

THE TERRIBLE, MIGHTY CRYSTAL



SHARON LEDWITH

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BY
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The Terrible, Mighty Crystal
by Sharon Ledwith
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DEDICATION

To all my wonderful and supportive readers. Thank you for investing in me.

“Please, children, don’t stand too close. The frequency will be too much for your young minds to handle,” Thoth said, waving a long, golden rod topped with a fashioned head of a baboon.

Shu-Tu stood at the back on her tiptoes behind her classmates, trying to catch a glimpse of the large six-sided figure known to her people as the *mighty* crystal. All around them, a sparkling metal—the color of storm clouds—lined the walls of the massive domed building to protect and ensure Atlantis’s safety from the crystal’s unpredictable vibratory forces. But even knowing this, Shu-Tu’s scalp prickled incessantly. She craned her neck. Heads—some the size of melons—bobbed up and down in front of her, obscuring her vision. She set her jaw, reached out and grabbed a fistful of red hair belonging to a tall girl with hunched shoulders, standing in the front row. Shu-Tu yanked hard.

“Ouch! Let go, let go!” the girl yelled, stumbling back.

“What goes on here?” a human-animal hybrid with the head of an ibis demanded. “The Crystal Dome is a place of respect!”

Shu-Tu pursed her full lips to one side. Her green eyes swept over the lowly hybrid—a servant of their teacher, Thoth. The hybrid’s long, hooked beak, beady yellow eyes, and s-shaped white-feathered neck moved back and forth in vigilance. Human hands gripped the looped end of a crossed-shaped ankh made of pure orichalcum—the sparkling copper-colored precious metal mined only in Atlantis. The hybrid ruffled his neck feathers, and made a severe clicking sound with his beak.

Shu-Tu shook her head. Her ivory tendrils swept across the back of her neck as she said, “I’m well aware of that. I couldn’t see, so I took care of the problem. There is no disrespect in trying to see my teacher.”

“See, no. But causing harm to others is not respectful, Shu-Tu,” Thoth said, moving through the group of parting students. “And what you give out, you get back, so in essence you are disrespecting yourself, young lady.”

“But...Shu-Tu has a point, Thoth. I couldn’t see either,” the brown-haired girl next to Shu-Tu blurted. “Someone had to move that red-headed giant out of the way.”

Few students giggled, but most remained silent.

“I was not speaking to you, Amiee.” Thoth wagged his rod at her.

“Shall I escort these two troublemakers outside, Master?” the ibis-headed hybrid asked, bowing.

Thoth turned, making his dark, red robe swirl around his towering frame. “That won’t be necessary, Djeuti, unless...”

“Unless, what?” Shu-Tu interrupted, inclining her head.

“I do not hear an apology coming out of both your mouths,” Thoth replied, his sapphire eyes staring down at them.

Shu-Tu balked. “An apology?”

“For what?” Amiee asked, shrugging.

“If I have to explain why, then you two are not ready for what I have to teach,” Thoth replied, gently planting the forked end of his rod onto the marble tiles in front of them.

“For Poseidon’s sake, just say you’re both sorry so we can get on with our lesson,” an older boy said, tugging on Amiee’s purple robe. “I want to learn all I can about the mighty crystal.”

“Let go, Segferd!” Amiee slapped his hand. “Or I’ll tell Father you skipped your chemistry studies last week!”

“Skipping studies?” Thoth asked abruptly. “Explain, Segferd.”

Segferd’s cheek twitched. He released his sister’s robe, then clenched his fists. “I am from the House of Beliar. We do not need to explain ourselves.”

Thoth’s cork-screw red beard trembled slightly. He leaned against his rod. “Is that so?”

“It is.” Segferd nodded sharply, making the crystals set in his black, curly hair shiver. “My father Sonl is the ambassador to the king, as was his father, and his father before him. One day, I will be the ambassador, and you will still be a teacher.”

Thoth’s broad forehead crinkled. He straightened and pushed his deep red pointed hat back far enough for Shu-Tu to catch the silver half crescent moon on its rim twinkle mischievously. “So why does the son of an ambassador to the king of Atlantis need to know about such trifle things as the mighty crystal?”

Segferd’s brown eyes widened. He glanced at Shu-Tu, then looked back at his teacher. She gulped. *I can’t let Segferd ruin my plans.* Shu-Tu brushed his arm lightly, catching the scent of lavender oil in his hair. A slight smile

played upon his lips before he said, "I want to know if the mighty crystal can...can bring back life?"

Thoth stroked his beard. "The mighty crystal is used for many things in Atlantis. Mostly it is used to power our cities, supply us with light, cleanse our waters, and heal the sick." Then he frowned. "I hope you are not asking what I think you're asking, Segferd."

"It's not Segferd who wants to know, it's me," Shu-Tu spoke up. Her stomach fluttered.

"You speak of necromancy, of bringing back the dead." Thoth flared his straight, long nose. "It's not something a fourteen-year-old child should know about."

Shu-Tu straightened. "I just want my father alive again."

Most of the class drew in deep breaths. Some whispered their disgust and disapproval.

Thoth held up his hand to quiet the students, and then waved his hybrid servant Djeuti over. "Take the class into the obsidian garden and wait for me there. Leave these three with me."

Djeuti bowed, his long bird-neck extended so that his beak almost touched the shining marble floor. "As you wish, Master."

Shu-Tu watched the ibis-headed hybrid herd the rest of her class with his orichalcum ankh toward an archway inlaid with gold and silver turtles. A hallow grinding noise made her look up. She blinked. The dome was opening, allowing for the mighty crystal to absorb the sun's powerful morning rays. Brilliant rays that could give life to Atlantis, but presumably could not give her father his life back. Her eyes welled, and she let out a sigh just as a heavy, warm hand came to rest on her shoulder. She jumped.

"I understand your sadness, Shu-Tu. Your father Elmeur was a wonderful vizier to our king, and just in many ways." Thoth dropped his hand from Shu-Tu's shoulder. "But we cannot, must not ever go against the flow of nature. To do so would go against our principles and sacred laws. Besides, I have it on the highest authority that the mighty crystal does not possess the kind of power you seek."

"That's not what I've heard," Segferd said, crossing his arms over his shimmering purple robe. "My father said the mighty crystal has the power to rejuvenate the body."

"True," Thoth replied, nodding. "But only for a *living* body."

"See? I told you this was pointless, Shu-Tu," Amiee said haughtily. "You should have listened to me in the first place and asked for an audience with

the high priests at the Temple of Poseidon. Our teacher obviously doesn't seem to want to help you in your time of need."

"Indeed?" Thoth asked, raising a ruddy brow. He tapped her under the chin with the top of his rod. "How would you suggest I help Shu-Tu, Amiee?"

Amiee stared at the grotesque-looking baboon head. Her lips quivered slightly as she said, "Help Shu-Tu resurrect her father."

Thoth's eyes widened. He withdrew his rod, and slid a thumb down the length of it. "Do you not believe the soul lives on, Shu-Tu?"

"Yes, of course, Thoth, but I also believe my father's destiny was compromised," Shu-Tu replied, wiping her eyes.

"Compromised?" Thoth asked. "How so?"

"Shu-Tu believes someone tampered with the water sample her father drank when he tasted the crystal-cleansed water supply for the king," Segferd spoke up, flicking an ivory tendril off one of Shu-Tu's shoulders. "So we thought the only way to reverse this terrible injustice was to rejuvenate Elmeur."

Thoth frowned. "And how do you plan on doing this, Shu-Tu?"

Shu-Tu stared at her sandaled feet. "By using the curative powers of the mighty crystal to flush the poison that still remains in his body."

Thoth grunted. "There are flaws in your plan. The mighty crystal is kept here and guarded by the appointed initiates at all times. They would never allow your father's body entrance into the Crystal Dome. In the initiates' minds, it would be a great sacrilege to Poseidon and the Law of One to reverse what has been done."

"But what of those crystals that are harvested from the mighty crystal?" Amiee asked. "My father calls them firestones. He believes the sorcerers have used them to regenerate life."

"Your father should keep such dark things to himself," Thoth said, raising his voice. "Why do you think Atlantis suffers from frequent earthquakes and volcanic activity? In the wrong hands firestones can be utilized for such destructive purposes."

"Yet in the hands of well-meaning Atlanteans, they could be used for constructive purposes such as tools for healing," Segferd said.

Shu-Tu looked up. "You were the one who taught us how alchemy can penetrate the secrets of nature, life, and death, Thoth. Please—" She reached for his red robe. "Father is set to be mummified the day after tomorrow, and then I will lose him forever."

Thoth's deep, blue eyes pierced through Shu-Tu's eyes and cut into her insides as if she'd been opened up like the dome above. She shuddered.

“Very well, I shall help,” Thoth replied with a slight smile. “But I warn you, Shu-Tu, you’ll see there is a thin veil between the known and the unknown. The mighty crystal can just as soon change into the terrible, mighty crystal, and then you may not like the destiny you create.”



“Where is he?” Shu-Tu asked, surveying the manicured grounds outside Thoth’s private grotto.

Under the light of the half moon and stars, she could make out a giant circular garden, all the flowers closed and bowing in deep contemplation. A bubbling spring on her right gave off enough steam to dampened the air and make her unbound hair frizz. She licked her lips, tasting the saltiness in the air from being so close to the ocean. Shu-Tu’s skin tingled. Her thin, sleeveless dress stuck to her body. *Perhaps this is a mistake.*

“Thoth said he’d meet us here, and his word is true,” Amiee replied, glancing around.

“True or not, Thoth better show his face soon,” Segferd said, hiking up his silk trousers to sit on a gleaming granite bench. “I’m not accustomed to be kept waiting.”

“Honestly, sometimes I think we came from different mothers, Segferd,” Amiee said.

“That would explain many things,” Segferd said, grinning. “Like your gigantic feet and monkey-like hands.”

Aimee snorted. “Or your tiny ears and bird-beak nose.” She glanced at her palms.

Shu-Tu rolled her eyes. She rubbed her arms briskly just as she heard a thunderous crack behind them. A dark green creature double the size of full grown horse charged out of the thicket. The creature screeched, the sound going through Shu-Tu like shards of glass, and then it snapped its reptilian jaws. The moonlight caught a forked-tongue slithering out of its mouth, lapping the air in search of fresh blood.

“Oh Poseidon, a wyvern!” Amiee shrieked. “It must have escaped from its breeder!”

“Quick, into the grotto and down the stairs!” Segferd picked up a chunk of rough-cut quartz crystal. “It’s too big to follow us!”

Segferd hurled the quartz at the wyvern’s bulbous serpent head. It snapped at the crystal in mid-air and spit it out. Translucent wings beat a path toward them while the wyvern’s hawk-like feet curled up into its

leathery body. A long tail with a barbed end—poisonous to the touch—swished furiously as the wyvern got closer to the three classmates.

“Move, now!” Segferd shouted, leading the way.

Stumbling, Amiee tripped over her bejeweled sandaled feet at the mouth of the grotto.

“Amiee!” Shu-Tu screamed. She stopped to help her friend up, and dragged Amiee inside.

Hot, rancid breath from the wyvern’s open mouth rolled across the back of Shu-Tu’s neck and arms. The wyvern screeched and snapped its powerful jaws, its tongue desperately trying to reach her, taste her, but the wyvern couldn’t fit in any farther. Shu-Tu shivered just as the ground started to tremor. Her eyes widened. *An earthquake! Oh please, Poseidon, have mercy!* Holding onto Amiee, Shu-Tu reached out to grab a statue of Poseidon’s mortal wife, Cleito, sculpted from the rock above them. The wyvern retreated as fast as it had attacked, the beating of its wings signaling the creature’s departure. Falling pieces of rock and crystal filled the entranceway, and snuffed out the moonlight. Shu-Tu’s throat tightened. There was no way out. Suddenly, the earth ceased shaking. Shu-Tu blew a sigh of relief. At least the quake only lasted three short breaths.

“Shu-Tu? Amiee? Are you okay?” Segferd asked from the bottom of the rock-cut stairs.

Shu-Tu coughed. “I’m fine.” She released the smooth, stone statue and blinked a few times to adjust her eyes to the darkness.

“I...I think I’ve twisted my ankle,” Amiee said.

Groping in the dark, Shu-Tu bent down, and brushed away Amiee’s soft gown. She placed her hand over Amiee’s foot. “She’s right. Her ankle is starting to swell.”

Amiee growled. “This...this is all your fault, Segferd!”

“My fault?” he asked, his voice echoing. “How so?”

“You attacked the wyvern first!” she snapped. “Who in his right mind does that?”

Shu-Tu used the cool, granite wall as a guide to stand. “It’s all right, Amiee, your brother did his best to protect us.”

“You must learn to stop sticking up for him,” Amiee said, grunting to stand. She squeezed Shu-Tu’s hand. “T-Thank you for...saving me.”

Shu-Tu shrugged. “You would have done the same for me. Can you walk?”

“I...I think so.”

“Here.” Segferd passed a wooden staff topped with a glowing crystal to Shu-Tu and Amiee. “This will help Amiee walk and give us enough light to navigate the pathways to find another way out.”

“Where’d you get these staffs?” Shu-Tu asked, the orange glowing end illuminating her features.

“They were leaning against the wall at the bottom of the stairs,” Segferd replied, holding out his hand to his sister. “It’s like someone left them there for us to find.”

Amiee swatted his hand away. “No thanks, I can manage without your help.”

As they made their way deeper into the grotto, the only light source, other than the glimmering crystals on the staffs Segferd found, came from the effervescent springs swirling below them. The damp, pungent air inside the grotto was a welcome relief from the humidity above. The smooth passage led them down and around, down and around, like the actions of a perfect spiral.

“Where do you suppose this goes?” Amiee asked, limping.

“There’s talk among our servant hybrids of a secret natural labyrinth called the Hall of Illumination,” Segferd said, holding out his staff. “Initiations for the highest order of magi are held at the far end of the hall. I wonder if this is the place they were speaking about?”

“I don’t think such a hall truly exists,” Amiee replied, grunting. “Hybrids have a tendency to fabricate things. Besides, those half-breed creatures were created to serve us, not teach us.”

“But, Amiee, what about what Thoth has taught us?” Shu-Tu asked, wiping damp hair off her forehead. “That everyone and everything has a purpose here. That we are all an inseparable part of one *Whole*.”

Amiee snorted in laughter. “If you to choose to believe that you’re one with a hybrid, Shu-Tu, then as Poseidon is my witness, I’ll throw you into the churning springs below us.”

“Wait, do you two hear that?” Segferd stopped. “It sounds like chanting.”

Shu-Tu listened. A steady, monotonic mantra lulled her, invited her to come closer like an invisible beckoning finger. She smiled. “Reminds me of a verse Father would chant.”

“Whoever it is must know a way out,” Amiee said.

“Agreed,” Segferd pulled at his silk tunic. “Come on, it’s not too much farther.”

One more turn led Serferd, Shu-Tu, and Amiee through an archway into a spacious cavern with a high arched rose crystal ceiling. The whole area was lit up using light blue crystals set into the rock walls, giving Shu-

Tu the impression the room was animated, alive. Across from where they stood was another archway that led to a set of stairs going up toward the surface. Shu-Tu clutched her chest. *That could be our way out!*

“Look.” Segferd pointed toward the narrow corridor on their left. “This must be a special burial chamber.”

At the farthest end of the cavern was a white marble alter marked with ancient geometric Atlantean symbols. Shu-Tu blinked. A body covered with a shimmering gold shroud was lying on top of the altar, and sitting cross-legged at the foot of the altar was the source of the chanting—a baboon-headed hybrid. A crocodile-skin mantle draped the hybrid’s chest and shoulders, and a plain white linen skirt covered his bottom half to just above his hairy knees. A silver pouch stamped with a crescent moon hung around his waist. Resting in the hybrid’s human hands was the same golden rod that Thoth carried.

The baboon-headed hybrid suddenly stopped chanting and winked at them.

“W-Where did you get that rod?” Shu-Tu asked.

“Your teacher Thoth gave it to me,” he replied, wiggling his brow.

“What’s the meaning of this, hybrid? Amiee demanded, limping closer. “Where is Thoth?”

“Indeed.” The hybrid puffed his cheeks, and then sputtered them out slowly. “Is this how Thoth has taught you to greet strangers?”

Segferd snorted. “Hybrids are not to be greeted in the same manner as humans.”

“Is that so?” The hybrid stood, turned around, lifted his skirt, and wiggled his bare bottom. “Would you rather greet this end instead?”

Shu-Tu covered her mouth.

“How dare you!” Amiee threw her staff at him like a spear.

“Do you think this is a game, hybrid?” Segferd hurled his staff.

The hybrid jumped out of the way of both flying staffs with ease, the glowing crystal ends shattering against the polished stone floor on impact. He landed in front of the archway leading up to the surface, and swung Thoth’s rod across the width of his hairy body several times. This movement generated a strong blast of cool air, making Shu-Tu’s hair cover her face and obscure her vision. Startled, she dropped her glowing crystal staff, and heard it smash against the floor. She groaned. All three of their lights were extinguished.

“I think many things, but if you wish to play a game, then a game it shall be!” The hybrid laughed wryly. “And my name is Khem, if you please.”

“We are not here to please a hybrid. Hybrids are here to please us,” Segferd said, waving his hand. “And we do not play games with hybrids!”

Shu-Tu brushed away the hair from her face, then bit her bottom lip. If there was one thing she had learned from her father during his years as the king’s vizier, it was that if you wanted something bad enough, there was always a way to get it. Wherever Thoth was, and whether he was looking for them or not, they were stuck in a crystal cavern with a large baboon-headed hybrid blocking their only way out.

“I’ll play, Khem,” Shu-Tu said, sweeping back her hair. “But it will come with a price.”

“You...you can’t be serious, Shu-Tu?” Segferd asked.

Khem inclined his head. His deep, blue eyes connected with her on a level she had never experienced before with a human-animal hybrid. It was like he was peering into her soul, pouring his essence into her body, and letting it swirl around and around. He wiggled his sapient ears, breaking their bond. “Everything comes with a price, Shu-Tu.”

Her throat tightened. “H-How do you know me?”

Segferd stepped in front of her. “What trick are you playing here, hybrid? We don’t know you, and you don’t know us!”

“Don’t I, Segferd?” Khem asked, smiling and exposing a fang.

“Listen, hybrid, you better not be threatening us,” Amiee said, clenching her fists. “My brother and I are from the House of—”

“Beliar,” Khem cut in. “Yes, yes, I know. Is that supposed to impress me, Amiee?”

Amiee’s fair face turned ashen. Khem dipped his human hand into his pouch and pulled out a glittering six-sided crystal, the likes Shu-Tu had never seen before. The rainbow-colored crystal, about the size of a small pomegranate lit up Khem’s features, making him look more human, than baboon.

“This is my price,” Khem said, holding up the six-sided crystal. “The only price you will pay is the consequences of your actions. The rule of the game is simple. I get to ask each of you the same question, and whoever has the best answer gets to keep this firestone.”

Amiee gasped. “A-A firestone?”

“How do we know it’s real?” Segferd asked, his mouth falling open.

“You’ll have to take the word of a hybrid, I guess,” Khem replied, shrugging. “But then again, seeing is believing for you humans. Here, hold my rod, Amiee, and I’ll prove that I’m telling the truth.”

Without the staff she threw at Khem, Shu-Tu watched Amiee limp over to grasp the golden rod. A sheen of sweat on her forehead attested

to her pain. Amiee grimaced as she gripped the rod, and leaned against it for support. The forked end of the rod scraped against the rock and sent shivers up Shu-Tu's spine. Khem waved the firestone over her ankle, and chanted an old Atlantean prayer nine times before he suddenly stopped.

"Walk," Khem commanded.

Amiee grunted. "This is ridiculous, I—" She paused, putting weight on her foot. "T-There's no pain anymore. It's like I never twisted my ankle."

Khem nodded. "The curative powers of the firestone have restored your body."

Amiee glanced at Segferd, then back at Khem. "I'm in for the game."

"Me too," Segferd said, nodding.

Shu-Tu's heart raced. "What else can the firestone do?"

Khem puckered his baboon lips, twisting them one way, then the other before he said, "Whatever you wish. It was one of six harvested from the mighty crystal. Very rare. Very special."

"Go on then," Amiee said with urgency. "Ask your silly question."

"Very well, I'll start with you, Amiee," Khem replied, strumming human fingers against his chest. "For what purpose would you use this firestone?"

Amiee licked her lips. "I would use the firestone to benefit all Atlanteans by surrendering it to the high priests and priestesses of the Temple of Poseidon to help promote divine knowledge."

Khem scratched his hairy chin. "How very noble. What about you, Segferd?"

Segferd straightened. "I would use the firestone to harness the forces of nature and put a stop to the earthquakes that have plagued our country for thousands of years."

"Now that's what I'm talking about!" Khem snapped his fingers. "Shu-Tu, your response better top Amiee and Segferd's answers."

Shu-Tu swallowed hard, and said, "I...I would use the firestone to bring my father back to life."

She swore she heard Amiee titter. Segferd coughed.

Khem frowned. "I see. You know what you want to use this firestone for goes against the Law of One's plan, don't you, Shu-Tu?"

She hung her head, her eyes began to well. "I told you the truth. That's how I would use the firestone."

"So, which one of us wins the game?" Amiee asked, banging the rod against the stone floor.

Segferd rubbed his hands together. "Yes, who is your choice, hybrid?"

"Very well, you all played my game fairly, so I must choose a winner." Khem held out the firestone to Shu-Tu. "It's all yours, Shu-Tu."

“What!” Amiee screamed. “Y-You can’t be serious! You said it yourself, hybrid, no one must tamper with the will of the Law of One’s plan!”

“Oh, a sore loser, I see,” Khem replied. “You played the game, you lost. I liked Shu-Tu’s answer the best.”

“But...my answer would have saved so many people,” Segferd blurted. “Shu-Tu only wants one life saved.”

Khem shrugged. “Alifethatmatterstoher—oneshelovesunconditionally.”

Shu-Tu stared at the beautiful firestone in her hands. Rainbow swirls of light danced off of it, warming her body through to the core. Khem reached out to touch her cheek, and she shivered. “Your father awaits you,” he said, pointing toward the altar.

Shu-Tu’s jaw dropped. “M-My father is the body under the shroud?”

“Something is wrong here,” Segferd said, scratching his head. “Why would a hybrid have your father’s body?”

“This is all Thoth’s doing isn’t it?” Amiee asked, pointing the forked end of the rod at Khem’s throat. “Tell us where he is or I’ll spear you!”

“No, Amiee!” Shu-Tu yelled, clutching the firestone to her chest. “Wait until I revive Father!”

“Your father is dead, and he’s not coming back,” Segferd said, his voice void of emotion. “Give us the firestone. The House of Beliar will use it for the highest good of Atlantis.”

Khem clapped. “Now this is getting interesting!”

Shu-Tu started backing up toward her father’s body. “No. I won fair and square. I will use the firestone as I see fit.”

Amiee tossed the rod to her brother. “Watch the hybrid! I’m taking that firestone!”

Shu-Tu’s eyes widened as Segferd grabbed the rod in mid-air and pointed it at Khem. “Go make father proud, sis.”

Amiee rushed after Shu-Tu, tackled her to the stone floor, and then straddled her thin body. Shu-Tu hit the back of her head, yet still held the firestone tightly to her chest. A sharp pain went up her neck while Amiee tried to wrestle the six-sided crystal away from her, bashing her back against the cool, hard stone floor. Suddenly, Shu-Tu lost her grip and the firestone was in Amiee’s possession.

“I...I saved you from the wyvern, and this...this is how you repay me?” Shu-Tu wiped away her tears. “How...how could I have been so blind not to see this side of you or Segferd?”

“I wouldn’t worry about it, Shu-Tu.” Amiee smirked wickedly. “In a moment, you won’t be able to see anything.”

Amiee raised the firestone over her head and whacked Shu-Tu in the middle of the forehead. A pain she had never known before seared through her eyes to the back of skull and down her spine. Shu-Tu started twitching as soon as Amiee got off her. Suddenly, she felt her eyes move around and around, as if they were immersed in a goblet of water. Warm liquid, she knew was her own blood, dripped down the sides of her face. Panicking, Shu-Tu slapped the cool stone floor repeatedly, trying to fight off the pain, trying to understand what was happening to her. She sat up, roughly wiped away the blood from her face, and placed both hands over her eyes. Shu-Tu's skin tingled all over. She could feel her eyes moving quickly, spinning around in their sockets, juggling and bouncing, until they both crossed. Her purpose, the reason why she had been born, everything became crystal clear. Her sight became her insight, her sacrifice became her gift.

Shu-Tu inhaled deeply, and pointed at Amiee. "You will bear a dark-hearted son named Belial who will teach Atlantis to worship pleasure and ease over love and respect. Unfortunately, Amiee, you die during childbirth, and will never know him. And you—" she pointed to Segferd, her eyes spun around and around "—were responsible for preparing a tainted crystal pellet to give to your father to poison the water my father drank. That is the reason why you away from class last week. You, Segferd, will be swallowed by the earth by the next full moon."

"Have you gone mad, Shu-Tu?" Segferd asked, squeezing the rod.

"By the looks of her spinning eyeballs, I'd say she's half-way there," Amiee said, snickering. "Maybe you should put the poor child out of her misery, Segferd."

He nodded sharply just as the ground started to shake again. The crystals above vibrated to such a degree of high intensity, Shu-Tu swore a chorus of the best singers in Atlantis were in the room with them. She reached out to stop herself from shaking. Surprisingly, she wasn't afraid.

"If you both want to live to use the firestone for your *noble* acts, I suggest you leave now," Khem said calmly. "I will take care of Shu-Tu for you. After all, hybrids are here to serve."

Segferd shoved the rod's forked end under Khem's throat. "Now you're getting the idea, baboon-breath. Kill the girl with this rod and leave no trace of us being here, or you'll wish you were never created."

Khem put his hands together. "As you wish."

Segferd sneered, then tossed the baboon-headed rod at Khem's feet. Shu-Tu jerked at the metallic clanging sound.

“Come on, Segferd!” Amiee yelled from the bottom of the stairs. “Let’s get out of here before the chamber caves in!”

The last thing Shu-Tu heard was the sound of hurried footsteps running up the granite stairs before the world as she knew it turned pitch black.



“Welcome back, Shu-Tu,” Thoth whispered. “You’ve been asleep for well over a week.”

Shu-Tu cringed. Her eyes fluttered open, then started to move around in their sockets. “W-Where am I?”

“Safe.” Thoth brushed away the hair from her brow. “That is all you need to know for now.”

Then, she remembered everything. Shu-Tu sat straight up, her head and back ached, but she ignored the pain. Trying to focus in on Thoth’s red-bearded face was a little like watching a butterfly in a strong wind—not impossible, but not easy either. She sensed her eyes move back and forth, back and forth, back and forth until they crossed. A vision flashed through her mind.

She gasped. “Segferd...he’s—”

“Dead.” Thoth finished for her. “Yes, I know. There was a full moon the night before last. He got caught during an earthquake near his family’s compound by the ocean, and the ground just opened up underneath him. Apparently, Sonl is still looking for his son’s body.”

Shu-Tu wanted to smile, but didn’t. “What of the firestone Amiee took from me?”

“I’m sure it will become the terrible, mighty crystal while in the hands of the House of Beliar,” Thoth replied, shrugging. “But that is not your concern anymore.”

“Aimee and Segferd, they...they left me for dead in that crystal room.” Her chest tightened.

“The Hall of Illumination, to be exact,” Thoth said.

“Is that where you found me?”

“Yes,” he replied, brushing wrinkles out of his red robe.

Thoth stood to pour a cup of water from the silver pitcher next to her bed. The sound of gurgling made Shu-Tu lick her dry lips. “Here, drink this. You need to get your strength back.”

Shu-Tu took a few gulps, and wiped her chin. “What happened to Khem?” Thoth frowned. “Who is Khem?”

“The baboon-headed hybrid we met inside the Hall of Illumination.” Shu-Tu closed her eyes to stop them from spinning. “He told us you gave him your rod.”

“You mean this rod?” Thoth asked, reaching behind his back.

Shu-Tu opened her eyes and stared at the golden rod topped with a baboon’s head. The smell of floral-scented incense calmed her, and she nodded. Her eyes started moving faster again, up and down, side to side, until they crossed. Startled, Shu-Tu looked into Thoth’s sapphire eyes, and drew in a deep, sharp breath.

“Khem,” she whispered.

Thoth placed a finger on her lips, and winked. “That’s our little secret.”

“But, why did you bring the firestone to the Hall of Illumination?”

Thoth sighed. “To test you, Shu-Tu. You passed. Unfortunately, Amiee and Segferd did not, and they will now have to live with the consequences of their actions. I believe Segferd already has paid his price, as you predicted.”

“The price that I paid and have to live with, it’s why my eyes are like this, isn’t it?”

“You are a seer now, Shu-Tu,” Thoth replied, taking the cup from her to fill again. “I will make sure you get the best training possible.”

Her eyes moved again, then stopped. She reached out to grab Thoth’s sleeve. “I see now it was wrong of me to wish my father alive again. I was in a sad, dark place. Forgive me.”

“There is nothing to forgive if you’ve acted out of pure love,” Thoth said, kneeling. “Remember, Shu-Tu, all things have life, and that nothing is truly dead. There is always motion, and everyone and everything moves at a different speed.”

Shu-Tu grinned. “Like my eyes?”

“Precisely.” Thoth laughed, then gently patted her arm. “Now get some rest. I’ve made arrangements for you to leave for the Temple of the Sun by the new moon.”

Shu-Tu reached for his large hand and squeezed it. “Thoth?”

“Yes, Shu-Tu?”

“I have something to ask before I leave my old life.”

He raised a grizzled brow. “Then ask.”

Shu-Tu’s eyes juggled around, moving this way and that way, then crossed. “What is a Timekeeper?”

Thoth smiled and tweaked her nose. “A matter not yet revealed, Shu-Tu.”

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sharon Ledwith is the author of the middle-grade/YA time travel series, *THE LAST TIMEKEEPERS*, available through Musa Publishing. When not writing, researching, or revising, she enjoys reading, yoga, kayaking, time with family and friends, and single malt scotch. Sharon lives in the wilds of Muskoka in Central Ontario, Canada, with her hubby, a water-logged yellow Labrador and moody calico cat.

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