

The
God's
Apprentice

PART ONE

NIGHT'S BLOOD



RETURN OF THE SCARLET EYE

MAGGIE BEST

© Maggie Best 2009

The moral right of the author has been asserted.

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Author: Best, Maggie, author.
Title: Night's blood : return of the scarlet eye / by Maggie Best.
ISBN: 9780992402808 (paperback)
Series: Best, Maggie, God's apprentice ; Part 1.
Notes: Includes index.
Subjects: Mythology, Egyptian--Fiction.
Dewey Number: A823.4

This is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and occurrences are either a product of the author's imagination or have been used fictitiously, and any resemblance to real persons, living or dead, businesses, events, and locations other than those clearly in the public domain, is completely coincidental.

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. This book contains material protected under International and Federal Copyright Laws and Treaties. Any unauthorized reprint or use of this material is prohibited. No part of this book may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system without express written permission from the author / publisher.

Please purchase only authorised electronic editions, and do not participate in or encourage electronic piracy of copyrighted materials.

Your support of the author's rights is appreciated.

Learn more about Maggie and her books on www.maggiest.com

Or follow on Facebook: www.facebook.com/maggiestauthor

And on Twitter: <https://twitter.com/AuthorMbest>

Printed by Digital Print Australia

THE GOD'S APPRENTICE - PART ONE: NIGHT'S BLOOD

Contents

Prologue:	7
Chapter 1: THE RETURN OF THE SCARLET EYE.....	9
Chapter 2: VANISHED.....	15
Chapter 3: ALEX.....	19
Chapter 4: THE WHITE ROOM.....	27
Chapter 5: DISTRACTIONS.	29
Chapter 6: THE LITTLE BOOKSHOP.	37
Chapter 7: A CLUE.....	45
Chapter 8: ADDED COMPLICATIONS.....	52
Chapter 9: REVELATIONS.....	65
Chapter 10: THEORIES.....	75
Chapter 11: PLANS.....	83
Chapter 12: ROAD TRIP.	93
Chapter 13: NIGHT'S BLOOD.	110
Chapter 14: THE SCHOLAR'S TALE.....	123
Chapter 15: THE LESSONS BEGIN.....	132
Chapter 16: MIND GAMES.....	144
Chapter 17: SPECIAL REQUEST.....	157
Chapter 18: THE UNDERWORLD.....	165
Chapter 19: A LEAD.....	176
Chapter 20: TWO STEPS FORWARD, ONE STEP BACK.....	188
Chapter 21: EVERYTHING CHANGES.....	208
Chapter 22: RHYME OR REASON?	216
Chapter 23: IF ONLY.....	226
Chapter 24: PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT.....	233
Chapter 25: SAFE GUARDS.....	243
Chapter 26: STOLEN MOMENTS.....	253
Chapter 27: THE HIDDEN DOOR.....	260
Chapter 28: LOOSE ENDS.....	274
Chapter 29: TIME TO GO.	283
Chapter 30: OUT OF THE FRYING PAN.	292
Chapter 31: YOU WIN SOME, YOU LOSE SOME.....	304
Chapter 32: DESTINY.....	320
Epilogue:	333

Acknowledgements:

This, my very first book, is dedicated my wonderful husband, Geoff and our fabulous kids Tanya, Andrew and David – with thanks for their patience, feedback, help and inspiration.

No book is ever a solo effort and so I'd like to also extend my sincere appreciation to these amazing folk:

Miranda, my editor, for your time, and great advice.

Digital Print Australia for turning my words into an actual book that I can hold in my hands.

Sensational Beta readers, Lilly, Jen, Kylie, Lindy, Anna and Nirmala, for your constructive – and sometimes sassy - comments.

The guys and gals at the Novelist's Circle for your detailed and meticulous critiques.

My friends both here and in cyberspace; Thanks for pushing, prodding and putting up with me, and not letting me give up on my dream.

I can never adequately express my gratitude to you all.

And to my beautiful mum, Ivy, who has watched this journey from another realm, this is for you...



Isis's prophecy for Horus...

*Blood will burn and Set will cower,
As the willing sacrifice surrenders power,
Glowing red and bright as day,
The Scarlet Eye again holds sway.
The helm no longer in disguise,
Reforms anew and you will rise.
Then all mankind will bend its knee,
Bound eternally to thee...*



THE GOD'S APPRENTICE PART 1

Prologue:

1824 AD – The Underworld.

Set's eyes snapped open, his peaceful meditation shattered. A disturbing sensation gnawed at his stomach denying him much needed rest. Swallowing hard, he tried to dispel the feeling, but it refused to ease. He peered irritably at the faint blush of dawn and marshalled his strength.

Expanding all his senses, he tried to locate the source of his discomfort; it was not in this realm. Clenching his teeth, he pushed further, seeking a beloved mind beyond the void. What she recounted made the breath catch in his throat.

The Scarlet Eye of Horus amulet, that cursed instrument of his Earthly downfall, the device Horus's minions had subsequently used to enslave his people, the Seti, had been rediscovered on Earth.

"What if falls into the wrong hands?" she fretted. "Without you here to guard it, all mankind could fall under its sway this time."

"I'm the god of Night for the Underworld, not Earth," he reminded her, his tone flat and unyielding. "Mankind chose its path when it turned its back on me."

"So you would abandon them? You would abandon me?"

The question stung. Anger gave way to aching sadness. He was indifferent to mankind, but not to her... No, "I could never do that."

Relief washed along their tenuous link and through him, giving his conscience a guilty nip.

"I knew you couldn't have changed that much."

He had, but he wasn't about to tell her how mistaken her faith was.

"I'll speak to Ra." The offer sounded grudging even to his ears, but that wasn't her fault.

"I can't promise he'll change his mind," he cautioned. "At least one of the reasons I was sent into exile still exists."

"I understand."

"If by some miracle he does agree, it will still be difficult for me to cross over after all this time. I'll need..."

"I'll get on to it while you speak to your father," she cut in, her excitement pricking his conscience again.

"Be careful, Aker." The warning reached her before she could sever their connection and made her pause. "If the Eye falls into the wrong hands before I'm able to come, and they learn about you and what you can do, it won't be just the people of Earth who will be in peril."

"I know. I'll take care; don't worry."

THE GOD'S APPRENTICE PART 1

Then he was alone again, the link broken.

Set stared at the ceiling, his face a mask gilded by the newly risen sun.

Despite the dire consequences the discovery of the Scarlet Eye might cause, the chance of his return had filled Aker with a hope and longing she hadn't been able to completely conceal.

A matching desire in him, ruthlessly suppressed before she could sense it, had made it impossible for him to add that, should it become necessary to destroy the Scarlet Eye rather than merely watch over it, this could all end badly – very badly.

He'd have to tell her one day of course, but not yet. No, not yet.

Chapter 1: THE RETURN OF THE SCARLET EYE.

1826 AD - Edinburgh, Scotland.

Two long, frustrating years; that's how long it took Set to convince Ra to allow him to leave the Underworld. His father might have remained adamant in his refusal had the Egyptian government not done the unthinkable and bequeathed the Scarlet Eye to Horatio Browne, the foreign archaeologist who had found it. It was now en-route to England, something that would never have been permitted had the gods still ruled Egypt. Furious at this treachery, Ra had relented.

Finally, after weeks of preparation, all was in readiness for Set's departure. Having extracted a solemn vow from his son regarding Aker, Ra gave Set his blessing. Anubis stood at the back of the chamber to bear witness and as a precaution should anything go amiss with the transfer.

Set lay on the altar, closed his eyes, steadied his breathing and prepared to cross over to the land of his birth.

Forces rushed into the chamber, pulled at his hair and clothing, swirled around and through him, tugging viciously at his soul. His body stiffened and arched in response, as the knotted chords in his throat desperately held back a scream of agony.

"You must surrender, Set. You wanted this." Ra's stern voice caused the colour in Set's already flushed cheeks to deepen.

Wonderful; just what he needed. To be scolded like a child in front of Anubis.

Set willed his rebellious muscles to relax.

They ached in protest, then...

...Calm.

...Silence.

...A violent wrench that sent him spinning into oblivion.

Sensations returned slowly.

First, soft light flickered against his eyelids.

Next, the muted sounds of horses' hooves on cobbles, voices, and a dog's barking, reached him.

Then the long-absent, but never-forgotten scent of cloves, attar of roses, and musk caressed his nostrils, and his eyes sprang open.

He blinked and tried to bring his surroundings into focus. Daylight streaming through a window in front of him made his eyes water.

A figure stooped and snuffed out a candle.

THE GOD'S APPRENTICE PART 1

Turning his head, he stared at the woman in the unfamiliar high-waisted, scalloped and beribboned old-gold silk and gauze gown, his eyes travelling up her trim figure until he at last found something he recognised – lips, nose and eyes.

“Aker.” His voice cracked. He stood, unsteady at first, his eyes never leaving hers.

Which of them moved first was impossible to tell. One minute half a room separated them, the next they were in each other's arms.

Set had every intention of honouring the promise he'd made to Ra, but facing the woman he loved after a separation of more than two thousand years, feelings drove rational thought away and they lost themselves in each other.

It took almost three days for duty to reassert itself. He hated it with a passion; loathed having to leave Aker alone once more as he set off to meet Horatio Browne's ship.

Thanks to Aker's genius for arranging such things, he had the perfect cover and a new partner who was more than happy to let Set assume his identity in exchange for knowledge about ancient Egypt from such an impeccable source.

So Set became a highly respected Egyptologist. That tickled him. As their carriage rattled and swayed its way across the Scottish border and into England he pulled a small mirror out of his jacket pocket and studied his disguise. A grin tugged at the corner of his mouth. Not even Ra would recognise him now.

Ingratiating himself with Horatio proved ridiculously easy thanks to the superb coaching he received on their long trip to London.

Horatio welcomed Set with enthusiasm - thrilled that he'd been able to lure the reclusive Professor south of the border at long last - and wasted no time installing him as his associate.

It was obvious from the outset that their passion for Egypt was mutual. Set was more surprised to discover that the bellicose archaeologist also shared his dry sense of humour.

Ironically, it was this rapport that was almost Set's undoing.

A year after they began working together Horatio received an offer to join a team of archaeologists at the Louvre, in Paris. He was of a mind to refuse but the British Government saw it as a great public relations coup and he was ordered to make preparations to move his family to France.

Determined not to leave without celebrating the end of his long and illustrious tenure at the British Museum, Horatio invited his colleagues to a ball at his townhouse in Belgravia.

Even Set was impressed when he entered the main salon that night.

Lifting a champagne flute from a tray proffered by a white-gloved waiter, Set wandered across the gleaming parquet floor, nodding to an acquaintance here, and stopping for a mild flirtation there. His eyes roamed over towering vases of exotic flowers, their scents and beauty vying with the perfumed finery of the ladies for precedence.

Above them in a minstrel's gallery, a group of musicians sawed away on their instruments, determined to be heard over the excited crowd. Set felt sorry for them.

He took a sip of his drink and turned to make another circuit of the room.

"There you are, you rascal!" a voice boomed in his ear. "I'd almost given you up as a lost cause."

Set looked down at Horatio's flushed face with genuine affection. "You should know that I would never let you down, sir."

"Good man!" Horatio barked a laugh and pummelled Set's shoulder, slopping his champagne. This provoked more hilarity and he waved a waiter over to clean up the spill and refresh Set's glass.

As the evening drew to a close Horatio gathered everyone around and held his hands up for silence. He waved Set forward.

"Friends and colleagues, I thank you all for coming here tonight, and for your kind wishes regarding my new position at the Louvre." He raised his glass in response to their toasts and took a generous gulp.

"Now, I'm sure you have all been wondering how anyone will be able fill my formidable shoes at the British Museum?" Chuckling along with his audience he put his glass down and pulled Set beside him. "Well, wonder no longer, my friends, and welcome your new Head of the Egyptology Department!"

Set's expression froze somewhere between a smile and shock. Belatedly he acknowledged the applause.

Horatio stepped behind him, to let him have his moment of triumph Set presumed, until Horatio added, "and what better way to anoint my successor than with my most prized artefact!"

Set couldn't see what Horatio had produced but he felt it long before the cold gold weight settled around his neck. Searing pain rushed through his veins and burst into flames inside his stomach. The Scarlet Eye pulsed with burning malevolence at each frantic beat of his heart and he felt his knees buckle.

Fool for trusting; for not shielding! It was too late now that the cursed thing was touching him. The world slowed and narrowed to a long tunnel of pain. Cries of distress and screams seemed far away. The last thing he saw was the champagne glass as it slipped from his nerveless fingers and shattered, its pieces glittering across the floor like scattered diamonds.

THE GOD'S APPRENTICE PART 1

Then his face met the polished boards and darkness claimed him.



1908 AD - London, England.

“Has someone died?” Set stared at Aker’s high-necked, long-sleeved black silk dress. The military-style braid on its bodice did nothing to soften its sober lines.

She removed the matching feather-trimmed hat and her lace gloves and placed them on his dresser.

Not someone; something, Aker thought privately. “You summoned me, my Lord. I’m here.”

“Aker, please. It wasn’t a summons. I...” His protest was cut short.

“With that one exception, it’s been over eighty years since you last spoke to me. And then it was only because you needed my skills to track down the Scarlet Eye. What is it this time?”

Set cringed, both at her tone and because that’s exactly why he had called her now; the thrice-cursed Eye had been stolen. They needed to find it fast.

He’d kept a greater distance from the amulet ever since that dreadful evening when Horatio had unknowingly almost crippled him, and that distance had led to him losing track of it briefly after Horatio’s heir had died.

Since then he’d been far more diligent, which made this theft all the more baffling. Who had taken it? *How* had they done it?

He met Aker’s eyes and manned up. “It’s gone. Someone managed to steal it. The current owners have police on three continents looking for it.”

Her eyes held his for another long moment. Then with a shake of her head she turned her back on him.

Damn! His detachment had been to protect her from his father’s wrath. If Ra found out they’d renewed their relationship, however briefly, he’d demand Aker return to the Underworld, which would be tantamount to a death-sentence for her.

For once in his extremely long life he was at a loss for words. What could he say to retrieve her good opinion?

Before he could think of a safe response she’d collected her things from the dresser.

“I’ll see what I can do. Are you staying here?” She tipped her head at the hotel room in which they now stood.

“Yes and...Thank you.”

Another nod and she stepped into the swirling mirage-like vortex that had appeared behind her.

Then it winked out, leaving him alone with his frustration.

Three tense weeks later Aker returned with the news that a member of the Metropolitan police force stationed at New Scotland Yard had recovered the Eye and it was back at the British Museum.

“Your friend at the Museum has authenticated it,” she added. Her stiff posture told him he hadn’t been forgiven yet, though the pale pink lace and chiffon tea-gown she was wearing today made him hopeful.

Taking her hand he placed a lingering kiss on each knuckle and then leaned in to kiss her properly before she could pull away. Her taut posture relaxed and he drew her closer, confident the wards he’d placed around the room would keep them safe from prying eyes.

When he raised his head at last they were lying across the bed, their clothing rumpled and their faces warm. He brushed aside the absurd curls framing her face. The rest of her hair was teased up and back and wound into a loose bun at the back of her head. This fashion didn’t do her justice. Edwardian society should adopt Egyptian braids, he thought, and then snorted at the idea.

Her hand swatted his. “What’s so funny?”

“These.” He tweaked another strand.

Aker sighed. “For once I agree with you. You have no idea how difficult it is to achieve this style with hair like mine.”

She missed the mischievous glint in his eye and the next moment he was tossing her hair pins all over the floor, freeing her tresses to form a dark cloud around her head.

The long day was just beginning to fade, and most of London was already asleep as she finished pinning her hair back up.

Set sighed. Their time together was always too short. Stolen moments.

Aker turned from the mirror to say goodbye.

Taking her hands in his before she could gather up the rest of her things, he bent to give her one last kiss.

Then, “There is something I’ve been meaning to tell you since I returned. Something I need to say before you leave...”



PRESENT DAY – London, England.

The Sunday-morning peal of the bells of St Paul’s was shimmering across the city as Aker appeared in Set’s newly-leased apartment. He stepped forward to take her in his arms but her expression made him falter.

“What is it? What’s wrong?”

THE GOD'S APPRENTICE PART 1

She took a breath and squared her shoulders. "The St Clairs have disappeared."

A chill of fear skittered across his skin. Alicia St Clair was the latest member of the Browne family to inherit the Scarlet Eye amulet.

"How? When did this happen?"

"Yesterday. I just found out. No-one knows how yet."

"But the Eye..."

"...Is still under glass and tight security in the British Museum, yes." She watched as he paced the small distance between the window and the couch.

Set's thoughts churned. The Scarlet Eye amulet had been gifted to Horatio by a grateful Egyptian government on the condition that he or his descendants remained its custodians.

What if this was a plot to get the Eye returned to Egypt? His homeland was in turmoil once more, and the military had taken control. If those in charge got hold of the Scarlet Eye...if they worked out how to restore it to full power, the blood-bath could be horrendous.

And all that stood between them now was a woman and a young girl, Horatio's last descendants.

"What's being done?"

"Alicia's sister, Meredith, left Scotland for Sydney this morning to collect Caitlin, and their foster son, Alex. They'll return in a few days and will stay with her in Gatehouse while the police investigate."

Pausing at the window he stared out over the rooftops and into the haze beyond.

"They are wealthy people," she proffered. "That could be the motive."

He grunted but remained silent, hoping the dread that had settled in his stomach wasn't a presentiment; that fate hadn't caught up with them at last.

Aker closed the distance between them. "What do you want me to do?"

No response.

"Set?"

Jolted out of his dark musing he turned around and took her hand. "Get close to those children. Be alert for any threat to them. You may have to use your gifts to send them somewhere safe."

It wasn't hard to follow his thoughts. "And you? What will you do?"

"I'll stay close to the museum, as usual."

"Perhaps it would be better if I took the amulet and hid it somewhere?"

"No. That might provoke whoever has the St Clairs into disposing of them. For now we just watch and wait, and hope this has nothing to do with the Scarlet Eye."