

BAPTISM

By Niko Joost

Blue-Eye, positioned downwind from the impala, howled in sheer delight to start the hunt. Startled, the animal had become unconscious of its surroundings, and had strayed too far from the herd. Now evening, the pack had been stalking this herd for the better part of the day. Dandelion and Swims-like-a-fish howled, too; they'd taken up a position between the impala and its herd, making sure the animal got started in the right direction. After all, the idea was to cut their prey off - not chase it back to the herd. The savannah was where they lived, where they thrilled in the life-sustaining hunt. Their only concern was with the lions, who out-weighed and out-numbered them...and those deadly claws. The animal bolted in the intended direction and took off. With Blue-Eye in the middle, and Dandelion and Swims-like-a-fish flanking him, the three wolves formed a moving wall, driving the impala into the jaws of the trap. Terrified, literally running for its life, the animal easily outdistanced the three. It could smell the wolves now - and they could smell the animal's fear. Up ahead, Mushroom and Lady made sure, with occasional yips and growls, to keep the beast on course. Within a couple of miles, however, the antelope began to tire visibly, stumbling here and there in the pale light of the rising moon. Slowly, inexorably, they closed the trap around their frightened quarry. Mushroom and Lady formed the pincers, pressing their prey into the waiting jaws of Fang, Dawn and Butterflies, as they lay in wait. Blue-Eye, with Dandelion and Swims-like-a-fish on either side, barked, hoping to get the impala to do something stupid and make their work easier. Always good to keep the pressure on, no matter what. Desperate prey often made disastrous decisions - it was only a

matter of time. As they neared the group of elders ahead, Blue-Eye, Dandelion and Swims-like-a-fish slowed their pace and began barking, keeping their prey on the move, and frightened. Except in rare cases, a hunt was more like a relay than a sprint; conserving their energy was of paramount importance. And then - the growling, snarling of the three elder wolves ahead signaled that the trap had been sprung. Fang and Dawn had gone for the legs, while Butterflies, carefully dodging the antlers, angled in for the throat. This allowed the rest of the pack to catch up and add weight and numbers for the kill. The impala fought with all its might, but it was no use. It was exhausted, outnumbered and outmatched. Butterflies snapped the beast's neck with one powerful motion, and it went limp, ceasing all struggle in an instant. After tearing away his "Alpha share", he beckoned to the rest of the pack -- the suckling mothers and unweaned cubs - with a howl, so they could join in the feast. This was one of the biggest hauls they'd taken in some time and they were very pleased. Blue-Eye could feel that sense of satisfaction radiating from the rest of the pack, but especially from Butterflies, the Alpha, their leader. Mixed in with the pleasure...was it...pride? Butterflies bowed his head to Blue-Eye, who immediately began grooming him. Blue-Eye revered the old wolf; in return, Butterflies treated him like a son, an heir apparent. Just then, the remainder of the pack joined the hunting party. All was good. Cubs not yet weaned suckled as their mothers tore at still-warm flesh. Blue-Eye raised his bloody muzzle to the pale white moon and howled. The younger males all joined in, music to his ears. The hunt had been successful, no one had been injured, no lions or packs of hyenas to contend with, and their bellies were full. He howled again and again. It was good to hunt with his wolf-brothers!

Suddenly, he stopped. Someone was calling him, "Amosis! Amosis! Wake up!" The pack vanished, taking the impala with them. The moon took on a human man's face: olive skin framed with dark hair. It had a human voice, too, "Amosis, wake up! Wake up!" The moonlit landscape dissolved, the moon disappeared. "Amosis!"

Streaming sweat from every pore, Amosis bolted upright, bewildered. Where was he?! Just moments before, he'd been hunting with his pack. He'd had that dream twice before and, just like the other times, he'd awakened, the moon in his dream streaming in through his bed chamber window. This time, however, his father had intervened. The Moon, streaming through the window splashed Her light across Amosis's pillow. *Just like the other times*, Amosis thought.

Menes, his father, wore a concerned look, but said only, "Are you alright, my son?"

Amosis arose from the bed and crossed the room shakily, pouring a little water into a basin from the pitcher beside it on the washstand. He splashed some of that water on his face and toweled it off. He shuddered. "I had *the dream* again." His stare fixed his father's gaze. He poured a cup of water from the pitcher; unable to completely steady himself, he sat back down on the bed. He turned to his father, "the *dream*... It was so...so...*real*," Amosis whispered.

A little unsteadied himself, Menes lit a lamp next to the bed, and then made himself comfortable on a stool next to the

washstand, while Amosis recounted the dream in as much detail as he could remember. Menes listened patiently, and by the time the boy had finished his telling, they'd both calmed down.

"It wasn't like an omen or a prophecy, father. I wasn't afraid of anything - not for one minute. And it wasn't because I was trying to be brave, or fierce. It was like...like *this* life. Everything seemed natural, the way you'd expect it to be in the savannah down south - all the smells, sounds...tastes. Even now, as I think about ripping the still-warm flesh from the animal, I can taste the blood in my mouth. It just felt...right."

"If you were a wolf, that is," Menes interjected. Amosis smiled ruefully. "But, don't you see? What was so disturbing wasn't that I was a wolf, hunting with my pack. What really shocked me was waking up in this bed - this house." He pointed at himself. "This body." Amosis stifled a yawn. "Well? What do you think it means?"

Menes, a little bleary-eyed himself, replied quietly, "I'm not sure, but I'll talk to someone tomorrow and try to get this sorted out. One more question, though..."

Amosis nodded drowsily, "Of course, father."

Menes chose his words carefully. "You mentioned in your telling that the other wolves all had names - individual names: Butterflies...Dawn...and wasn't one of them 'Swims like a Fish'?"

Amosis nodded. "Did you speak to each other? By name?"

"No, it wasn't anything like that, father. We just *knew*. If I wanted to communicate with someone, I just thought of them, and thought my thoughts to them."

"Did you have a name in this pack?" Amosis nodded again.

"Well...what was it? How did they refer to you within the pack?"

Amosis lowered his voice. "Blue Eye."

Menes' face darkened noticeably.

"What is it, father?"

"It's probably nothing," this was Menes doing his best not to alarm his son, "but it may prove to be an important detail."

Menes continued, "As a whole, it seems like a powerful dream; but to have the *same* dream three times at the full moon, no less, makes me believe that we need to consult with a Seer. Someone who knows about these things."

"But father, why not consult the priests of Anubis? Aren't wolves their--"

Menes cut him off, "You will not mention those priests or anyone or anything associated with them in this house!"

"But, father, I --" Amosis was taken aback by the level of his father's anger.

"We've been through this before! I don't like priests -- least of all *those* priests! If you want to bring priests into this, go visit the temples of Isis, or Ra! I'll even give you some gold for an offering! But the subject is closed!

Amosis hung his head. "I only meant to..."

Menes took a deep breath and put his hand on his son's shoulder.

"I know, son...you only want to help. You're a good boy. Menes stepped back, the better to survey his son. "Boy! Ha! By the looks of you, you're almost a full-grown man!"

Menes' glare softened. "If only your mother were still here to see you. She'd be so proud..."

Menes' tone turned confidential. "Look, it'll be dawn in soon enough. Go to bed and try to get some sleep; we'll see what tomorrow brings."

Amosis smiled sleepily at his father. If anyone could solve the puzzle of the dream, his father would know who it was. He climbed back into his bed, turning onto one side so he could face his father. Menes moved to muss his son's hair, but Amosis ducked. Taking the hint, Menes chuckled. "Did I say '*almost*' a man? You're growing up too fast!"

Menes extinguished the lamp, leaving Amosis alone with his thoughts. He yawned as Menes gently shut the door.

His father still had many friends in service to The First Among Equals, as well as in the City Guard. And sooner or later he - or *someone* he knew - would give that information up - either as a favor-in-trade or in a dungeon. Amosis shuddered at the thought. He remembered as a young boy hearing his father joke to friends that, whether you were a Truth-seeker in the City Guard or a traveling merchant, your real stock-in-trade was the same: secrets. If you could get someone to *believe* that it was in their interest to give up their secrets, well...you'd be a big success in either career. "Never forget that, son. Always get the information *first*. It can be worth far more than gold."

And with that, Amosis closed his eyes and fell into a deep, dreamless slumber.

A dark figure parted the clouds of incense smoke; at first, it appeared to be a man. Of medium height, slight frame. Skin?

Hard to tell in the dim, candle-lit room. It was dark, the man's skin, but not so dark as the peoples far to the south, with their wooly hair, inhabitants of the kingdoms of the savannah and the jungle.

This man was from the East. He wore robes of finest silk, and an amulet fell exactly in the middle of his chest. As he passed through the great hall, he turned to one side. His head was not human, but that of a wolf.

"Your Eminence," the acolyte bowed and scraped.