

“Nefernaten, Daughter of Akhenaten”

By Katie Worland and Simone Federici

Nefernaten stared intently at the roach making its way across the dirt floor. She couldn't bear to look up; looking up meant seeing her sister's dead body and her parent's anguished faces. Nefernaten glanced at her mother, Nefertiti, only to see her face wilted under a steady stream of tears. Her father, Akhenaten, who put so much faith in the Sun God, Aten, was at a loss for words or actions to lift up their family. Countless words of prayer weren't enough to bring back their beloved daughter Meketaten.

Nefernaten made her way to the garden when a noise around the rose bush whispered into her ear. She turned around slowly pressing her back against the tall leaves and peeked around the corner only to find her father on his knees. His hands were raised to Aten as he spoke words she couldn't understand. Nefernaten sunk to the floor, hiding her face in her knees. She couldn't think of any justification for this death and began to doubt Aten's powers. She trusted her father but questioned if he made the right decision as the Pharaoh. *Was he right to leave the Gods that people had believed in for so long?* Nefernaten questioned why she should put any faith and trust in a God that let her sister die. *What did their family do to deserve this?*

Seeking a break from her family's tragedy, Nefernaten and her closest friend Beset snuck out of the palace, something they rarely did. They quickly slipped by the guards and ran down the beaten dirt path away from the palace. Finally, they reached the Nile river, which flowed near the palace. The hot sun beat down and reflected off the water into their eyes.

Buildings began to surface in the distance. They were eager to talk to new people, learn new things, and, most importantly, take their minds off the death and the consequences that were likely to follow upon their return. Upon entering the town, the two girls began to realize that this was nothing like the palaces they had grown up in. Animals drifted through the crowd and the smell of burning plants filled their noses. Buildings, although tall and sturdy, were dirty and cracked. People's faces were streaked with mud and calluses dotted their hands; however, serene smiles graced their faces. They began to realize that although these people were poor, they were content and possessed a certain wisdom that the Pharaoh did not. Nefernaten and Beset were so intrigued by these new sights that they didn't notice the sun setting. They immediately rushed back to the palace.

When they arrived at the palace, they walked with great caution so as to sneak back past the guards. The next morning Nefernaten approached her father to ask for permission to leave the palace. Akhenaten immediately said no. With the recent passing of Meketaten, plus the fact that Nefernaten was still a teenager, Akhenaten was adamant about his decision. Nefernaten's eyebrows began to furrow and the tips of her lips pointed down. She knew that she couldn't stay in the palace any longer. She threw her arms down at her side and stomped to the garden where she sat for hours

in peace. She didn't trust her God, and she felt oppressed by her family. Her stomach grumbled, and her throat was dry. Dinner passed and she was still waiting in the garden, and she eventually fell asleep on the hard ground. She refused to eat or drink until her parents let her out of the palace.

Meanwhile, Akhenaten was lost. He pondered outside the palace while the sun shone brightly on the pyramids. Akhenaten questioned his decision, so he resorted to the only thing he thought was true, Aten. He waited for Aten to speak to him, and sure enough he did. Although Akhenaten loved Nefernaten very much, he knew that this may be good for her and that he needed to let her go.

Nefernaten was very excited about Akhenaten's decision. She was sad to leave her family, but she knew that this would be the right thing to do. She knew that there was something more than fancy dinners in the palace, private teachers, and slaves. She wanted something true, to go where people wouldn't give her special treatment for being the Pharaoh's daughter.

Nefernaten and Beset packed some food and a change of clothes and took off in the midday heat. The ground was hot beneath their feet, but they continued along the Nile in search of the next town where they hoped to enter into something new.

"Nefernaten look!" Beset called while pointing in the distance. They both squinted their eyes to see what was ahead. Up the river, they could see small figures surrounded by palm trees. The sun was nearly setting, and pinks, purples, and yellows began to swirl together. There was a glow in the sky that created striking silhouettes of the palm trees and the Great Pyramids against the soft sunset.

Nefernaten and Beset walked slowly up to the new town. They saw two people making vases out of clay and admired their artisanship. The people looked up at Nefernaten and Beset and were confused. They recognized the clothing and knew that they came from wealth.

One of the artists spoke up, "What brings you here?" They stopped working on their vases and stood up to talk to Nefernaten and Beset.

Beset spoke as Nefernaten continued to look around. "We've traveled here from the palace. We're looking for a change, something new."

The artist looked at them in confusion. "I don't understand. Why would two girls like you, who come from the top of society, come here in search of a change? Did the Pharaoh approve of this?"

Nefernaten finished looking around and told the artist that they had received her father's permission. She explained the death of Meketaten and the need for a change in their lives.

"On behalf of this town, I would like to welcome you both," said the artist as he did a small bow in front of them. "Come here, let me show you."

Nefernaten and Beset spent the rest of the night with the artist having long conversations about where they each came from. They also spoke about religion.

The artist explained, "When your father decided to believe only in Aten, there was a big

awakening for our community. Most of us didn't quite agree with this. We believe in all the Gods - that each one has something unique to offer and that there is no reason to put all of our faith in just one. Here, in this community, we make art. We create art that reflects our values. We do it because we love creating art and that is what makes us happy. We don't need to have slaves working for us or live in ostentatious palaces. We live with what we need and nothing more."

Nefernaten and Beset sat there quietly, unable to form responses. They had never heard of a life like this.

Beset was the first to react. "Teach us your ways! We want to experience a life like this."

That night Nefernaten and Beset went to sleep in a tent that the artist had so generously set up for them. They didn't mind that they weren't sleeping in a bed or that servants weren't there bring them food when they woke up that next morning. The artist suggested that they sell their dresses and jewelry because robbers were known to steal from the rich.

Nefernaten and Beset were soon unrecognizable. Mud and clay became ingrained in their skin, and they now wore simple clothing that was stained and faded. The long tresses that once framed Nefernaten's face were now pulled back into a bun. The artists taught them everything they knew, and the two girls showed great promise as artists themselves. Although Beset's artwork was good, Nefernaten quickly excelled and her artwork began to sell faster than everybody else's in the village.

Months turned into years and Nefernaten and Beset were well established in the art community. Beset happily lived the artist's simple lifestyle; however, Nefernaten began to feel dissatisfied. Although she had learned to create beautiful art and live simply, she felt as though she wasn't any closer to learning more about herself or the world. As she looked around, she began to see that the artists weren't worldly or wise. All they knew was their town and how to create art. Although this might have been enough for the artists, Nefernaten began to feel the familiar itch of wanting to see the rest of the world.

Nefernaten was working in the town on a new piece of art, but this one seemed to look different than the rest. The lines were sloppy and the shape was not symmetrical. She knew something was off. Nefernaten looked up to see a man in the distance walking towards her. As he became closer, she started to sense a yearning. A wave of contentment came over her, but she didn't know why. She'd never met this person and had no idea why this man was able to change her mood so quickly. The man was now only a couple of feet away from her. His shadow blocked the light from the piece of artwork she was shaping. Nefernaten kept her head down and her eyes fixed on her art until she snuck a peek to see that his feet were planted next to her. The shadow moved and she saw the man's wrinkled hands reach towards her artwork. In almost any other situation, Nefernaten would have been alarmed by this man's presence, but something about it put her at ease; she felt comfortable with him there.

“Here, try this,” the man said as he molded the clay in a different direction fixing what Nefernaten had been unable to do. “Now you try.”

Nefernaten tried what the man did and saw that this piece of artwork was special. She took a step back and looked at the piece and smiled. Then she turned around and looked at the man for the first time. Lines and grooves adorned his worn, tan skin, and striking blue eyes stared back at her. Although he was tall, his shoulders hunched over from years of traveling. His doughy face comforted her.

The sleeve of his dress lifted as he extended his hand. “My name is Horus.”

Horus explained that he once had lived in the same town but he became unsettled. He had decided to try and understand his feelings, so he left the town without a clear goal or plan. Horus traveled around the world, and with each country his artwork became better. He learned to trust his feelings and himself, and with that he became a better person and artist. It wasn’t until he returned to his town that he realized his journey was complete. He felt content and at peace with himself. Horus felt that since he had reached his personal fulfillment, he wanted to help others reach theirs.

Nefernaten felt a deep admiration and respect for Horus and was intrigued with the idea of finding her own journey. Although she loved being an artist, she knew that it was only the beginning of her understanding of herself. Night was falling, and Nefernaten was sure that she was ready to move onto the next phase of her life, whatever it was. Horus offered her a place in his workshop; however, Nefernaten declined. She truly believed that Horus was happy, but she knew that his path was not her path. With this, she left Beset in his care and began to travel down the Nile.

Nefernaten walked down the Nile stopping to wade in the warm water when her feet were too hot. She walked with no urgency and was able to take in her surroundings like never before. The river was quiet and peaceful and the current was calm with little ripples from the light breeze. There was no one around except a woman in a small boat. The boat came closer to Nefernaten and so she stopped and waited, making quick eye contact with the woman. When the boat ran into the ground, the woman asked Nefernaten if she would like a ride across the river. With the excitement of her new freedom, Nefernaten agreed and climbed into the boat.

“My name is Beniti,” said the woman. “I fish along the river and give rides to those who need it.” Nefernaten and Beniti chatted for the duration of the ride.

Nefernaten started to walk on the other side of the river when all of a sudden she heard a stern voice from behind.

“What are you doing here?” yelled a man in the near distance.

Nefernaten turned around abruptly. In front of her stood a soldier. His face was chiseled and his chin came to a stubborn point. Deep green eyes squinted back at her and toned muscles shined in the sun. She was overcome with a feeling low in the pit of her stomach. Her eyes widened and she contemplated turning back around to run away. But something made her stay. *Was it his looks or his*

voice? What was making her want to talk to this man?

Nefernaten slowly lifted her eyes to his, and she faintly murmured, "My name is Nefernaten. I'm just passing over into the next town."

The man squinted his eyes and took in the woman before him. Dirt was slapped over her face and clothing making him believe she had been traveling for some time. Her hair was pulled back into a knot leaving her face bare and without protection. High cheekbones slashed her face and large, defiant lips pursed back at him. Under the filth laid a beautiful woman. However, she had no money, so she was of no interest to this man. He preferred rich, well-dressed women. He was about to walk away when he took a final look at the woman. Something magnetic was pulling him towards her. His feelings were jumbled and confused, but he felt compelled to help her, protect her.

"My name is Hasani. I patrol this side of the river. Please, let me take you to my father, Adeo's house. He can give you a place to bathe as well as a change of clothes. A woman like you should not be traveling in the desert when it is this hot. At least wait there until the sun starts to set."

Nefernaten was inclined to say no, but she felt like she could trust the soldier. They walked together through the dirt until they reached the wall guarding the town. The wall was no taller than Nefernaten, but it made her feel safe and secure. She continued walking slightly behind Hasani. Women all around stared at him. Nefernaten saw their faces and read the confusion. *Why was a poor woman walking with Hasani?* Their faces were ridden with jealousy.

Finally, they reached the house. Adeo walked out to greet the two. Adeo's house was the most elegant she had ever seen. The sun was beating down on one side of the house creating shadows on the East wall and along the riverbank nearby. Nefernaten walked up the dirt path, up the stairs, past the pillars, and into the house. The light was penetrating the windows making the simple furniture and decorations gleam with radiance.

That afternoon Adeo provided Nefernaten with new clothes and a room to call her own. The three of them had dinner at the table that seated twelve. Nefernaten told them of her past living in the palace, soon explaining her abilities to read, write, and draw.

"You have a very valuable talent, you know?" Adeo said to Nefernaten.

"Yes, I had great teachers in the palace," Nefernaten responded.

"How would you feel about doing some work for me? I will pay you."

Nefernaten felt like this could be a positive change. She had never had a paying job before. They shook hands, and Adeo welcomed Nefernaten into his business.

Years later, Nefernaten became one of the best scribes in Egypt. She was very talented, and Adeo benefited from all of the business she brought him. Soon, Nefernaten had all the money and beautiful clothes she could want. She was now a tasteful, desirable woman. As she continued to work with Adeo, Hasani and her became closer. One afternoon, Hasani took Nefernaten to the pyramids. He laid out a blanket, and they watched the sunset. He fed her grapes and pulled her in for a

passionate kiss. The grapes tumbled out of his hand and rolled to the end of blanket. The two lovers enjoyed each others company as the sun set and the sky turned pink.

Before long, Nefernaten's smooth stomach began to stretch. Morning sickness consumed her and fatigue kept her inside most days. She soon realized she was pregnant with Hasani's baby. Nefernaten took a small hiatus during her pregnancy and later gave birth to a baby girl. They named her Femi, and she was light of their life. However, it wasn't long before Nefernaten's job came calling. She passed off the motherly duties to Hasani and returned to her role as a scribe. Her career only continued to excel, and her riches began to stack up. Although she was experiencing great success, she neglected her family.

Nefernaten knew that her family needed her, and she started feeling guilty for focusing on her work. She was invited to one of the most grand parties and hesitated going at first but knew that this appearance would be good for her reputation and possibly allow her to gain more work. She dressed in her best attire and headed to the party.

People everywhere greeted her and complimented her on her work and stunning looks. Nefernaten loved the attention and compliments, but something felt wrong. She began to understand that her life had changed and her priorities had shifted in a way that she didn't like. She wasn't committed to her family, and she felt that there was something missing once again. She didn't understand why. She had all the money in the world.

With this new frustration, she took another glance at the room. She began to hate the sight of opulence. She listened to how others were talking and became disgusted with this life.

Nefernaten hastily walked out of the party toward the river. Her steps were sloppy and she could barely keep the wine bottle in her grasp. Nefernaten stumbled to the ground landing on the riverbank with her legs submerged in the warm water. She could feel the alcohol moving to her head consuming her thoughts as her vision began to cloud. She hated the person she had become, and she felt more lost than ever. With that, Nefernaten ripped off all her fine jewelry and fell back into the water. Water drenched her clothes and gurgled deep in her throat. She gripped the sand and willed herself to stay under the water. Images of her past life fluttered in her mind. She saw her family, filled with love and unity. She yearned for that same happiness. She yearned to revert to her pure childlike perspective of the world instead of the greedy person she had become.

Nefernaten felt the water beginning to fill her body. With newfound clarity, she knew that this wasn't the way she wanted to die. She released the sand from her hands and let her body drift onto the shore.

The next morning Nefernaten awoke to a familiar face beside her. Aged lines and worn skin looked back at her, but there was no mistaking it. The woman was Beset. Nefernaten was elated to see her old friend and took it as a good sign. She gently nudged Beset and murmured comforting words to wake her up. The two women embraced and shared a long conversation. Beset explained

that she had been passing by to the next town when she had seen Nefernatens body. She had thought that Nefernatens was dead. Beset had waited for her to awaken, but she knew that she had to return to the artists colony.

Nefernatens, with a new sense of hope, dried her clothes in the sun and slowly walked along the river. A small brown fishing boat drifted by accompanied by a lithe, tan woman. Nefernatens immediately recognized the woman as Beniti, the fishing woman. Beniti pushed her boat into the sand and gestured for Nefernatens to come aboard. Nefernatens laid out along one of the boats benches and basked in the warmth of the sun. They traveled for some time along the river until they reached a small hut. Beniti explained that this was her home and that Nefernatens was welcome to live with her until she figured out her next step. Nefernatens graciously accepted and smiled at the river, her new home. It almost seemed as though the river was shining back a hello to her.

Nefernatens enjoyed her time with Beniti and the river more than she ever thought she would. She loved the simplicity of this life. Each morning she would happily do her chores before spending quality time on the river thinking about her new life and where she saw herself going.

Meanwhile, Hasani was traveling with Femi to the next town to see the artwork. As soon as they stepped outside Adeos house, they began to sweat; it was scorching. They decided to proceed on their journey anyways staying close to the river to cool off. The water from the river wasn't helping, however, and Hasani continued to sweat and needed to take frequent breaks. He felt his heart begin to beat rapidly and his face became flushed and soaked.

"Father, are you okay?" Femi asked reaching her arm out to help him as he tripped over his own feet.

Hasani was able to catch himself but said to his daughter, "I just need to rest. Let me sit down."

Femi tried to lower him to the ground, but his weight was too much for her to handle. Hasani fell to the ground. Femi tried to cool him off using the water, but nothing was helping. She turned her head rapidly and looked around desperately searching for help. She saw nothing and began to panic. Finally, she saw small ripples in the water that could have only been made by something or someone in the water. She turned around and stood up to find a small boat in the distance.

"Help! Help! I need help! Please come here!" Femis voice was giving out from yelling so loudly.

The boat began to change direction and headed toward them. The ripples from the water washed small waves onto Hasanis body. He was still unresponsive, and his eyes could barely stay open.

The boat eventually made its way to shore. Femi and the woman on the boat worked together to get Hasanis helpless body onto the boat.

"My name is Beniti. Let me take you to my home."

Femi was too distraught to talk. They sat in silence until they reached her house.

It was too late. By the time Beniti was able to reach her home, Hasani had lost his heartbeat. Nefernaten came out, only to drop her to her knees when she recognized who it was. Tears rushed down her face that she had hidden in her hands. The young girl was confused as to why this woman was so upset about her father's passing. Then she noticed the high cheekbones and the pouty, prominent lips. This woman looked like the dirtier version of her mother. Femi's only memories of her mother were the ones that her father had told her. With small, hesitant steps, she approached the woman and poked her in the shoulder. Femi narrowed her eyes and looked deep into the hazel ones that stared back at her.

"Are you my mother? Nefernaten?"

Nefernaten reached her arm out, placed her hand on Femi's cheek, and stammered the word, "Yes."

Rage flew into Femi's body. She never imagined her mother to be a poor, lowly fishing woman. All of these years, her father had been telling her that her mother was the most beautiful woman in Egypt. Femi was disgusted and disappointed in the woman that stood before her. She rushed out of the hut and sat by the river. She sat and cried and wondered how her life could have changed so quickly.

As the river began to turn dark, Nefernaten slowly sat next to Femi. She raised her hand to place on her daughter's shoulder, but Femi flinched away. Nefernaten quietly explained to Femi that she would stay with her and Beniti in the hut. Nefernaten had no money to pay for Femi to live back in the city. Enraged, Femi stomped back into the hut and threw herself onto the cot sobbing. Nefernaten, at a loss for words, burrowed into her bed and waited for the sun to rise.

The next couple of weeks were disastrous. Femi's existence had upset the balance between the two women. The young girl refused to do her chores and spent her days trashing the house and throwing rocks into the river. Nefernaten was blinded by love and overlooked her daughter's behavior. After all that she had put her daughter through, Nefernaten didn't feel she had the right to scold her. Beniti advised that Nefernaten should bring Femi back to Adeo's, but Nefernaten couldn't bear the thought of letting her daughter go. She knew that Adeo could offer her daughter everything that she wanted and needed. Femi knew this too and constantly begged Nefernaten to let her go. She insulted the two women's lifestyle and continually yelled at them. She felt no love for her mother.

Nefernaten awoke one morning to find that Femi wasn't there. Panicked, she looked around and saw that all of Femi's belongings were gone. She immediately rushed outside only to see that the boat had been taken. She squinted her eyes and looked across the river and saw the boat pushed up onto the shore. Grief stricken, she buried her face into her hands and cried about the child who she had now lost twice.

Nefernaten walked out to the river. The day seemed quieter than usual and the sky was tinged with grey. While wading in the water, she realized that it was selfish of her to try and hold onto Femi and force her into a life that wasn't meant for her. She felt like she didn't have the right to expect Femi to ask for permission, let alone her blessing. After all, Nefernaten was the one who had once left her own parents and then later left Femi by putting her money and reputation ahead of her family. Nefernaten had finally learned her lesson that sometimes love is best shown by letting go.

The next day Beniti told Nefernaten that she had accomplished what she needed and took off without any belongings leaving Nefernaten with the hut and the boat. Nefernaten didn't quite understand what Beniti meant when she said she had fulfilled her work. Despite her confusion, Nefernaten was happy. The ends of her mouth began to turn up when she thought about the life lessons she had learned from Beniti.

The next few days Nefernaten continued to take the boat out, did chores around the house fishing, and provided rides for others. Nefernaten was more content with her life than ever before. Nefernaten had great conversations with people and realized through teaching and talking that this was her purpose.

Each day she woke up to the calm flowing water and the occasional fisher. She greeted all that passed with a smile. No one realized that Nefernaten had taken Beniti's place. Nefernaten continued all of her daily chores, but this time she was without the help of Beniti. Although she was alone, she had never felt more peaceful.

Beset traveled along the Nile once again and requested a ride across the river from Nefernaten. She saw her serene smile and asked Nefernaten how she achieved it. Nefernaten enjoyed the company of her old friend and promised to teach her everything she knew, just as Beniti had once taught her.