

CHAPTER IV

THE COURT OF BETROTHAL

"Life! Blood! Strength!" echoed everyone in the great hall, falling to their knees and bending their foreheads to the ground. Even the Prince and the aged Bakenkhonsu prostrated themselves thus as though before the presence of a god. And, indeed, Pharaoh Meneptah, passing through the patch of sunlight at the head of the hall, wearing the double crown upon his head and arrayed in royal robes and ornaments, looked like a god, no less, as the multitude of the people of Egypt held him to be. He was an old man with the face of one worn by years and care, but from his person majesty seemed to flow.

With him, walking a step or two behind, went Nehesi his Vizier, a shrivelled, parchment-faced officer whose cunning eyes rolled about the place, and Roy the High-priest, and Hora the Chamberlain of the Table, and Meranu the Washer of the King's Hands, and Yuy the private scribe, and many others whom Bakenkhonsu named to me as they appeared. Then there were fan-bearers and a gorgeous band of lords who were called King's Companions and Head Butlers and I know not who besides, and after these guards with spears and helms that shone like god, and black swordsmen from the southern land of Kesh.

But one woman accompanied his Majesty, walking alone immediately behind him in front of the Vizier and the High-priest. She was the Royal

Daughter, the Princess Userti, who looked, I thought, prouder and more splendid than any there, though somewhat pale and anxious.

Pharaoh came to the steps of the throne. The Vizier and the High-priest advanced to help him up the steps, for he was feeble with age. He waved them aside, and beckoning to his daughter, rested his hand upon her shoulder and by her aid mounted the throne. I thought that there was meaning in this; it was as though he would show to all the assembly that this princess was the prop of Egypt.

For a little while he stood still and Userti sat herself down on the topmost step, resting her chin upon her jewelled hand. There he stood searching the place with his eyes. He lifted his sceptre and all rose, hundreds and hundreds of them throughout the hall, their garments rustling as they rose like leaves in a sudden wind. He seated himself and once more from every throat went up the regal salutation that was the king's alone, of--

"Life! Blood! Strength! Pharaoh! Pharaoh! Pharaoh!"

In the silence that followed I heard him say, to the Princess, I think:

"Amenmeses I see, and others of our kin, but where is my son Seti, the Prince of Egypt?"

"Watching us no doubt from some vestibule. My brother loves not

ceremonials," answered Userti.

Then, with a little sigh, Seti stepped forward, followed by Bakenkhonsu and myself, and at a distance by other members of his household. As he marched up the long hall all drew to this side or that, saluting him with low bows. Arriving in front of the throne he bent till his knee touched the ground, saying:

"I give greeting, O King and Father."

"I give greeting, O Prince and Son. Be seated," answered Meneptah.

Seti seated himself in a chair that had been made ready for him at the foot of the throne, and on its right, and in another chair to the left, but set farther from the steps, Amenmeses seated himself also. At a motion from the Prince I took my stand behind his chair.

The formal business of the Court began. At the beckoning of an usher people of all sorts appeared singly and handed in petitions written on rolled-up papyri, which the Vizier Nehesi took and threw into a leathern sack that was held open by a black slave. In some cases an answer to his petition, whereof this was only the formal delivery, was handed back to the suppliant, who touched his brow with the roll that perhaps meant everything to him, and bowed himself away to learn his fate. Then appeared sheiks of the desert tribes, and captains from fortresses in Syria, and traders who had been harmed by enemies, and even peasants who

had suffered violence from officers, each to make his prayer. Of all of these supplications the scribes took notes, while to some the Vizier and councillors made answer. But as yet Pharaoh said nothing. There he sat silent on his splendid throne of ivory and gold, like a god of stone above the altar, staring down the long hall and through the open doors as though he would read the secrets of the skies beyond.

"I told you that courts were wearisome, friend Ana," whispered the Prince to me without turning his head. "Do you not already begin to wish that you were back writing tales at Memphis?"

Before I could answer some movement in the throng at the end of the hall drew the eyes of the Prince and of all of us. I looked, and saw advancing towards the throne a tall, bearded man already old, although his black hair was but grizzled with grey. He was arrayed in a white linen robe, over which hung a woollen cloak such as shepherds wear, and he carried in his hand a long thornwood staff. His face was splendid and very handsome, and his black eyes flashed like fire. He walked forward slowly, looking neither to the left nor the right, and the throng made way for him as though he were a prince. Indeed, I thought that they showed more fear of him than of any prince, since they shrank from him as he came. Nor was he alone, for after him walked another man who was very like to him, but as I judged, still older, for his beard, which hung down to his middle, was snow-white as was the hair on his head. He also was dressed in a sheepskin cloak and carried a staff in his hand. Now a whisper rose among the people and the whisper said:

"The prophets of the men of Israel! The prophets of the men of Israel!"

The two stood before the throne and looked at Pharaoh, making no obeisance. Pharaoh looked at them and was silent. For a long space they stood thus in the midst of a great quiet, but Pharaoh would not speak, and none of his officers seemed to dare to open their mouths. At length the first of the prophets spoke in a clear, cold voice as some conqueror might do.

"You know me, Pharaoh, and my errand."

"I know you," answered Pharaoh slowly, "as well I may, seeing that we played together when we were little. You are that Hebrew whom my sister, she who sleeps in Osiris, took to be as a son to her, giving to you a name that means 'drawn forth' because she drew you forth as an infant from among the reeds of Nile. Aye, I know you and your brother also, but your errand I know not."

"This is my errand, Pharaoh, or rather the errand of Jahveh, God of Israel, for whom I speak. Have you not heard it before? It is that you should let his people go to do sacrifice to him in the wilderness."

"Who is Jahveh? I know not Jahveh who serve Amon and the gods of Egypt, and why should I let your people go?"

"Jahveh is the God of Israel, the great God of all gods whose power you shall learn if you will not hearken, Pharaoh. As for why you should let the people go, ask it of the Prince your son who sits yonder. Ask him of what he saw in the streets of this city but last night, and of a certain judgment that he passed upon one of the officers of Pharaoh. Or if he will not tell you, learn it from the lips of the maiden who is named Merapi, Moon of Israel, the daughter of Nathan the Levite. Stand forward, Merapi, daughter of Nathan."

Then from the throng at the back of the hall came forward Merapi, clad in a white robe and with a black veil thrown about her head in token of mourning, but not so as to hide her face. Up the hall she glided and made obeisance to Pharaoh, as she did so, casting one swift look at Seti where he sat. Then she stood still, looking, as I thought, wonderfully beautiful in that simple robe of white and the evil of black.

"Speak, woman," said Pharaoh.

She obeyed, telling all the tale in her low and honeyed voice, nor did any seem to think it long or wearisome. At length she ended, and Pharaoh said:

"Say, Seti my son, is this truth?"

"It is truth, O my Father. By virtue of my powers as Governor of this city I caused the captain Khuaka to be put to death for the crime of

murder done by him before my eyes in the streets of the city."

"Perchance you did right and perchance you did wrong, Son Seti. At least you are the best judge, and because he struck your royal person, this Khuaka deserved to die."

Again he was silent for a while staring through the open doors at the sky beyond. Then he said:

"What would ye more, Prophets of Jahveh? Justice has been done upon my officer who slew the man of your people. A life has been taken for a life according to the strict letter of the law. The matter is finished. Unless you have aught to say, get you gone."

"By the command of the Lord our God," answered the prophet, "we have this to say to you, O Pharaoh. Lift the heavy yoke from off the neck of the people of Israel. Bid that they cease from the labour of the making of bricks to build your walls and cities."

"And if I refuse, what then?"

"Then the curse of Jahveh shall be on you, Pharaoh, and with plague upon plague shall he smite this land of Egypt."

Now a sudden rage seized Meneptah.

"What!" he cried. "Do you dare to threaten me in my own palace, and would ye cause all the multitude of the people of Israel who have grown fat in the land to cease from their labours? Hearken, my servants, and, scribes, write down my decree. Go ye to the country of Goshen and say to the Israelites that the bricks they made they shall make as aforetime and more work shall they do than aforetime in the days of my father, Rameses. Only no more straw shall be given to them for the making of the bricks. Because they are idle, let them go forth and gather the straw themselves; let them gather it from the face of the fields."

There was silence for a while. Then with one voice both the prophets spoke, pointing with their wands to Pharaoh:

"In the Name of the Lord God we curse you, Pharaoh, who soon shall die and make answer for this sin. The people of Egypt we curse also. Ruin shall be their portion; death shall be their bread and blood shall they drink in a great darkness. Moreover, at the last Pharaoh shall let the people go."

Then, waiting no answer, they turned and strode away side by side, nor did any man hinder them in their goings. Again there was silence in the hall, the silence of fear, for these were awful words that the prophets had spoken. Pharaoh knew it, for his chin sank upon his breast and his face that had been red with rage turned white. Userti hid her eyes with her hand as though to shut out some evil vision, and even Seti seemed ill at ease as though that awful curse had found a home within his

heart.

At a motion of Pharaoh's hand the Vizier Nehesi struck the ground thrice with his wand of office and pointed to the door, thus giving the accustomed sign that the Court was finished, whereon all the people turned and went away with bent heads speaking no words one to another. Presently the great hall was emptied save for the officers and guards and those who attended upon Pharaoh. When everyone had gone Seti the Prince rose and bowed before the throne.

"O Pharaoh," he said, "be pleased to hearken. We have heard very evil words spoken by these Hebrew men, words that threaten your divine life, O Pharaoh, and call down a curse upon the Upper and the Lower Land. Pharaoh, these people of Israel hold that they suffer wrong and are oppressed. Now give me, your son, a writing under your hand and seal, by virtue of which I shall have power to go down to the Land of Goshen and inquire of this matter, and afterwards make report of the truth to you. Then, if it seems to you that the People of Israel are unjustly dealt by, you may lighten their burden and bring the curse of their prophets to nothing. But if it seems to you that the tales they tell are idle then your words shall stand."

Now, listening, I, Ana, thought that Pharaoh would once more be angry. But it was not so, for when he spoke again it was in the voice of one who is crushed by grief or weariness.

"Have your will, Son," he said. "Only take with you a great guard of soldiers lest these hook-nosed dogs should do you mischief. I trust them not, who, like the Hyksos whose blood runs in many of them, were ever the foes of Egypt. Did they not conspire with the Ninebow Barbarians whom I crushed in the great battle, and do they not now threaten us in the name of their outland god? Still, let the writing be prepared and I will seal it. And stay. I think, Seti, that you, who were ever gentle-natured, have somewhat too soft a heart towards these shepherd slaves. Therefore I will not send you alone. Amenmeses your cousin shall go with you, but under your command. It is spoken."

"Life! Blood! Strength!" said both Seti and Amenmeses, thus acknowledging the king's command.

Now I thought that all was finished. But it was not so, for presently Pharaoh said:

"Let the guards withdraw to the end of the hall and with them the servants. Let the King's councillors and the officers of the household remain."

Instantly all saluted and withdrew out of hearing. I, too, made ready to go, but the Prince said to me:

"Stay, that you may take note of what passes."

Pharaoh, watching, saw if he did not hear.

"Who is that man, Son?" he asked.

"He is Ana my private scribe and librarian, O Pharaoh, whom I trust. It was he who saved me from harm but last night."

"You say it, Son. Let him remain in attendance on you, knowing that if he betrays our council he dies."

Userti looked up frowning as though she were about to speak. If so, she changed her mind and was silent, perhaps because Pharaoh's word once spoken could not be altered. Bakenkhonsu remained also as a Councillor of the King according to his right.

When all had gone Pharaoh, who had been brooding, lifted his head and spoke slowly but in the voice of one who gives a judgment that may not be questioned, saying:

"Prince Seti, you are my only son born of Queen Ast-Nefert, royal Sister, royal Mother, who sleeps in the bosom of Osiris. It is true that you are not my first-born son, since the Count Ramessu"--here he pointed to a stout mild-faced man of pleasing, rather foolish appearance--"is your elder by two years. But, as he knows well, his mother, who is still with us, is a Syrian by birth and of no royal blood, and therefore he can never sit upon the throne of Egypt. Is it not so, my son Ramessu?"

"It is so, O Pharaoh," answered the Count in a pleasant voice, "not do I seek ever to sit upon that throne, who am well content with the offices and wealth that Pharaoh has been pleased to confer upon me, his first-born."

"Let the words of the Count Ramessu be written down," said Pharaoh, "and placed in the temple of Ptah of this city, and in the temples of Ptah at Memphis and of Amon at Thebes, that hereafter they may never be questioned."

The scribes in attendance wrote down the words and, at a sign from the Prince Seti, I also wrote them down, setting the papyrus I had with me on my knee. When this was finished Pharaoh went on.

"Therefore, O Prince Seti, you are the heir of Egypt and perhaps, as those Hebrew prophets said, will ere long be called upon to sit in my place on its throne."

"May the King live for ever!" exclaimed Seti, "for well he knows that I do not seek his crown and dignities."

"I do know it well, my son; so well that I wish you thought more of that crown and those dignities which, if the gods will, must come to you. If they will it not, next in the order of succession stands your cousin, the Count Amenmeses, who is also of royal blood both on his father's

and his mother's side, and after him I know not who, unless it be my daughter and your half-sister, the royal Princess Userti, Lady of Egypt."

Now Userti spoke, very earnestly, saying:

"O Pharaoh, surely my right in the succession, according to ancient precedent, precedes that of my cousin, the Count Amenmeses."

Amenmeses was about to answer, but Pharaoh lifted his hand and he was silent.

"It is matter for those learned in such lore to discuss," Meneptah replied in a somewhat hesitating voice. "I pray the gods that it may never be needful that this high question should be considered in the Council. Nevertheless, let the words of the royal Princess be written down. Now, Prince Seti," he went on when this had been done, "you are still unmarried, and if you have children they are not royal."

"I have none, O Pharaoh," said Seti.

"Is it so?" answered Meneptah indifferently. "The Count Amenmeses has children I know, for I have seen them, but by his wife Unuri, who also is of the royal line, he has none."

Here I heard Amenmeses mutter, "Being my aunt that is not strange," a

saying at which Seti smiled.

"My daughter, the Princess, is also unmarried. So it seems that the fountain of the royal blood is running dry----"

"Now it is coming," whispered Seti below his breath so that only I could hear.

"Therefore," continued Pharaoh, "as you know, Prince Seti, for the royal Princess of Egypt by my command went to speak to you of this matter last night, I make a decree----"

"Pardon, O Pharaoh," interrupted the Prince, "my sister spoke to me of no decree last night, save that I should attend at the court here to-day."

"Because I could not, Seti, seeing that another was present with you whom you refused to dismiss," and she let her eyes rest on me.

"It matters not," said Pharaoh, "since now I will utter it with my own lips which perhaps is better. It is my will, Prince, that you forthwith wed the royal Princess Userti, that children of the true blood of the Ramessides may be born. Hear and obey."

Now Userti shifted her eyes from me to Seti, watching him very closely. Seated at his side upon the ground with my writing roll spread across my

knee, I, too, watched him closely, and noted that his lips turned white and his face grew fixed and strange.

"I hear the command of Pharaoh," he said in a low voice making obeisance, and hesitated.

"Have you aught to add?" asked Meneptah sharply.

"Only, O Pharaoh, that though this would be a marriage decreed for reasons of the State, still there is a lady who must be given in marriage, and she my half-sister who heretofore has only loved me as a relative. Therefore, I would know from her lips if it is her will to take me as a husband."

Now all looked at Userti who replied in a cold voice:

"In this matter, Prince, as in all others I have no will but that of Pharaoh."

"You have heard," interrupted Meneptah impatiently, "and as in our House it has always been the custom for kin to marry kin, why should it not be her will? Also, who else should she marry? Amenmeses is already wed. There remains only Saptah his brother who is younger than herself----"

"So am I," murmured Seti, "by two long years," but happily Userti did not hear him.

"Nay, my father," she said with decision, "never will I take a deformed man to husband."

Now from the shadow on the further side of the throne, where I could not see him, there hobbled forward a young noble, short in stature, light-haired like Seti, and with a sharp, clever face which put me in mind of that of a jackal (indeed for this reason he was named Thoth by the common people, after the jackal-headed god). He was very angry, for his cheeks were flushed and his small eyes flashed.

"Must I listen, Pharaoh," he said in a little voice, "while my cousin the Royal Princess reproaches me in public for my lame foot, which I have because my nurse let me fall when I was still in arms?"

"Then his nurse let his grandfather fall also, for he too was club-footed, as I who have seen him naked in his cradle can bear witness," whispered old Bakenkhonsu.

"It seems so, Count Saptah, unless you stop your ears," replied Pharaoh.

"She says she will not marry me," went on Saptah, "me who from childhood have been a slave to her and to no other woman."

"Not by my wish, Saptah. Indeed, I pray you to go and be a slave to any woman whom you will," exclaimed Userti.

"But I say," continued Saptah, "that one day she shall marry me, for the Prince Seti will not live for ever."

"How do you know that, Cousin?" asked Seti. "The High-priest here will tell you a different story."

Now certain of those present turned their heads away to hide the smile upon their faces. Yet on this day some god spoke with Saptah's voice making him a prophet, since in a year to come she did marry him, in order that she might stay upon the throne at a time of trouble when Egypt would not suffer that a woman should have sole rule over the land.

But Pharaoh did not smile like the courtiers; indeed he grew angry.

"Peace, Saptah!" he said. "Who are you that wrangle before me, talking of the death of kings and saying that you will wed the Royal princess? One more such word and you shall be driven into banishment. Hearken now. Almost am I minded to declare my daughter, the Royal Princess, sole heiress to the throne, seeing that in her there is more strength and wisdom than in any other of our House."

"If such be Pharaoh's will, let Pharaoh's will be done," said Seti most humbly. "Well I know my own unworthiness to fill so high a station, and by all the gods I swear that my beloved sister will find no more faithful subject than myself."

"You mean, Seti," interrupted Userti, "that rather than marry me you would abandon your right to the double crown. Truly I am honoured. Seti, whether you reign or I, I will not marry you."

"What words are these I hear?" cried Meneptah. "Is there indeed one in this land of Egypt who dares to say that Pharaoh's decree shall be disobeyed? Write it down, Scribes, and you, O Officers, let it be proclaimed from Thebes to the sea, that on the third day from now at the hour of noon in the temple of Hathor in this city, the Prince, the Royal Heir, Seti Meneptah, Beloved of Ra, will wed the Royal Princess of Egypt, Lily of Love, Beloved of Hathor, Userti, Daughter of me, the god."

"Life! Blood! Strength!" called all the Court.

Then, guided by some high officer, the Prince Seti was led before the throne and the Princess Userti was set beside him, or rather facing him. According to the ancient custom a great gold cup was brought and filled with red wine, to me it looked like blood. Userti took the cup and, kneeling, gave it to the Prince, who drank and gave it back to her that she might also drink in solemn token of their betrothal. Is not the scene graven on the broad bracelets of gold which in after days Seti wore when he sat upon the throne, those same bracelets that at a future time I with my own hands clasped about the wrists of dead Userti?

Then he stretched out his hand which she touched with her lips, and bending down he kissed her on the brow. Lastly, Pharaoh, descending to the lowest step of the throne, laid his sceptre, first upon the head of the Prince, and next upon that of the Princess, blessing them both in the name of himself, of his Ka or Double, and of the spirits and Kas of all their forefathers, kings and queens of Egypt, thus appointing them to come after him when he had been gathered to the bosom of the gods.

These things done, he departed in state, surrounded by his court, preceded and followed by his guards and leaning on the arm of the Princess Userti, whom he loved better than anyone in the world.

A while later I stood alone with the Prince in his private chamber, where I had first seen him.

"That is finished," he said in a cheerful voice, "and I tell you, Ana, that I feel quite, quite happy. Have you ever shivered upon the bank of a river of a winter morning, fearing to enter, and yet, when you did enter, have you not been pleased to find that the icy water refreshed you and made you not cold but hot?"

"Yes, Prince. It is when one comes out of the water, if the wind blows and no sun shines, that one feels colder than before."

"True, Ana, and therefore one must not come out. One should stop there till one--drowns or is eaten by a crocodile. But, say, did I do it

well?"

"Old Bakenkhonsu told me, Prince, that he had been present at many royal betrothals, I think he said eleven, and had never seen one conducted with more grace. He added that the way in which you kissed the brow of her Highness was perfect, as was all your demeanour after the first argument."

"And so it would remain, Ana, if I were never called upon to do more than kiss her brow, to which I have been accustomed from boyhood. Oh! Ana, Ana," he added in a kind of cry, "already you are becoming a courtier like the rest of them, a courtier who cannot speak the truth. Well, nor can I, so why should I blame you? Tell me again all about your marriage, Ana, of how it began and how it ended."