

Chapter 1: Yeah, I know, blood, huh?

Banafrit moved slowly towards the back door of her family's home as if she knew, though she had drawn water a thousand times before, something was going to be different this time. She was tired of being the only one of four children who had to draw the household water every time. Both of her brothers and her sister had jobs around the house to do. 'But why couldn't we switch off and take turns doing our different chores?' she murmured under her breath, the same as she did every time she headed out the back door to pick up the jar she carried the water in.

As soon as she stepped outside, she heard her next-door neighbor raising his voice to the people living in the next house. Halima, the gentle old man whom she sometimes referred to as 'grandpa,' never spoke an unkind word to anyone, but when he talked about the young couple living on the other side of him, it was though he had a different personality. Banafrit had not heard him talk bad to his neighbors so she was concerned to why he seemed this intense.

She started towards them possibly to intervene on her 'grandpa's' behalf if needed and since there is no fence between her property and his she could be there in a quick second. She had only gone a couple of steps when she saw Halima turn away from the couple on the other side of the short decorative stonewall where they were standing, so she stopped. He turned towards the back part of his land, tossed the contents of a bucket he was holding and in one full motion continued turning until he faced the back door of his house and stormed indoors.

As Banafrit and the couple standing on the other side of the wall looked at one another in bewilderment, Rabiah turned to her husband Odián and said in a loud voice so Banafrit could hear, "I don't know why he keeps accusing us of sabotaging his stuff." Looking back at Banafrit with her eyebrows bunched up and stress in her voice, she grabbed her husband's elbow and pulled him towards their home and proclaimed, "We haven't done anything to him."

Banafrit wanted to respond, but didn't know whether to defend her old friend who had never given her his reason for disliking this couple or to go knock on his door and find out just what he was so upset about. She decided for now it wasn't worth the trouble, but still there was this lingering thought that it might have something to do with her own feelings about drawing water out of the inlet today. When Halima dumped the contents of his bucket in the yard, her immediate thought was that it did not look like water, but she was so far away and it happen so fast it originally didn't register. She was sure she would find out what just happened, but for now, she needed to draw the water before her mother got home for lunch.

Banafrit's family lived an average Egyptian lifestyle for any working class family living in Qantir. Occasionally she had met someone from another town outside the city because of her father's work, but she hardly ever met anyone with children. Her knowledge of any place or people outside the city of Qantir was limited because she was not allowed to talk to an adult her family did not know.

Egyptian children only know of the multiple gods that rule everyone's life and have no knowledge of other societies. She knew that there is a god for the sky, a god of the river Nile, a god of the insects and even though Banafrit had only seen the Pharaoh one time, he himself was a god. She had no thoughts of whether the world was round, square, or triangular, red, green, or turquoise.

She did not even know if there were other cities with a Pharaoh.

Something she had heard but could not make sense of is that her city is the only one enslaving people against their will. She knew of Egyptian servants and lawbreakers made to work for little or no pay, this of course, seemed natural and right to Banafrit. Slavery did not.

The brief dispute in her neighbors' yard, reminded her of recent conflicts recounted by her father between the slaves and Egyptian officials. Her oldest brother works for the slave masters and would always speak against the slaves. Banafrit's heart has compassion towards any human being enduring a punishment of a crime for which they were not accused.

She only knew the history of her city and the slaves who built it because she had befriended four Hebrew children her own age who had been taught of their own heritage and told Banafrit these stories. It was their favorite topic of discussion during the 'club meetings' her and her friends held together.

Banafrit once asked her father to teach her of their Egyptian family ancestors, but he said it was not important. "We should only be content with what we have and please the Pharaoh. This in turn will please Ma'at, the Egyptian god conglomerate. Anything else makes one rebellious and the gods will respond accordingly." Her father explained.

Her Hebrew friends knew stories of their fathers and their 'fathers, fathers' as they called it. Banafrit thought that expression sounded funny. They even knew why Egyptians lived in this part of Egypt instead of to the south where Pharaoh and the rest of Egypt lived. However, the stories of the slave history and a time of famine intrigued her the most. This was so interesting because she never had a want for anything, especially food. 'How could people be without food?' she thought to herself. Once again, as she prepared to draw water, these thoughts weighed heavy and she could feel something was about to unfold.

She looked toward the path to the inlet where she needed to go get water and thought of the wonderful job her father and brothers had done re-clearing this particular path from their house. Two roads cross at the back end of their land. Large piles of straw that fall from the carts bringing straw to the slaves for their brick obstruct the road sometimes. One road brought the straw to the slaves, the other road carried carts going for more.

Banafrit traveled this path often hauling water and it was noticeable to her that when the slaves operated the carts, they stayed on the correct path and not one blade of straw fell to the road. When the Egyptian taskmasters steered the carts, they would pay no attention to the assigned roads. Any cart driven by someone on a proper path would inevitably collide with the cart on the wrong path and straw would inescapably end up all over her path.

The first crossing looked as though it is clear of debris, but the second crossing appeared damaged. Her father and oldest brother had spent a lot of time trying to fill in the damaged sections made by the uneven and wobbly wheels of the straw carts. In her opinion, the slave masters should spend more time making the roads better for the slave straw carts than forcing them to work harder.

She wondered whether she should check the path first before going down to the inlet, or just pick the jar up and go. She could not see the portion of the usually obstructed path as it is after a couple of corners down the path. This morning though, she only needed the one smaller jar of water and she could handle it without taking the cart, she decided to pick up the jar and go without first checking the path.

Just as she reached into the bin to pick up the jar, she heard her sister's voice screaming frantically. It sounded as though it was coming from inside the house, but as she turned her head toward the house, she remembered her sister had been down to the corner market picking up 'extras', as her younger brother, Rashidi, called them, for the noon meal. As she strained to hear her

sisters cries, she could tell she was very quickly getting closer and running along side of the house.

Banafrit's parents named her sister Quibilah, meaning 'peaceful'. When she was a lot younger, her name fit her perfectly, but the older she got and especially right now, Banafrit was thinking her sister was far from any sort of peace! Then, out of nowhere, she exploded from around the corner of the house screaming at the top of her lungs.

"Bana, Bana," she could barely get out, being out of breath.

"Quiby!" Banafrit yelled as she grabbed her sister to settle her down, still holding on the water jar she had just picked up. "Quiby, settle down. What is going on with you?"

"Have you seen the water? Have you seen the water?" Quiby's words were barely intelligible since she was out of breath.

Thinking of the water jar she was holding in her hand, she puzzlingly responded, "You mean this water? I have not gone down to the inlet yet. All that's in here is the few drops left over from last night's draw. What are you talking about?"

"Pour out what's left in the jar, Bana," Quiby exclaimed, finally catching some of her breath. "Do it, do it!"

"Ok, ok, but I don't get it." She tilted the jar, expecting a couple of drops to trickle out. Instead, a small stream of thick red fluid slowly flowed out onto the pavers they were standing on. She threw the jar to the ground in front of her and it broke into three large pieces and some fragments.

"Ah, ah, ah!" They both screamed in unison, being sisters, their expressions sounded exactly alike.

"What is that? It looks like...?" Bana expressed shockingly.

"Yeah, I know, blood, huh? It is everywhere. I mean everywhere. I was at Nuri's market getting extras. While I was telling her how much I liked her garlic bunches better than I like Tahir's bunches, even though Tahir's are cheaper..." Quiby started.

"Quiby, get to the point." Bana's voice rose a bit at the end of the sentence to stress her expectancy. Quiby's ramblings are well known.

"Yes, yes, while I was telling Nuri this, she started to rinse off the garlic bunches, as she always does, because as you very well know, Nuri's market is much cleaner than Tahir's." Bana stepped directly in front of Quiby, put her hand on her shoulder and gave her a very stern older sister look as she had to do quite often.

"Ok. When she poured the water over the garlic, the water came out of the bowl red and thick like BLOOD!" Banafrit took her hand off Quiby's shoulder and looked back down at the broken jar as her sister continued. "I was watching her do it and we both screamed just like you and I just did. Then she picked up her water jar, went out to the side of the market and poured it on the ground. It was the same. We both screamed again."

Now Banafrit's curiosity is taking over. She squatted down and picked up the largest of the jar fragments to look closer at the red liquid that pooled into a corner of the lowest part of the fragment.

Quiby continued, "So then I saw Rehema across the road going into her yard. She was carrying her basket and must have just got back from washing down at the inlet. I yelled at her so she would stop, then ran across the road to ask her if she had her small water jar. You know the one she always has with her. She thought I was crazy when I asked her to pour some of it on the ground. She said she did not mind pouring it into my cupped hands so I could get a drink, but if Rehema had the same stuff in her water jar, I couldn't handle the thought of whatever it is in the palm of my hands. I convinced her to pour just a couple of drops on the ground, because you know,

she trusts me, and sure enough it looked exactly the same as Nuri's, that's when I knew all the water somehow has turned to blood. That's when I ran home to tell you."

Banafrit stood up trying to make some sort of sense of what she was looking at. "What do you think Bana?" Quiby had to know more. "Let's go down to the inlet. If the water here is red, then I wonder if all the water is red. What do you think it is Bana? Mom says that you know these things."

Banafrit could hear her sister frantic questioning, but her thoughts were on Halima tossing the water out of his bucket. "He must have found the same liquid in his bucket," she said out loud, "and figured Rabiah and her husband Odian put it there."

Because Quibilah was talking at the same time Bana was thinking aloud, she only heard, "Rabiah and her husband Odian put it there." She raised her eyebrows then frowned responding with, "Rabiah and Odian? You think they did this?" Bana came out of her small trance and looked straight at Quibilah as her sister finished with a resounding, "Why?"

"No, Quiby, they didn't do this."

Once again thinking aloud, Banafrit said, "I knew it. I knew something was going to be different and happen *today*. And I knew it was something to do with the water." Her mother often expressed to the family that Bana had an interesting ability to sense things others took for granted. Today, she realized her mother was right.

She looked over to her neighbors' houses hopefully to see if they per chance might be outside and questions them regarding the earlier instance, but for once Quiby made more sense. Banafrit turned back to Quibilah and said, "If the water in the inlet is the same as what we saw in the jar, Ma'at must have something to do with this." They headed towards the inlet.

Qantir is the largest city of the Nile Delta located in the north central part of Egypt. The elaborate canal system running through the delta, and through Qantir, supplied the inhabitants with their water lifeline. The inlet where Banafrit and Quibilah drew their water is a reservoir supplying smaller canals throughout the eastern side of Qantir. In the middle of the city and southernmost end, where Banafrit lives, are aqueducts, which supply a highly advanced system of underground plumbing and water to the easternmost reservoir.

Banafrit wanted to know if their water lifeline is tainted. As they sprinted around the first curve of the path, she tried to tell Quibilah something, but she had to break it up into separated exhaling breathes, and it almost tickled her to say, "I don't think" - "we've ever" - "run this fast" - "on this path."

Quibilah and Bana were laughing as they reached the last corner in excitement. They both stopped in their tracts in exactly the same spot. The river inlet was in fact, dark blood red.

"Oh my *personal* god!" Bana let out with sigh, and once again chopping up her sentence with every exhale, "Do you remember," - "what dad was telling" - "us about last night?"

More in shock than out of breath, Quibilah replied, "You mean about how those old Hebrew guys tried to do a trick in front of the Pharaoh and the court magicians made a bunch of snakes eat one of them?"

Bana, finally catching her breath but hunching down to put her hands on her knees, responded, "No Quiby, I don't think that's exactly what happened, but dad did say that the Hebrews have some kind of leader now." Straightening up and looking directly at the inlet she said, "If that's true, I'll bet you Pharaoh is mad at the slaves and something has gone terribly wrong." Quiby starts walking towards the inlet and Banafrit questioned still standing almost mesmerized, "Do you smell that?"

"Wow! It even smells like blood." Quiby says without hesitating, but not quickening her

step.

"Stop Quiby! I don't want to go anywhere near it and you aren't either." Quiby stops and turns her face toward Bana. Her facial expression tells Bana she is not peaceful about this decision, but Bana petitions her sister, "Let's go back to the house, mom will be home any time and she will know what to do."

Quiby's young inquisitive nature has caused her to look back at the inlet. "What is *that* floating on top of it Bana?" She regains her slow stepping towards the inlet, almost tiptoeing. "We have to go check it out Bana."

"NO Quiby!" Her sister is sharp toned.

Not looking back nor slowing her step she said, "Bana, I think those things are fish! Those are dead fish floating on the water or blood or whatever it is."

"It is fish, dead fish," a boy Banafrit's age says as he came from around the tall weak grass that defined the beach edge away from the water.

"Hasani" both girls exclaimed in unison. Quiby stopped, turned toward her friend who is just a few feet away.

"Yeah," Hasani answered, "is this unreal or what?"

Quibilah looked back up to where her sister was standing and then walked up the path with Hasani. She thought to herself, "I am so glad he showed up, I really didn't want to go down there."

Focusing her attention on Hasani, Banafrit asked, "Do you think it's everywhere or just our inlet? Quiby saw it in a couple of pails at Nuri's market and the stuff was even in our water jar at the house."

"It's not just coloring in the water, it *is* blood and I think it's everywhere. I've been down at the 'duck' for awhile." The 'duck' is what all the kids call the south aqueduct system, which divides the south part of the Egyptian city Qantir, from the north end of Goshen where the Hebrew people live. "I was supposed to meet Uri there earlier and he never showed up. You know how Uri is, he comes and he goes."

Quiby answers even before Hasani finished, "Oh yeah, we know how Uri is. Last week he and his dad were next..." Bana steps sideways so as to be directly between Quibilah and Hasani but facing Quibilah. She raises her hand in a firm stop motion but remains silent.

Quiby stops, looks around Bana at Hasani and says, "Yeah, we know how Uri is."

"Anyway," Hasani continues, "I was bent over, down in the water checking out these rocks that I have only seen in this part in the inlet. I am not even sure that they are rocks, but I had my hand down in the water and moved one of the bigger ones around to lift it out when the water turned red. At first I thought the rock stirred up the water and caused it to turn red, but when I straightened, up and looked across the inlet, the whole inlet was blood red. Almost immediately, three or four fish came popping up out of the inlet. It was thick too, unreal. I don't think you girls should go down in it."

"I don't want to go in it, I just want to see the dead fish," Quiby said as to proclaim her independence. Banafrit rolled her eyes and started to say something when Quibilah grabbed Hasani's arm above his elbow with both hands and drew herself up close. Looking up at her friend, she begged with a puppy dog expression on her face, "Please?"

"We aren't going anywhere near it." Bana sternly said and grabbed Quibilah's arm to rescue Hasani from certain embarrassment.

Releasing her grip on Hasani Quiby said, "Ok, then let's go back to the house and wait on mom."

Bana had a huge smile on her face as she watched Quiby take the lead back to their house.

Hasani smiled back at Bana as they followed and said in a low tone to hide what he was saying from Quibilah, "I knew she didn't really want to go down there." Banafrut bumped his shoulder with hers and said, "Do ya think?" They both chuckled as they watched Quiby scurry in front of them.

Quibilah turned to see them taking their time and said, "Hasani, come on, let's find out what happened."

"Can you stay for lunch?" Bana questioned her friend to apologize for her sister's immature demand.

"I've got some time, it's still morning and I would really like to know what's going on too." he replied.

On the way up the path, Hasani tried to reason the rumors he had heard. "I've heard the Hebrews have some old slave who thinks he can stand up to the Pharaoh. I've even heard he thinks he can get the Pharaoh to give the slaves better working conditions."

Bana replied, "Yeah, dad told us he used to be the son of the previous Pharaoh. I don't understand how you can, 'used to be the son of someone' and why would the son of a Pharaoh be helping the slaves?"

"Yeah, I heard that too, and if that's true where has he been all this time. It doesn't add up." Hasani answers.

Quiby still maintaining a bouncing pace and not missing a step, turns her whole body around and pipes in, "Dad said the old guy used to be a sorcerer, but the Pharaoh's magician's fed him to the asps."

"Will it never end? Quiby, your mind has an amazing way of processing stories. I don't remember dad saying it quite that way," Banafrut said, trying to correct her sister.

"Thank you Bana, I like your mind too," and raising her voice finishes with, "but I think that is *exactly* how it happened." Quiby replied to show Bana she can hold her ground.

"You guys know how to keep it interesting, that's for sure," Hasani said, enjoying the bantering.

When the three of them got back to the house, Banafrut and Hasani started to fix their lunch while waiting for her mother to come home. Quibilah went to solicit any information she could find from her neighbors.

"Bana?" her mother's voice questioned as she came in the front door.

"Yes mother, Sani's here and we're almost done," Banafrut responded.

"I need to get back to your father. It seems everything is running late today." She said raising her voice with a touch of stress from her bedroom. As she walked into the open cooking area and saw Hasani, she stopped to say, "Hasani, where did you come from?"

"Mother," Bana, replied, "I told you when you came in, he was here."

"I'm sorry, your father has got me on edge with this massive wheel order of his and we are so far behind. I really only remember hearing your voice."

"It's ok mother Layla." Hasani tried to relieve her stress a bit. "Is there something I could do to help?"

"Mother," Banafrut interrupted with exasperation in her voice, "you haven't said a word about the water. You do know about the water don't you?"

"What Bana, what?" Layla turned her attention to her obviously strained daughter. "We all know you don't want to get..."

"Blood - mother - blood! Haven't you and father seen the water," Banafrut interrupted again raising her voice this time to point of dropping the tray she is holding.

"Blood! Where is Quibilah? Banafrit where is your sister?" All this stress made her thoughts go to her usually frantic daughter, "What do you mean blood?"

Hasani and Banafrit squatted down to pick up the tray of food. "She's ok mom. I don't know where she is." Bana looked at Hasani for a partial assurance.

Hasani responded with, "Don't look at me; I can't keep track of her when she's standing in front of me."

Layla started questioning Banafrit before Hasani finished, "You don't know where she is?" "What do you mean blood, Bana?"

Bana stood up while Hasani finished putting everything back on the tray. "Ok, ok, I'm sorry mom. It's been crazy for us this morning too. It's *looks* as though all the water everywhere has turned to blood." Her mother perched her eyebrows in wonderment as Bana finished. "I can't begin to tell you all the things we've seen this morning that is supposed to be water but it's not."

Layla replied, "Bana you sound like Quibilah. You're not making any sense."

Hasani rose up and setting the tray on the table said, "She's right Bana, you sound like Quibs."

"*SANI!*" Bana exclaimed putting her hands on her hips.

Flinching back and chuckling, Hasani turned to Layla and explained, "I'm major joking mother Layla. She's right; the water everywhere has turned to blood or something a heck of a lot like blood."

Bana ran out the back door as her mother yelled, "Bana, what are you doing."

Then in an instant they heard, "Open the door please!" Bana's voice rang from outside.

Both Hasani and Layla went to let Bana back in and found her holding the largest of the broken jar fragments from her earlier encounter with Quibilah. As Hasani opened the door, Banafrit came in holding the fragment with both hands. "Look mother, what do you think this liquid is in here?"

As Hasani closed the back door behind her, the front door flew open and Quibilah came storming in. Almost as though she knew they were all in the cooking area, Quibs came in talking a mile a minute. "Pharaoh is here. He is here in Qantir. Pharaoh's physicians had planned this thing with the water for months because the slaves' new king is from Midea and he's going to kill all of the Pharaoh's armies to take over the Pharaohs' government."

Layla briefly looked around when Quibilah first came in, but being very used to her ranting, she had learned to let Quibs finish. Hasani looked at Bana and smiled as Bana quizzed her mother, "Well, now you see?"

"Mother what are we going to do? Let's go get father." Quibilah could not let it go.

Ignoring Quibs completely, her mother looked up at Banafrit, raised her hand in a stopping motion and asked, "Bana you never make things up, what do you think of this?" Hasani smiled as he thought; 'Now I know where Bana gets that hand thing from.' Layla finished, "And don't tell me again this is blood."

"The entire inlet is this stuff," Hasani answered.

Banafrit stuck *her* hand in front of Quibilah's face knowing she could not help but respond. She then set the broken jar fragment on the table, turned her thumb down and dabbed some liquid on it. Rubbing her thumb and forefinger together, then separating the two and looking at the result, said, "Mother, tell me this isn't blood."

"Ooohh, you did not just touch it. No!" Quibilah could not take it anymore.

"It is not!" Layla responded. "Ok, enough. I do not have an answer, but we are going to need water. I will take this food to your father and check the inlet behind the shop. We *are* going to

need water here later, so you need to figure out how to accomplish that task Bana."

"I'll help you carry this to the shop mother Layla. I'd like to see what it's like over there too. I've been wondering that." Hasani said as he helped her gather the food.

"When does your mother get home Hasani?" Layla asked.

"It's almost dark when she arrives there." Quibilah answered. "I've been over there when it seemed she would never get home."

"I don't live far from your shop and I do have things I need to do at home before she gets there," Hasani replied.

"This will be good; I think I have an idea that will help us both Hasani." Layla said stacking her arms with bags. "We can talk along the way."

As Layla and Hasani walked out the door, Banafrit questioned her sister, "Where did you get that ridiculous story, 'he's going to take over the Pharaohs' government?' Sometimes I think we should feed *you* to the asps."