ear, two in the other. She sat in a duct-taped, graffiti-slathered seat while a group of freshman boys behind her hocked spitballs at one another, a group of sophomore girls in front of her defied the bumps of the bus and applied makeup from compacts, and a googly-eyed member of the speech team persistently offered her a stick of gum. Nelly leaned her forehead against the bus window, watched the rain rivulets chase one another across the glass, and wished the day were at an end.

During home room, Nelly was made to take a state survey—she despised filling in those stupid Scantron circles with a stupid number-two pencil. Instead, she pulled out a bright green glitter pen and created diamonds on her Scantron sheet; the homeroom teacher noticed and Nelly had to retake the whole thing. An essay comparing the archetypes of Jung with characters in *Demian* was due in first-period English, which Nelly had, of course, forgotten to do. Second-period Social Studies consisted of a long, drawn-out lecture about the early American political parties. Nelly nearly fell out of her chair with boredom. By third-period Anatomy Science with Mr. Yawanis, Nelly decided to play hooky after class.

“Psst!” she leaned over her desk and hissed at Denise, her best friend who sat in front of her in Anatomy.

Denise pretended not to hear. Instead, she flicked one of her two strawberry-blonde plaits over one shoulder.

The two girls couldn’t look more opposite; people saw them walking down the hall, chatting and giggling, and didn’t believe they were actually friends. Nelly with her pink-streaked hair and clunky army boots was a sharp contrast to the redheaded Denise, who tended to wear polo shirts and plaid pleated schoolgirl skirts, sporting a letterman’s jacket. Denise was kind of a bookworm and, with the SATs fast approaching, had become the epitome of a studious student.

Nelly kicked the back of her chair.

“What?” Denise whispered, agitated, over her shoulder.

“I’m skipping out after this class. Wanna grab a burger?”

“No way.” Denise always said no way. If it weren’t for Nelly constantly badgering her to break the rules, Denise would be a complete drip.

“Come on!” Nelly whined.

“Shut up!” Denise hissed, casting a nervous look in Mr. Yawanis’ direction.

“Please, please, please...”

“OK! Fine! Just be quiet!”

Satisfied, Nelly sat back in her chair, folded her arms across her chest, and focused her attention on a fly circling the ceiling. Slowly, she descended into a dark lull of daydreams that brought her to the precipice of sleep.

From far away, she thought she heard the classroom door squeak open. There was a murmur of conversation and a shuffling of paper and feet, then Mr. Yawanis announced to the class, “OK guys, this is Laydon. He’s joining us for the semester. Laydon, why don’t you tell us where you’re from?”

“Egypt.”

At the word “Egypt,” a collective sigh exuded from the class. Nelly’s eyes snapped open and her posture whipped upright. Egypt! Egypt was so far away, so foreign, so exotic! Like the rest of the class, she craned to get a glimpse of Laydon.

He didn’t look anything like how she thought an Egyptian would. She expected somebody like the ancient Egyptians, like Cleopatra, like Tutankhaman—somebody with dark, desert-tanned skin and black hair, maybe some kohl smudged around her eyes, braids and jewelry . . . that sort of thing.

By comparison, Laydon looked downright normal. Though his skin had a healthy tan, his hair was a pale shade of downy blonde. He wore a hooded shirt with a corduroy jacket, a pair of faded blue jeans, and a lumpy green book bag. In fact, the only Egyptian thing about him was the beaded choker around his neck with a small gold hieroglyphic locket glinting just visibly over his collar.

Despite the fact that he didn’t look like the stereotypical Egyptian, Nelly felt a light churning in the pit of her stomach. Laydon had large, almond-shaped eyes a color so blue they bordered on ethereal. Leaning forward over her desk, Nelly kicked the back of Denise’s chair.

Denise whipped around, braids flicking over her shoulders, and glared at Nelly. “What?”

Nelly beamed and, her tongue protruding slightly between her teeth, whispered, “He’s cute!” She pretended to hide a girlish giggle behind one hand.

Denise glanced back at Laydon, then stared at Nelly. She shook her head and said, “He is not.”

Nelly gawked at her friend. “Are you kidding? He’s good looking!”

Denise rolled her eyes.

Then the most amazing thing happened. Mr. Yawanis gestured to the desks and said, “Welcome to America, Laydon. It looks like there’s an empty seat next to Nelly. Why don’t you sit there?”

Nelly’s breath caught in her throat. She felt her cheeks blush. As Laydon approached and slung his bag onto the desk to the immediate left of Nelly’s,

she slowly slid down in her seat, wishing she could bury her burning face. In front of her, Denise turned around to shoot a mirthful smirk.

Halfway through Mr. Yawanis' lecture on the complexities of the aorta, Nelly became uncomfortably aware of the fact that Laydon was looking at her. No, not only looking. The boy was *ogling* her. Nelly was careful not to glance in his direction, but ten minutes before the end of the period she couldn't help it.

The second she did, he caught and held her gaze in that penetrating blue stare, and she saw his lips mouth a word, possibly "Hi," possibly something else. Was it a trick of the light, filtering gray through the raindrops on the window, or was there something a little off about Laydon's eyes, something lurking just beneath, like a shadow flickering beneath the surface of a cool blue pool . . . drawing, pulling, coercing Nelly in . . . ?

In front of her, Denise jolted her chair backward, bashing it into the edge of Nelly's desk. Nelly whipped her gaze from Laydon's and refused to flicker it his way for the remainder of the period.

After class was dismissed, just as Nelly stepped into the hall, Laydon hooked her by the elbow and pulled her aside, away from the hustle and bustle of the passing period.

"Can we talk?" he asked. Nelly noted his light, indistinguishable accent, and felt a shiver course over her arms.

Somehow, she managed to form two words, "About what?"

"Not here," his gaze shifted to the other students, "somewhere private."

"She can't," a voice interrupted. Denise appeared over Nelly's shoulder, her arms crossed, holding her schoolbooks to her chest. "We're getting burgers, remember, Nell?" She flashed Laydon a look of pure ice, which he returned, unflinching.

Nelly, standing between the two, felt caught, tied up in a ribbon of tension. In an attempt to dispel the unexplained hostility between her best friend and the new boy, she said to Laydon, "Look, she's right. We're getting some food . . . unless you want to come?"

"He doesn't," Denise snapped.

"I do."

"No," Denise's brow rose, "you don't."

"OK," Nelly interrupted, "obviously you two know each . . ."

"What do you think you're doing?" Laydon whispered to Denise, his voice hoarse and dangerous.

Nelly's mouth snapped shut, and she stepped back. There was obviously something going on here. What, she had no idea. Denise and the new boy, for

one reason or another, didn't seem to like each other very much. The only logical explanation Nelly could come up with was that they must've met sometime before Anatomy and gotten into an argument. But if that was the case, why hadn't Denise told her about it? When Laydon first arrived in class, why hadn't Denise given Nelly a play-by-play of why she didn't like him and Nelly should steer clear?

Something didn't fit.

The two slid closer to one another, filling in the space where Nelly had just stood. They were face-to-face, neither blinking from the other's cold gaze. Around them, the other students continued to drift, chatter, and laugh, like an oblivious current around three rocks.

Denise snapped, "I'm not doing anything. She left on her own, remember?"

"She would sometimes, you know that. For a respite. But you've done something to her. You've turned her into this! She doesn't remember who she is or where she belongs . . ."

Denise leered, a curious curling of one lip. "I only did what she asked me to do."

This seemed to take Laydon aback. The color in his face drained and he sucked in a sharp breath. His eyes squinted and he murmured, "You lie."

"Why would I lie about that? It's so unbelievable . . . I would only say it if it was the truth."

"Where's the feather?"

Denise's eyes became big and innocent, and she cocked her head to the right, "I don't know what you're talking about, Laay-don." She said the name in a mocking sort of way.

Laydon turned around, caught Nelly by the arm, muttered, "Let's go," and started dragging her through the hall. Nelly looked over her shoulder at Denise, who watched the two leave with a half-smile before turning and disappearing into the crowd. Nelly struggled against Laydon and managed to pull herself free of his grasp. She scowled, "Listen, that's my friend back there, and if you've got some kind of gripe with her, you've got a gripe with me."

Looking left and right, Laydon steered Nelly into an alcove in the hall, next to a water fountain, and lowered his voice. "She isn't who you think she is, and I'm not who you think I am."

"Yeah, right, OK . . ." Nelly rolled her eyes and made to turn and leave. The boy was obviously insane; it must have been all that exposure to desert sun.

"I'll show you."

She glanced back at him and saw, for a flickering moment, the strangest apparition. In that instant, he wasn't Laydon. There was a flutter of white, a flapping of wings, a slender beak, and a long, delicate neck. A blink later the apparition was gone and Laydon was Laydon again.

Nelly collapsed against the wall behind her, ogling at him, her mouth gaping open and closed like a fish. She stared at the other students. Had none of them seen it? Had *she* seen it?

"Do you believe me?" he asked.

Dumb with shock, Nelly managed a nod.

"Good, then let's go." He took hold of her hand and steered her to the exit. They ran past the soccer field, rain whipping their hair and soaking their clothes. Luckily, Mr. Stills—the hall monitor who rode a green golf cart dubbed the Narc-Mobile around the school grounds to catch students playing hooky—was nowhere in sight.

There was a city bus stop at the corner, a bus just visible on the next block over. Laydon made a mad dash toward it, towing Nelly behind him like an anchor, and just managed to catch the bus before it pulled away.

They stood inside, gasping for breath and dripping pools of rainwater as they paid their fares. The bus was only half full, a barrage of half-drowned afternoon shoppers, errand runners, and businessmen on lunch staring straight ahead or gazing listlessly out the windows, refusing to make eye contact with anyone. Laydon led Nelly to two empty seats halfway to the back.

"OK," Nelly stuttered, her voice raising decibels with every word, "Now what was that all about? 'Cause let me tell you something, that was pretty friggin' freaky, OK!"

Laydon shushed her and ran a hand through his hair, shaking the water from it. "I've been looking for you for eighteen years. My name isn't actually Laydon, and Denise isn't really Denise. She's tricked you. She's taken on a different form and disguised herself. She has many names. She is Apep. She is Seth. She is the snake. She is chaos. She cannot be trusted.

"Apep is pandemonium. By stealing you, she has brought the world to the brink of anarchy. Outside the Hall of Maat, the spirits of the dead wait for the weighing of their *iebs*. It was your duty to weigh them against your feather, and thereby determine if their hearts are filled with vice or virtuosity. Because you are here, hidden in mortal form, the weighing of the hearts cannot happen. Ammut, the crocodile-hippopotamus, grows hungry without evil souls to eat. Annubis and the forty-two judges are lethargic as they wait futilely for your return. The stairway to the afterlife beckons, but no new souls descend."

A loud snort sounded just behind the two. They both turned and found themselves being scrutinized by a dowdy woman with tight, curly, gray hair, who clutched two overflowing grocery bags on her lap and had, on the seat beside her, a patchy calico in a cat carrier.

Nelly's eyes narrowed and she snapped, "You got a problem?"

The woman pursed her lips and raised her brows, but said nothing. The calico mewed.

Unfazed, Nelly returned her focus to Laydon. "So who are you?"

"Thoth, the moon God of knowledge and scribes." For a moment, it seemed he would say more but then decided against it. Instead, he added, "I'm sometimes the ibis."

Dawning. "Aahh . . . is that what that was?"

Laydon dipped his head in a nod. "It's my duty to find Maat and have her bring the one responsible for her delay to justice."

Nelly's head swum. It was all so unbelievable, so completely alien . . . any normal day, she would've called Laydon a raving lunatic, yanked the pull chord, and leapt from that bus, putting him out of reach and out of mind.

But the flickering image she'd seen in the hallway . . . for a moment, Laydon had been something else. Something not of this world at all. She hadn't imagined that. She shuddered and absently picked at the grimy, wet mass that was her hair. "Who am I supposed to be, again?"

"Maat. Truth, justice, and harmony. The Breath of Life."

Nelly sat back in her seat. Most of what Laydon was saying whisked right over her head. Why didn't she recognize any of this Egyptian mythology stuff? Then she remembered. Denise and she'd skipped school and gone to a music concert the day they'd studied ancient Egypt in sophomore World History.

Come to think of it, it was Denise who'd scored those tickets . . .

"I'm sorry, Laydon. Maybe you are this guy Thoth, and maybe even Denise is that snake thing; she can be pretty slick. But if there's one thing I know, it's me. I'm just not who you say I am."

"I can show you."

They got off at the next stop, a vacant parking lot seven blocks from the school. Rain puddles formed miniature islands out of the humps in the asphalt. A few cars splashed around the street corner, but other than that and a few scuttling rats by a trash dumpster, they were alone.

Laydon instructed her to look at him.

More than a little weirded out, Nelly obliged.

She watched his entire face go slack and his pupils dilate. He murmured

something, and through the patter of rain Nelly heard a single word, “*Ba*.”

Instantly, she felt that strange pulling, like she had in Anatomy. The blue hue of his eye shifted and broke, like the cusp of waves, and the world behind him—the trash dumpster and the parking lot—dimmed to black. Then there was a silent flash of light, like a television screen had just blown out, and Laydon blinked into the black behind him.

“Laydon?” Nelly whispered, but found that her voice was no longer there. It didn’t exist, her mouth, too, and her throat and her skin. She was a floating entity, unburdened by a body. Slowly, the darkness around her cleared, and she was looking at a grand temple: pillars and tapestries, old stone and white marble.

She saw a long, snaking line of people leaning against the furthest wall. Some of them read newspapers, some were asleep, their mouths gaped open and snoring; some chatted amiably, others stared listlessly ahead.

An eternity passed, the line inching step by step forward, a shuffle of bodies, a break in the lull. Then more waiting.

A wind picked up and whisked Nelly away from the line, down the temple hall, and into a circular room. There sat an imposing circle of robed men. There was also a table, and perched at the side of it was Laydon. He sat poised with a quill pen and a sheet of parchment. He gazed past Nelly and didn’t seem to see her.

Standing next to Laydon was a woman, garbed in elegant finery, with a long graceful neck and beautiful, wide-set eyes, plum red lips and polished, tapered nails. Her long, black hair fell in waves down to her waist. In her hair was a single ostrich feather, white and impossibly soft, wafting in a solitary beam of sunlight as though in water. The woman, too, was staring past Nelly at something behind her.

Nelly glanced over her shoulder, back at the waiting line. She saw a frightening creature with the body of a human but the head of some sort of dog escorting the person at the head of the line, an old man in a bowler hat, into the center of the room.

The dog-headed person gestured to the bowler-hat man to lean over the table, so that the side of his midsection sat on a stained cutting plate. What then followed was the most bizarre, engrossingly gross display Nelly had ever witnessed. The dog man plucked from the table a long knife and deftly slid it into the person’s chest. With an expert air he made four deep lacerations, and proceeded to scoop out the area cut as one scoops out a sliced brownie. Blood splattered to the floor, cascading over the bowler-hat man’s chest like a waterfall. He didn’t seem to mind. He didn’t so much as flinch.

The dog man held in his palm a handful of bodily mass. He plucked free the excess flesh and muscle, picked away a few splinters of ribs, until the thing he held was wholly and completely a human heart. He handed the heart over to Laydon, then picked up a gleaming gold scale from the table.

Laydon stood up from the stool. As he did so, he casually, tenderly brushed the back of his hand against the inner crook of the woman's arm before placing the heart in one of the scale's dishes. The scale didn't move when the weight of the heart was added. It remained completely balanced.

The woman reached behind her head and plucked free the peacock feather. Her arm draped forward, the feather pinched between thumb and forefinger. She dropped it onto the scale's second dish.

Like a rock, the heart's dish clanged against the table. The momentum caused the feather to waft upward for just a moment, catch the sunlight, then drift again into the dish.

A moment later, there was a snapping of jaws, a croak, a howl of pain, a gnashing of teeth, and the man was gone, dragged beneath the table by some unseen, dark monster lurking just beneath.

Laydon made a mark on the parchment, while the judges and the dog-man watched unwaveringly, their faces passive . . . almost apathetic.

The woman, too, had that look of the daily grind. But there was something else; something indistinguishable and hidden. Something secret. As she'd watched the bowler-hat man approach, her mouth had pulled down just slightly, and her shoulders had curled forward. Her gaze flickered just once—as she pulled the feather from her hair-toward the ceiling, up at the only window in the whole of the room.

Nelly knew that expression. It was the same expression she sometimes had in class, when she'd gaze out a window at the stretch of ground outside, at the shifting leaves of trees and the bursts of clouds, at birds swooping circles in the sky, and younger children, already out of school, chasing after an ice cream truck.

It was a look of boredom.

It was a look of yearning.

And Nelly knew, with all of her being, that that woman, somehow, was *her*.

The dog-man wiped his hands clean of blood in a basin of water, then walked toward the head of the line, to fetch the next victim.

There was a flash of silent light and darkness, and Nelly was back in the parking lot. She was soaked to the bone, shivering, and Laydon stood before her, one eyebrow arched expectantly.

“So?” he asked.

Nelly felt herself sink to the curb. The gutter swirled with murky brown rainwater, and her boots slogged in it. She nodded dumbly, “So you’re right. That was me.”

Laydon smiled. “Good. Now I’m not certain I’ll be able to bring back your memory, but restoring you to your immortal body shouldn’t be a problem at all. Then we’ll return to your hall, and . . .” his voice drifted and he stared at Nelly, who hadn’t said anything.

Nelly’s shoulders hunched forward, her head bowed, and her hair, pulled loose from the ponytail, shielded her face like a mangled curtain.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

“It’s just . . .” she shook her head, “day in and day out, the same thing. Cutting out peoples’ hearts, sentencing them to be eaten by that monster-thing. An eternity of that?” She shuddered. “It seems like such a terrible life.”

The rain thickened, fat drops slapping the puddles and soaking Nelly’s clothes through. Laydon was still and quiet. Hands in pockets, he stared down at Nelly with a mixture of fear, repulsion, and overwhelming grief.

At long last, he sighed and muttered, “She wasn’t lying, was she?”

He began to walk away.

Nelly stood and caught up with him. She gripped his shoulder, holding him back, and planted herself firmly in front of him. “What’s wrong? What is it?”

“Apep . . . Denise . . . she told the truth when she said you’d asked to be made this way. You actually *wanted* this! To be mortal, a human, to give up your responsibilities, your life . . .” He cringed and turned, unable to look at her.

A stubborn flame licked up inside Nelly. To his back she spat, “So what? You were there; you can’t tell me you honestly like weighing people’s hearts, every day all the time for the rest of eternity . . .”

“That isn’t the point.”

“What is?”

He thought a moment, then gestured to the ground. Spread out in nearly parallel lines over the parking lot were thin, drowning, dying bodies of pale pink earthworms, slowly going gray.

“Why do they come out?” Laydon said. “It seems so pointless, doesn’t it? They come out of the ground, where they would drown. But on the surface, if they’re lucky enough to survive the rainstorm, they bake in the sun. Such a worthless organism.”

“But *Maat* is the order of the universe. Everything has its place and its purpose. The earthworm breathes through its skin, taking in the air between soil

particles. By doing this, earthworms break down *humus*, decaying matter in the ground. If not for earthworms, *humus* would linger, spoil, and plants wouldn't grow. The ecosystems collapse; the universe becomes chaos.

"You, Maat, are the opposite—that order, that balance—that keeps everything right. It isn't about doing something because you *like* to. This isn't about frivolous fancies. Do the earthworms like what they do? Do they dislike it? Neither. It's about doing something because it's your purpose; it's what you are meant to and made to do."

Nelly kicked a loose chunk of gravel. With the toe of her boot she pried it from its place and sent it skittering through the puddles. A few worms were mashed beneath it.

"Well," she said at long last, "I don't want to."

She saw something blink out in the blue of his eyes. They didn't seem so vibrant anymore. He looked suddenly like a bedraggled cat, half-drowned and wholly pathetic.

"Come on," he shrugged. "I'll take you back to school."

They trudged the seven blocks in silence, and passing cars occasionally spritzed them with gutter water.

At school, the grounds were empty. The buses were gone. The final class had been let out. Because of the rain, after-school sports were cancelled, and the place was utterly abandoned.

Nelly squinted through the gray fog of rain. A smear of white, like a paint stroke, seemed to be leaning against the flagpole. As she neared, the smear solidified and separate colors pieced out: a green plaid skirt, a yellow letterman's jacket, a sky blue umbrella, violent red hair . . . It was Denise, smirking beneath the protection of her umbrella as she watched the two approach. When they were near enough, she sneered, "Did I lie, *Laay*-don?"

Laydon, his head bowed and posture sunk with the weight of his wet clothes and heavy heart, could only nod once. Nelly stared at him and felt an overwhelming surge of pity course through her. He seemed so small, so insignificant now. All of his grand words, his fantastical story, his talk of myths and life and order . . . they were all now obsolete.

Denise smiled at Nelly and held out a hand. "You should come out of the rain. You're soaked, Nell. We can go get those burgers. And I promise, come tomorrow, you're not gonna remember any of this." Nelly stepped toward Denise, casting Laydon a final, apologetic look. He was still as a stone statue, gray and soaked through. Only his finger moved, a slight twitch at his side.

She remembered something. In the vision of the heart weighing, she'd seen

Laydon place the heart in the scale, and later record the results. But just before that, he'd done something small, a tiny little gesture that had gone nearly unnoticed. He'd touched Maat's arm. It had been a tender, loving little motion. A casual, intimate thing . . .

Just beyond Denise's outstretched hand, Nelly stopped and looked back at Laydon. Were Maat and Thoth lovers? How pitiful, that she didn't even remember him, and was now abandoning him for the fleeting, carefree life of a mortal. She felt sorry for him, and the girlish part of her was a little let down, but she wasn't going to chain herself to an immortal life of responsibility just because she had a crush on a cute boy.

Another thought came to her. Her life as Maat couldn't have been *all* heart weighing. That tender little gesture between lovers was proof that there was something more, a relationship beyond the duties of the temple. She'd had a life that went beyond the golden scale. There was more to Maat than feather plucking and soul condemnation.

Did she want to find out what more there was?

Sensing Nelly's hesitation, Denise said, "I should add that you begged me to make you mortal. I'm not using 'begged' as a hyperbole, here. On your knees, pleading, tears, the whole sha-bang. You want to go back to the life that reduced you to that?"

Nelly didn't know. She looked over her shoulder at Laydon, "Was there anything else? Maybe something you forgot to mention?"

He stared at her through the gray drizzle and didn't say anything. But for a moment she thought she saw a brilliant flash of blue rekindle behind his eyes.

Denise snapped, "It's a *dull life*, Nelly, an eternity of monotony. And I know you. You'd hate it. You love playing hooky too much. You love being rebellious. That's you. Not what he says. Order and balance and all that; you wouldn't be breaking the rules . . . you'd *be* the rules! The life of Nelly Weems is what you wanted!"

Nelly turned and faced Denise, her best friend in all the world. Beneath the sanctity of the brilliant blue umbrella, Denise was a vision of perfection. Unlike the soaked Laydon and frazzled Nelly, her clothes were dry and not a red hair was out of place. Nothing whatsoever about her appearance suggested there was some slithering, scaly thing lurking beneath that befreckled, ivory skin.

Nelly said, her voice sharp and edged with finality, "I made a mistake."

High above, there was a break in the gray storm clouds. A beam of warm sunlight sieved through and cast a golden glow over the flagpole.

Seething, Denise's shoulder sunk and her arm went limp. Her grip on the

umbrella slackened and it dipped down, then clattered to her feet. Denise had time to give Nelly a single cold stare—the iciest, most livid look of hatred Nelly had ever borne witness to in her life—before dissipating into a curling ribbon of red smoke. Nelly watched the smoke dance up into the sunlight, thinning and spreading until not a trace of it was left. Behind her, she heard Laydon let loose a sigh of irrepressible relief.

As the sunlight warmed her wet clothes and stroked her clammy skin, a sense of overwhelming duty overcame Nelly. She recalled something Laydon had told her on the bus, something about his mission: the guilty one responsible for delaying Maat's return to the temple must be brought to justice.

Today, Nelly was the guilty one, and she knew exactly what her punishment should be. "Laydon," she whispered, "take me home."