

CHAPTER V

THE PROPHECY

Whether or no the Prince Seti saw Userti again before the hour of his marriage with her I cannot say, because he never told me. Indeed I was not present at the marriage, for the reason that I had been granted leave to return to Memphis, there to settle my affairs and sell my house on entering upon my appointment as private scribe to his Highness. Thus it came about that fourteen full days went by from that of the holding of the Court of Betrothal before I found myself standing once more at the gate of the Prince's palace, attended by a servant who led an ass on which were laden all my manuscripts and certain possessions that had descended to me from my ancestors with the title-deeds of their tombs. Different indeed was my reception on this my second coming. Even as I reached the steps the old chamberlain Pambasa appeared, running down them so fast that his white robes and beard streamed upon the air.

"Greeting, most learned scribe, most honourable Ana," he panted. "Glad indeed am I to see you, since very hour his Highness asks if you have returned, and blames me because you have not come. Verily I believe that if you had stayed upon the road another day I should have been sent to look for you, who have had sharp words said to me because I did not arrange that you should be accompanied by a guard, as though the Vizier Nehesi would have paid the costs of a guard without the direct order of Pharaoh. O most excellent Ana, give me of the charm which you have

doubtless used to win the love of our royal master, and I will pay you well for it who find it easier to earn his wrath."

"I will, Pambasa. Here it is--write better stories than I do instead of telling them, and he will love you more than he does me. But say--how went the marriage? I have heard upon the way that it was very splendid."

"Splendid! Oh! it was ten times more than splendid. It was as though the god Osiris were once more wed to the goddess Isis in the very halls of heaven. Indeed his Highness, the bridegroom, was dressed as a god, yes, he wore the robes and the holy ornaments of Amon. And the procession! And the feast that Pharaoh gave! I tell you that the Prince was so overcome with joy and all this weight of glory that, before it was over, looking at him I saw that his eyes were closed, being dazzled by the gleam of gold and jewels and the loveliness of his royal bride. He told me that it was so himself, fearing perhaps lest I should have thought that he was asleep. Then there were the presents, something to everyone of us according to his degree. I got--well it matters not. And, learned Ana, I did not forget you. Knowing well that everything would be gone before you returned I spoke your name in the ear of his Highness, offering to keep your gift."

"Indeed, Pambasa, and what did he say?"

"He said that he was keeping it himself. When I stared wondering what it might be, for I saw nothing on him, he added, 'It is here,' and touched

the private signet guard that he has always worn, an ancient ring of gold, but of no great value I should say, with 'Beloved of Thoth and of the King' cut upon it. It seems that he must take it off to make room for another and much finer ring which her Highness has given him."

Now, by this time, the ass having been unloaded by the slaves and led away, we had passed through the hall where many were idling as ever, and were come to the private apartments of the palace.

"This way," said Pambasa. "The orders are that I am to take you to the Prince wherever he may be, and just now he is seated in the great apartment with her Highness, where they have been receiving homage and deputations from distant cities. The last left about half an hour ago."

"First I will prepare myself, worthy Pambasa," I began.

"No, no, the orders are instant, I dare not disobey them. Enter," and with a courtly flourish he drew a rich curtain.

"By Amon," exclaimed a weary voice which I knew as that of the Prince, "here come more councillors or priests. Prepare, my sister, prepare!"

"I pray you, Seti," answered another voice, that of Userti, "to learn to call me by my right name, which is no longer sister. Nor, indeed, am I your full sister."

"I crave your pardon," said Seti. "Prepare, Royal Wife, prepare!"

By now the curtain was fully drawn and I stood, travel-stained, forlorn and, to tell the truth, trembling a little, for I feared her Highness, in the doorway, hesitating to pass the threshold. Beyond was a splendid chamber full of light, in the centre of which upon a carven and golden chair, one of two that were set there, sat her Highness magnificently apparelled, faultlessly beautiful and calm. She was engaged in studying a painted roll, left no doubt by the last deputation, for others similar to it were laid neatly side by side upon a table.

The second chair was empty, for the Prince was walking restlessly up and down the chamber, his ceremonial robe somewhat disarrayed and the uræus circlet of gold which he wore, tilted back upon his head, because of his habit of running his fingers through his brown hair. As I still stood in the dark shadow, for Pambasa had left me, and thus remained unseen, the talk went on.

"I am prepared, Husband. Pardon me, it is you who look otherwise. Why would you dismiss the scribes and the household before the ceremony was ended?"

"Because they wearied me," said Seti, "with their continual bowing and praising and formalities."

"In which I saw nothing unusual. Now they must be recalled."

"Let whoever it is enter," he exclaimed.

Then I stepped forward into the light, prostrating myself.

"Why," he cried, "it is Ana returned from Memphis! Draw near, Ana, and a thousand welcomes to you. Do you know I thought that you were another high-priest, or governor of some Nome of which I had never heard."

"Ana! Who is Ana?" asked the Princess. "Oh! I remember that scribe----. Well, it is plain that he has returned from Memphis," and she eyed my dusty robe.

"Royal One," I murmured abashed, "do not blame me that I enter your presence thus. Pambasa led me here against my will by the direct order of the Prince."

"Is it so? Say, Seti, does this man bring tidings of import from Memphis that you needed his presence in such haste?"

"Yes, Userti, at least I think so. You have the writings safe, have you not, Ana?"

"Quite safe, your Highness," I answered, though I knew not of what writings he spoke, unless they were the manuscripts of my stories.

"Then, my Lord, I will leave you to talk of the tidings from Memphis and these writings," said the Princess.

"Yes, yes. We must talk of them, Userti. Also of the journey to the land of Goshen on which Ana starts with me to-morrow."

"To-morrow! Why this morning you told me it was fixed for three days hence."

"Did I, Sister--I mean Wife? If so, it was because I was not sure whether Ana, who is to be my chariot companion, would be back."

"A scribe your chariot companion! Surely it would be more fitting that your cousin Amenmeses----"

"To Set with Amenmeses!" he exclaimed. "You know well, Userti, that the man is hateful to me with his cunning yet empty talk."

"Indeed! I grieve to hear it, for when you hate you show it, and Amenmeses may be a bad enemy. Then if not our cousin Amenmeses who is not hateful to me, there is Saptah."

"I thank you; I will not travel in a cage with a jackal."

"Jackal! I do not love Saptah, but one of the royal blood of Egypt a jackal! Then there is Nehesi the Vizier, or the General of the escort

whose name I forget."

"Do you think, Userti, that I wish to talk about state economies with that old money-sack, or to listen to boastings of deeds he never did in war from a half-bred Nubian butcher?"

"I do not know, Husband. Yet of what will you talk with this Ana? Of poems, I suppose, and silliness. Or will it be perchance of Merapi, Moon of Israel, whom I gather both of you think so beautiful. Well, have your way. You tell me that I am not to accompany you upon this journey, I your new-made wife, and now I find that it is because you wish my place to be filled by a writer of tales whom you picked up the other day--your 'twin in Ra' forsooth! Fare you well, my Lord," and she rose from her seat, gathering up her robes with both hands.

Then Seti grew angry.

"Userti," he said, stamping upon the floor, "you should not use such words. You know well that I do not take you with me because there may be danger yonder among the Hebrews. Moreover, it is not Pharaoh's wish."

She turned and answered with cold courtesy:

"Then I crave your pardon and thank you for your kind thought for the safety of my person. I knew not this mission was so dangerous. Be careful, Seti, that the scribe Ana comes to no harm."

So saying she bowed and vanished through the curtains.

"Ana," said Seti, "tell me, for I never was quick at figures, how many minutes is it from now till the fourth hour to-morrow morning when I shall order my chariot to be ready? Also, do you know whether it is possible to travel from Goshen across the marshes and to return by Syria? Or, failing that, to travel across the desert to Thebes and sail down the Nile in the spring?"

"Oh! my Prince, my Prince," I said, "I pray you to dismiss me. Let me go anywhere out of the reach of her Highness's tongue."

"It is strange how alike we think upon every matter, Ana, even of Merapi and the tongues of royal ladies. Hearken to my command. You are not to go. If it is a question of going, there are others who will go first. Moreover, you cannot go, but must stay and bear your burdens as I bear mine. Remember the broken cup, Ana."

"I remember, my Prince, but sooner would I be scourged with rods than by such words as those to which I must listen."

Yet that very night, when I had left the Prince, I was destined to hear more pleasant words from this same changeful, or perchance politic, royal lady. She sent for me and I went, much afraid. I found her in a small chamber alone, save for one old lady of honour who sat the end of

the room and appeared to be deaf, which perhaps was why she was chosen. Userti bade me be seated before her very courteously, and spoke to me thus, whether because of some talk she had held with the Prince or not, I do not know.

"Scribe Ana, I ask your pardon if, being vexed and wearied, I said to you and of you to-day what I now wish I had left unsaid. I know well that you, being of the gentle blood of Egypt, will make no report of what you heard outside these walls."

"May my tongue be cut out first," I answered.

"It seems, Scribe Ana, that my lord the Prince has taken a great love of you. How or why this came about so suddenly, you being a man, I do not understand, but I am sure that as it is so, it must be because there is much in you to love, since never did I know the Prince to show deep regard for one who was not most honourable and worthy. Now things being so, it is plain that you will become the favourite of his Highness, a man who does not change his mind in such matters, and that he will tell you all his secret thoughts, perhaps some that he hides from the Councillors of State, or even from me. In short you will grow into a power in the land and perhaps one day be the greatest in it--after Pharaoh--although you may still seem to be but a private scribe.

"I do not pretend to you that I should have wished this to be so, who would rather that my husband had but one real councillor--myself. Yet

seeing that it is so, I bow my head, hoping that it may be decreed for the best. If ever any jealousy should overcome me in this matter and I should speak sharply to you, as I did to-day, I ask your pardon in advance for that which has not happened, as I have asked it for that which has happened. I pray of you, Scribe Ana, that you will do your best to influence the mind of the Prince for good, since he is easily led by any whom he loves. I pray you also being quick and thoughtful, as I see you are, that you will make a study of statecraft, and of the policies of our royal House, coming to me, if it be needful, for instruction therein, so that you may be able to guide the feet of the Prince aright, should he turn to you for counsel."

"All of this I will do, your Highness, if by any chance it lies in my power, though who am I that I should hope to make a path for the feet of kings? Moreover, I would add this, although he is so gentle-natured, I think that in the end the Prince is one who will always choose his own path."

"It may be so Ana. At the least I thank you. I pray you to be sure also that in me you will always have a friend and not an enemy, although at times the quickness of my nature, which has never been controlled, may lead you to think otherwise. Now I will say one more thing that shall be secret between us. I know that the Prince loves me as a friend and relative rather than as a wife, and that he would not have sought this marriage of himself, as is perhaps natural. I know, too, that other women will come into his life, though these may be fewer than in the

case of most kings, because he is more hard to please. Of such I cannot complain, as this is according to the customs of our country. I fear only one thing--namely that some woman, ceasing to be his toy, may take Seti's heart and make him altogether hers. In this matter, Scribe Ana, as in others I ask your help, since I would be queen of Egypt in all ways, not in name only."

"Your Highness, how can I say to the Prince--'So much shall you love this or that woman and no more?' Moreover, why do you fear that which has not and may never come about?"

"I do not know how you can say such a thing, Scribe, still I ask you to say it if you can. As to why I fear, it is because I seem to feel the near shadow of some woman lying cold upon me and building a wall of blackness between his Highness and myself."

"It is but a dream, Princess."

"Mayhap. I hope so. Yet I think otherwise. Oh! Ana, cannot you, who study the hearts of men and women, understand my case? I have married where I can never hope to be loved as other women are, I who am a wife, yet not a wife. I read your thought; it is--why then did you marry? Since I have told you so much I will tell you that also. First, it is because the Prince is different to other men and in his own fashion above them, yes, far above any with whom I could have wed as royal heiress of Egypt. Secondly, because being cut off from love, what

remains to me but ambition? At least I would be a great queen, as was Hatshepu in her day, and lift my country out of the many troubles in which it is sunk and write my name large upon the books of history, which I could only do by taking Pharaoh's heir to husband, as is my duty."

She brooded a while, then added, "Now I have shown you all my thought. Whether I have been wise to do so the gods know alone and time will tell me."

"Princess," I said, "I thank you for trusting me and I will help you if I may. Yet I am troubled. I, a humble man if of good blood, who a little while ago was but a scribe and a student, a dreamer who had known trouble also, have suddenly by chance, or some divine decree, been lifted high in the favour of the heir of Egypt, and it would seem have even won your trust. Now I wonder how I shall bear myself in this new place which in truth I never sought."

"I do not know, who find the present and its troubles enough to carry. But, doubtless, the decree of which you speak that set you there has also written down what will be the end of all. Meanwhile, I have a gift for you. Say, Scribe, have you ever handled any weapon besides a pen?"

"Yes, your Highness, as a lad I was skilled in sword play. Moreover, though I do not love war and bloodshed, some years ago I fought in the great battle between the Ninebow Barbarians, when Pharaoh called upon

the young men of Memphis to do their part. With my own hands I slew two in fair fight, though one nearly brought me to my end," and I pointed to a scar which showed red through my grey hair where a spear had bitten deep.

"It is well, or so I think, who love soldiers better than stainers of papyrus pith."

Then, going to a painted chest of reeds, she took from it a wonderful shirt of mail fashioned of bronze rings, and a short sword also of bronze, having a golden hilt of which the end was shaped to the likeness of the head of a lion, and with her own hands gave them to me, saying:

"These are spoils that my grandsire, the great Rameses, took in his youth from a prince of the Khitah, whom he smote with his own hands in Syria in that battle whereof your grandfather made the poem. Wear the shirt, which no spear will pierce, beneath your robe and gird the sword about you when you go down yonder among the Israelites, whom I do not trust. I have given a like coat to the Prince. Let it be your duty to see that it is upon his sacred person day and night. Let it be your duty also, if need arises, with this sword to defend him to the death. Farewell."

"May all the gods reject me from the Fields of the Blessed if I fail in this trust," I answered, and departed wondering, to seek sleep which, as it chanced, I was not to find for a while.

For as I went down the corridor, led by one of the ladies of the household, whom should I find waiting at the end of it but old Pambasa to inform me with many bows that the Prince needed my presence. I asked how that could be seeing he had dismissed me for the night. He replied that he did not know, but he was commanded to conduct me to the private chamber, the same room in which I had first seen his Highness. Thither I went and found him warming himself at the fire, for the night was cold. Looking up he bade Pambasa admit those who were waiting, then noting the shirt of mail and the sword I carried in my hand, said:

"You have been with the Princess, have you not, and she must have had much to say to you for your talk was long? Well, I think I can guess its purport who from a child have known her mind. She told you to watch me well, body and heart and all that comes from the heart--oh! and much else. Also she gave you that Syrian gear to wear among the Hebrews as she has given the like to me, being of a careful mind which foresees everything. Now, hearken, Ana; I grieve to keep you from your rest, who must be weary both with talk and travel. But old Bakenkhonsu, whom you know, waits without, and with him Ki the great magician, whom I think you have not seen. He is a man of wonderful lore and in some ways not altogether human. At least he does strange feats of magic, and at times both the past and the future seem to be open to his sight, though as we know neither the one nor the other, who can tell whether he reads them truly. Doubtless he has, or thinks he has, some message to me from the heavens, which I thought you might wish to hear."

"I wish it much, Prince, if I am worthy, and you will protect me from the anger of this magician whom I fear."

"Anger sometimes turns to trust, Ana. Did you not find it so just now in the case of her Highness, as I told you might very well happen? Hush! They come. Be seated and prepare your tablets to make record of what they say."

The curtains were drawn and through them came the aged Bakenkhonsu leaning upon his staff, and with him another man, Ki himself, clad in a white robe and having his head shaven, for he was an hereditary priest of Amon of Thebes and an initiate of Isis, Mother of Mysteries. Also his office was that of Kherheb, or chief magician of Egypt. At first sight there was nothing strange about this man. Indeed, he might well have been a middle-aged merchant by his looks; in body he was short and stout; in face fat and smiling. But in this jovial countenance were set two very strange eyes, grey-hued rather than black. While the rest of the face seemed to smile these eyes looked straight into nothingness as do those of a statue. Indeed they were like to the eyes or rather the eye-places of a stone statue, so deeply were they set into the head. For my part I can only say I thought them awful, and by their look judged that whatever Ki might be he was no cheat.

This strange pair bowed to the Prince and seated themselves at a sign from him, Bakenkhonsu upon a stool because he found it difficult to

rise, and Ki, who was younger, scribe fashion on the ground.

"What did I tell you, Bakenkhonsu?" said Ki in a full, rich voice, ending the words with a curious chuckle.

"You told me, Magician, that we should find the Prince in this chamber of which you described every detail to me as I see it now, although neither of us have entered it before. You said also that seated therein on the ground would be the scribe Ana, whom I know but you do not, having in his hands waxen tablets and a stylus and by him a coat of curious mail and a lion-hilted sword."

"That is strange," interrupted the Prince, "but forgive me, Bakenkhonsu sees these things. If you, O Ki, would tell us what is written upon Ana's tablets which neither of you can see, it would be stranger still, that is if anything is written."

Ki smiled and stared upwards at the ceiling. Presently he said:

"The scribe Ana uses a shorthand of his own that is not easy to decipher. Yet I see written on the tablets the price he obtained for some house in a city that is not named--it is so much. Also I see the sums he disbursed for himself, a servant, and the food of an ass at two inns where he stopped upon a journey. They are so much and so much. Also there is a list of papyrus rolls and the words, 'blue cloak,' and then an erasure."

"Is that right, Ana?" asked the Prince.

"Quite right," I answered with awe, "only the words 'blue cloak,' which it is true I wrote upon the tablet, have also been erased."

Ki chuckled and turned his eyes from the ceiling to my face.

"Would your Highness wish me to tell you anything of what is written upon the tablets of this scribe's memory as well as upon those of wax which he holds in his hand? They are easier to decipher than the others and I see on them many things of interest. For instance, secret words that seem to have been said to him by some Great One within an hour, matters of high policy, I think. For instance, a certain saying, I think of your Highness's, as to shivering upon the edge of water on a cold day, which when entered produced heat, and the answer thereto. For instance, words that were spoken in this palace when an alabaster cup was broke. By the way, Scribe, that was a very good place you chose in which to hide one half of the cup in the false bottom of a chest in your chamber, a chest that is fastened with a cord and sealed with a scarab of the time of the second Rameses. I think that the other half of the cup is somewhat nearer at hand," and turning, he stared at the wall where I could see nothing save slabs of alabaster.

Now I sat open-mouthed, for how could this man know these things, and the Prince laughed outright, saying:

"Ana, I begin to think you keep your counsel ill. At least I should think so, were it not that you have had no time to tell what the Princess yonder may have said to you, and can scarcely know the trick of the sliding panel in that wall which I have never shown to you."

Ki chuckled again and a smile grew on old Bakenkhonsu's broad and wrinkled face.

"O Prince," I began, "I swear to you that never has one word passed my lips of aught----"

"I know it, friend," broke in the Prince, "but it seems there are some who do not wait for words but can read the Book of Thought. Therefore it is not well to meet them too often, since all have thoughts that should be known only to them and God. Magician, what is your business with me? Speak on as though we were alone."

"This, Prince. You go upon a journey among the Hebrews, as all have heard. Now, Bakenkhonsu and I, also two seers of my College, seeing that we all love you and that your welfare is much to Egypt, have separately sought out the future as regards the issue of this journey. Although what we have learned differs in some matters, on others it is the same. Therefore we thought it our duty to tell you what we have learned."

"Say on, Kherheb."

"First, then, that your Highness's life will be in danger."

"Life is always in danger, Ki. Shall I lose it? If so, do not fear to tell me."

"We do not know, but we think not, because of the rest that is revealed to us. We learn that it is not your body only that will be in danger. Upon this journey you will see a woman whom you will come to love. This woman will, we think, bring you much sorrow and also much joy."

"Then perhaps the journey is worth making, Ki, since many travel far before they find aught they can love. Tell me, have I met this woman?"

"There we are troubled, Prince, for it would seem--unless we are deceived--that you have met her often and often; that you have known her for thousands of years, as you have known that man at your side for thousands of years."

Seti's face grew very interested.

"What do you mean, Magician?" he asked, eyeing him keenly. "How can I who am still young have known a woman and a man for thousands of years?"

Ki considered him with his strange eyes, and answered:

"You have many titles, Prince. Is not one of them 'Lord of Rebirths,' and if so, how did you get it and what does it mean?"

"It is. What it means I do not know, but it was given to me because of some dream that my mother had the night before I was born. Do you tell me what it means, since you seem to know so much."

"I cannot, Prince. The secret is not one that has been shown to me. Yet there was an aged man, a magician like myself from whom I learned much in my youth--Bakenkhonsu knew him well--who made a study of this matter. He told me he was sure, because it had been revealed to him, that men do not live once only and then depart hence for ever. He said that they live many times and in many shapes, though not always on this world, and that between each life there is a wall of darkness."

"If so, of what use are lives which we do not remember after death has shut the door of each of them?"

"The doors may open again at last, Prince, and show us all the chambers through which our feet have wandered from the beginning."

"Our religion teaches us, Ki, that after death we live eternally elsewhere in our own bodies, which we find again on the day of resurrection. Now eternity, having no end, can have no beginning; it is a circle. Therefore if the one be true, namely that we live on, it would seem that the other must be true, namely that we have always lived."

"That is well reasoned, Prince. In the early days, before the priests froze the thought of man into blocks of stone and built of them shrines to a thousand gods, many held that this reasoning was true, as then they held that there was but one god."

"As do these Israelites whom I go to visit. What say you of their god, Ki?"

"That he is the same as our gods, Prince. To men's eyes God has many faces, and each swears that the one he sees is the only true god. Yet they are wrong, for all are true."

"Or perchance false, Ki, unless even falsehood is a part of truth. Well, you have told me of two dangers, one to my body and one to my heart. Has any other been revealed to your wisdom?"

"Yes, Prince. The third is that this journey may in the end cost you your throne."

"If I die certainly it will cost me my throne."

"No, Prince, if you live."

"Even so, Ki, I think that I could endure life seated more humbly than on a throne, though whether her Highness could endure it is another

matter. Then you say that if I go upon this journey another will be Pharaoh in my place."

"We do not say that, Prince. It is true that our arts have shown us another filling your place in a time of wizardry and wonders and of the death of thousands. Yet when we look again we see not that other but you once more filling your own place."

Here I, Ana, bethought me of my vision in Pharaoh's hall.

"The matter is even worse than I thought, Ki, since having once left the crown behind me, I think that I should have no wish to wear it any more," said Seti. "Who shows you all these things, and how?"

"Our Kas, which are our secret selves, show them to us, Prince, and in many ways. Sometimes it is by dreams or visions, sometimes by pictures on water, sometimes by writings in the desert sand. In all these fashions, and by others, our Kas, drawing from the infinite well of wisdom that is hidden in the being of every man, give us glimpses of the truth, as they give us who are instructed power to work marvels."

"Of the truth. Then these things you tell me are true?"

"We believe so, Prince."

"Then being true must happen. So what is the use of your warning me

against what must happen? There cannot be two truths. What would you have me do? Not go upon this journey? Why have you told me that I must not go, since if I did not go the truth would become a lie, which it cannot? You say it is fated that I should go and because I go such and such things will come about. And yet you tell me not to go, for that is what you mean. Oh! Kherheb Ki and Bakenkhonsu, doubtless you are great magicians and strong in wisdom, but there are greater than you who rule the world, and there is a wisdom to which yours is but as a drop of water to the Nile. I thank you for your warnings, but to-morrow I go down to the land of Goshen to fulfil the commands of Pharaoh. If I come back again we will talk more of these matters here upon the earth. If I do not come back, perchance we will talk of them elsewhere. Farewell."