

## CHAPTER VII

### THE AMBUSH

Eight full days went by before we left the land of Goshen. The story that the Israelites had to tell was long, sad also. Moreover, they gave evidence as to many cruel things that they had suffered, and when this was finished the testimony of the guards and others must be called, all of which it was necessary to write down. Lastly, the Prince seemed to be in no hurry to be gone, as he said because he hoped that the two prophets would return from the wilderness, which they never did. During all this time Seti saw no more of Merapi, nor indeed did he speak of her, even when the Count Amenmeses jested him as to his chariot companion and asked him if he had driven again in the desert by moonlight.

I, however, saw her once. When I was wandering in the town one day towards sunset, I met her walking with her uncle Jabez upon one side and her lover, Laban, on the other, like a prisoner between two guards. I thought she looked unhappy, but her foot seemed to be well again; at least she moved without limping.

I stopped to salute her, but Laban scowled and hurried her away. Jabez stayed behind and fell into talk with me. He told me that she was recovered of her hurt, but that there had been trouble between her and Laban because of all that happened on that evening when she came by it,

ending in his encounter with the captain.

"This young man seems to be of a jealous nature," I said, "one who will make a harsh husband for any woman."

"Yes, learned scribe, jealousy has been his curse from youth as it is with so many of our people, and I thank God that I am not the woman whom he is to marry."

"Why, then, do you suffer her to marry him, Jabez?"

"Because her father affianced her to this lion's whelp when she was scarce more than a child, and among us that is a bond hard to break. For my own part," he added, dropping his voice, and glancing round with shifting eyes, "I should like to see my niece in some different place to that of the wife of Laban. With her great beauty and wit, she might become anything--anything if she had opportunity. But under our laws, even if Laban died, as might happen to so violent a man, she could wed no one who is not a Hebrew."

"I thought she told us that her mother was a Syrian."

"That is so, Scribe Ana. She was a beautiful captive of war whom Nathan came to love and made his wife, and the daughter takes after her. Still she is Hebrew and of the Hebrew faith and congregation. Had it not been so, she might have shone like a star, nay, like the very moon after

which she is named, perhaps in the court of Pharaoh himself."

"As the great queen Taia did, she who changed the religion of Egypt to the worship of one god in a bygone generation," I suggested.

"I have heard of her, Scribe Ana. She was a wondrous woman, beautiful too by her statues. Would that you Egyptians could find such another to turn your hearts to a purer faith and to soften them towards us poor aliens. When does his Highness leave the land of Goshen?"

"At sunrise on the third day from this."

"Provision will be needed for the journey, much provision for so large a train. I deal in sheep and other foodstuffs, Scribe Ana."

"I will mention the matter to his Highness and to the Vizier, Jabez."

"I thank you, Scribe, and will in waiting at the camp to-morrow morning. See, Laban returns with Merapi. One word, let his Highness beware of Laban. He is very revengeful and has not forgotten that sword-blow on the head."

"Let Laban be careful," I answered. "Had it not been for his Highness the soldiers would have killed him the other night because he dared to offer affront to the royal blood. A second time he will not escape. Moreover, Pharaoh would avenge aught he did upon the people of Israel."

"I understand. It would be sad if Laban were killed, very sad. But the people of Israel have One who can protect them even against Pharaoh and all his hosts. Farewell, learned Scribe. If ever I come to Tanis, with your leave we will talk more together."

That night I told the Prince all that had passed. He listened, and said:

"I grieve for the lady Merapi, for hers is like to be a hard fate. Yet," he added laughing, "perhaps it is as well for you, friend, that you should see no more of her who is sure to bring trouble wherever she goes. That woman has a face which haunts the mind, as the Ka haunts the tomb, and for my part I do not wish to look upon it again."

"I am glad to hear it, Prince, and for my part, I have done with women, however sweet. I will tell this Jabez that the provisions for the journey will be bought elsewhere."

"Nay, buy them from him, and if Nehesi grumbles at the price, pay it on my account. The way to a Hebrew's heart is through his treasure bags. If Jabez is well treated, it may make him kinder to his niece, of whom I shall always have a pleasant memory, for which I am grateful among this sour folk who hate us, and with reason."

So the sheep and all the foodstuffs for the journey were bought from Jabez at his own price, for which he thanked me much, and on the third

day we started. At the last moment the Prince, whose mood seemed to be perverse that evening, refused to travel with the host upon the morrow because of the noise and dust. In vain did the Count Amenmeses reason with him, and Nehesi and the great officers implore him almost on their knees, saying that they must answer for his safety to Pharaoh and the Princess Userti. He bade them begone, replying that he would join them at their camp on the following night. I also prayed him to listen, but he told me sharply that what he said he had said, and that he and I would journey in his chariot alone, with two armed runners and no more, adding that if I thought there was danger I could go forward with the troops. Then I bit my lip and was silent, whereon, seeing that he had hurt me, he turned and craved my pardon humbly enough as his kind heart taught him to do.

"I can bear no more of Amenmeses and those officers," he said, "and I love to be in the desert alone. Last time we journeyed there we met with adventures that were pleasant, Ana, and at Tanis doubtless I shall find others that are not pleasant. Admit that Hebrew priest who is waiting to instruct me in the mysteries of his faith which I desire to understand."

So I bowed and left him to make report that I had failed to shake his will. Taking the risk of his wrath, however, I did this--for had I not sworn to the Princess that I would protect him? In place of the runners I chose two of the best and bravest soldiers to play their part. Moreover, I instructed that captain who smote down Laban to hide away with a score of picked men and enough chariots to carry them, and to

follow after the Prince, keeping just out of sight.

So on the morrow the troops, nobles, and officers went on at daybreak, together with the baggage carriers; nor did we follow them till many hours had gone by. Some of this time the Prince spent in driving about the town, taking note of the condition of the people. These, as I saw, looked on us sullenly enough, more so than before, I thought, perhaps because we were unguarded. Indeed, turning round I caught sight of a man shaking his fist and of an old hag spitting after us, and wished that we were out of the land of Goshen. But when I reported it to the Prince he only laughed and took no heed.

"All can see that they hate us Egyptians," he said. "Well, let it be our task to try to turn their hate to love."

"That you will never do, Prince, it is too deep-rooted in their hearts; for generations they have drunk it in with their mother's milk. Moreover, this is a war of the gods of Egypt and of Israel, and men must go where their gods drive them."

"Do you think so, Ana? Then are men nothing but dust blown by the winds of heaven, blown from the darkness that is before the dawn to be gathered at last and for ever into the darkness of the grave of night?"

He brooded a while, then went on.

"Yet if I were Pharaoh I would let these people go, for without doubt their god has much power and I tell you that I fear them."

"Why will he not let them go?" I asked. "They are a weakness, not a strength to Egypt, as was shown at the time of the invasion of the Barbarians with whom they sided. Moreover, the value of this rich land of theirs, which they cannot take with them, is greater than that of all their labour."

"I do not know, friend. The matter is one upon which my father keeps his own counsel, even from the Princess Userti. Perhaps it is because he will not change the policy of his father, Rameses; perhaps because he is stiff-necked to those who cross his will. Or it may be that he is held in this path by a madness sent of some god to bring loss and shame on Egypt."

"Then, Prince, all the priests and nobles are mad also, from Count Amenmeses down."

"Where Pharaoh leads priests and nobles follow. The question is, who leads Pharaoh? Here is the temple of these Hebrews; let us enter."

So we descended from the chariot, where, for my part, I would have remained, and walked through the gateway in the surrounding mud wall into the outer court of the temple, which on this the holy seventh day of the Hebrews was full of praying women, who feigned not to see us yet

watched us out of the corners of their eyes. Passing through them we came to a doorway, by which we entered another court that was roofed over. Here were many men who murmured as we appeared. They were engaged in listening to a preacher in a white robe, who wore a strange shaped cap and some ornaments on his breast. I knew the man; he was the priest Kohath who had instructed the Prince in so much of the mysteries of the Hebrew faith as he chose to reveal. On seeing us he ceased suddenly in his discourse, uttered some hasty blessing and advanced to greet us.

I waited behind the Prince, thinking it well to watch his back among all those fierce men, and did not hear what the priest said to him, as he whispered in that holy place. Kohath led him forward, to free him from the throng, I thought, till they came to the head of the little temple that was marked by some steps, above which hung a thick and heavy curtain. The Prince, walking on, did not see the lowest of these steps in the gloom, which was deep. His foot caught on it; he fell forward, and to save himself grasped at the curtain where the two halves of it met, and dragged it open, revealing a chamber plain and small beyond, in which was an altar. That was all I had time to see, for next instant a roar of rage rent the air and knives flashed in the gloom.

"The Egyptian defiles the tabernacle!" shouted one. "Drag him out and kill him!" screamed another.

"Friends," said Seti, turning as they surged towards him, "if I have done aught wrong it was by chance----"



He could add no more, seeing that they were on him, or rather on me who had leapt in front of him. Already they had grasped my robes and my hand was on my sword-hilt, when the priest Kohath cried out:

"Men of Israel, are you mad? Would you bring Pharaoh's vengeance on us?"

They halted a little and their spokesman shouted:

"We defy Pharaoh! Our God will protect us from Pharaoh. Drag him forth and kill him beyond the wall!"

Again they began to move, when a man, in whom I recognized Jabez, the uncle of Merapi, called aloud:

"Cease! If this Prince of Egypt has done insult to Jahveh by will and not by chance, it is certain that he will avenge himself upon him. Shall men take the judgment of God into their own hands? Stand back and wait awhile. If Jahveh is affronted, the Egyptian will fall dead. If he does not fall dead, let him pass hence unharmed, for such is Jahveh's will. Stand back, I say, while I count threescore."

They withdrew a space and slowly Jabez began to count.

Although at that time I knew nothing of the power of the god of Israel, I will say that I was filled with fear as one by one he counted, pausing

at each ten. The scene was very strange. There by the steps stood the Prince against the background of the curtain, his arms folded and a little smile of wonder mixed with contempt upon his face, but not a sign of fear. On one side of him was I, who knew well that I should share his fate whatever it might be, and indeed desired no other; and on the other the priest Kohath, whose hands shook and whose eyes started from his head. In front of us old Jabez counted, watching the fierce-faced congregation that in a dead silence waited for the issue. The count went on. Thirty. Forty. Fifty--oh! it seemed an age.

At length sixty fell from his lips. He waited a while and all watched the Prince, not doubting but that he would fall dead. But instead he turned to Kohath and asked quietly if this ordeal was now finished, as he desired to make an offering to the temple, which he had been invited to visit, and begone.

"Our God has given his answer," said Jabez. "Accept it, men of Israel. What this Prince did he did by chance, not of design."

They turned and went without a word, and after I had laid the offering, no mean one, in the appointed place, we followed them.

"It would seem that yours is no gentle god," said the Prince to Kohath, when at length we were outside the temple.

"At least he is just, your Highness. Had it been otherwise, you who had

violated his sanctuary, although by chance, would ere now be dead."

"Then you hold, Priest, that Jahveh has power to slay us when he is angry?"

"Without a doubt, your Highness--as, if our Prophets speak truth, I think that Egypt will learn ere all be done," he added grimly.

Seti looked at him and answered:

"It may be so, but all gods, or their priests, claim the power to torment and slay those who worship other gods. It is not only women who are jealous, Kohath, or so it seems. Yet I think that you do your god injustice, seeing that even if this strength is his, he proved more merciful than his worshippers who knew well that I only grasped the veil to save myself from falling. If ever I visit your temple again it shall be in the company of those who can match might against might, whether of the spirit or the sword. Farewell."

So we reached the chariot, near to which stood Jabez, he who had saved us.

"Prince," he whispered, glancing at the crowd who lingered not far away, silent and glowering, "I pray you leave this land swiftly for here your life is not safe. I know it was by chance, but you have defiled the sanctuary and seen that upon which eyes may not look save those of the

highest priests, an offence no Israelite can forgive."

"And you, or your people, Jabez, would have defiled this sanctuary of my life, spilling my heart's blood and not by chance. Surely you are a strange folk who seek to make an enemy of one who has tried to be your friend."

"I do not seek it," exclaimed Jabez. "I would that we might have Pharaoh's mouth and ear who soon will himself be Pharaoh upon our side. O Prince of Egypt, be not wroth with all the children of Israel because their wrongs have made some few of them stubborn and hard-hearted. Begone now, and of your goodness remember my words."

"I will remember," said Seti, signing to the charioteer to drive on.

Yet still the Prince lingered in the town, saying that he feared nothing and would learn all he could of this people and their ways that he might report the better of them to Pharaoh. For my part I believed that there was one face which he wished to see again before he left, but of this I thought it wise to say nothing.

At length about midday we did depart, and drove eastwards on the track of Amenmeses and our company. All the afternoon we drove thus, preceded by the two soldiers disguised as runners and followed, as a distant cloud of dust told me, by the captain and his chariots, whom I had secretly commanded to keep us in sight.

Towards evening we came to the pass in the story hills which bounded the land of Goshen. Here Seti descended from the chariot, and we climbed, accompanied by the two soldiers whom I signed to follow us, to the crest of one of these hills that was strewn with huge boulders and lined with ridges of sandstone, between which gullies had been cut by the winds of thousands of years.

Leaning against one of these ridges we looked back upon a wondrous sight. Far away across the fertile plain appeared the town that we had left, and behind it the sun sank. It would seem as though some storm had broken there, although the firmament above us was clear and blue. At least in front of the town two huge pillars of cloud stretched from earth to heaven like the columns of some mighty gateway. One of these pillars was as though it were made of black marble, and the other like to molten gold. Between them ran a road of light ending in a glory, and in the midst of the glory the round ball of Ra, the Sun, burned like the eye of God. The spectacle was as awesome as it was splendid.

"Have you ever seen such a sky in Egypt, Prince?" I asked.

"Never," he answered, and although he spoke low, in that great stillness his voice sounded loud to me.

For a while longer we watched, till suddenly the sun sank, and only the glory about it and above remained, which took shapes like to the palaces

and temples of a city in the heavens, a far city that no mortal could reach except in dreams.

"I know not why, Ana," said Seti, "but for the first time since I was a man I feel afraid. It seems to me that there are omens in the sky and I cannot read them. Would that Ki were here to tell us what is signified by the pillar of blackness to the right and the pillar of fire to the left, and what god has his home in the city of glory behind, and how man's feet may walk along the shining road which leads to its pylon gates. I tell you that I am afraid; it is as though Death were very near to me and all his wonders open to my mortal sight."

"I too am afraid," I whispered. "Look! The pillars move. That of fire goes before; that of black cloud follows after, and between them I seem to see a countless multitude marching in unending companies. See how the light glitters on their spears! Surely the god of the Hebrews is afoot."

"He, or some other god, or no god at all, who knows? Come, Ana, let us be going if we would reach that camp ere dark."

So we descended from the ridge, and re-entering the chariot, drove on towards the neck of the pass. Now this neck was very narrow, not more than four paces wide for a certain distance, and, on either side of the roadway were tumbled sandstone boulders, between which grew desert plants, and gullies that had been cut by storm-water, while beyond these rose the sides of the mountain. Here the horses went at a walk towards a

turn in the path, at which point the land began to fall again.

When we were about half a spear's throw from this turn of a sudden I heard a sound and, glancing to the right, perceived a woman leaping down the hillside towards us. The charioteer saw also and halted the horses, and the two runner guards turned and drew their swords. In less than half a minute the woman had reached us, coming out of the shadow so that the light fell upon her face.

"Merapi!" exclaimed the Prince and I, speaking as though with one breath.

Merapi it was indeed, but in evil case. Her long hair had broken loose and fell about her, the cloak she wore was torn, and there were blood and foam upon her lips. She stood gasping, since speak she could not for breathlessness, supporting herself with one hand upon the side of the chariot and with the other pointing to the bend in the road. At last a word came, one only. It was:

"Murder!"

"She means that she is going to be murdered," said the Prince to me.

"No," she panted, "you--you! The Hebrews. Go back!"

"Turn the horses!" I cried to the charioteer.

He began to obey helped by the two guards, but because of the narrowness of the road and the steepness of the banks this was not easy. Indeed they were but half round in such fashion that they blocked the pathway from side to side, when a wild yell of 'Jahveh' broke upon our ears, and from round the bend, a few paces away, rushed a horde of fierce, hook-nosed men, brandishing knives and swords. Scarcely was there time for us to leap behind the shelter of the chariot and make ready, when they were on us.

"Hearken," I said to the charioteer as they came, "run as you never ran before, and bring up the guard behind!"

He sprang away like an arrow.

"Get back, Lady," cried Seti. "This is no woman's work, and see here comes Laban to seek you," and he pointed with his sword at the leader of the murderers.

She obeyed, staggering a few paces to a stone at the roadside, behind which she crouched. Afterwards she told me that she had no strength to go further, and indeed no will, since if we were killed, it were better that she who had warned us should be killed also.

Now they had reached us, the whole flood of them, thirty or forty men. The first who came stabbed the frightened horses, and down they went



against the bank, struggling. On the chariot leapt the Hebrews, seeking to come at us, and we met them as best we might, tearing off our cloaks and throwing them over our left arms to serve as shields.

Oh! what a fight was that. In the open, or had we not been prepared, we must have been slain at once, but, as it was, the place and the barrier of the chariot gave us some advantage. So narrow was the roadway, the walls of which were here too steep to climb, that not more than four of the Hebrews could strike at us at once, which four must first surmount the chariot or the still living horses.

But we also were four, and thanks to Userti, two of us were clad in mail beneath our robes--four strong men fighting for their lives. Against us came four of the Hebrews. One leapt from the chariot straight at Seti, who received him upon the point of his iron sword, whereof I heard the hilt ring against his breast-bone, that same famous iron sword which to-day lies buried with him in his grave.

Down he came dead, throwing the Prince to the ground by the weight of his body. The Hebrew who attacked me caught his foot on the chariot pole and fell forward, so I killed him easily with a blow upon the head, which gave me time to drag the Prince to his feet again before another followed. The two guards also, sturdy fighters both of them, killed or mortally wounded their men. But others were pressing behind so thick and fast that I could keep no count of all that happened afterwards.

Presently I saw one of the guards fall, slain by Laban. A stab on the breast sent me reeling backwards; had it not been for that mail I was sped. The other guard killed him who would have killed me, and then himself was killed by two who came on him at once.

Now only the Prince and I were left, fighting back to back. He closed with one man, a very great fellow, and wounded him on the hand, so that he dropped his sword. This man gripped him round the middle and they rolled together on the ground. Laban appeared and stabbed the Prince in the back, but the curved knife he was using snapped on the Syrian mail. I struck at Laban and wounded him on the head, dazing him so that he staggered back and seemed to fall over the chariot. Then others rushed at me, and but for Userti's armour three times at least I must have died. Fighting madly, I staggered against the rock, and whilst waiting for a new onset, saw that Seti, hurt by Laban's thrust, was now beneath the great Hebrew who had him by the throat, and was choking the life out of him.

I saw something else also--a woman holding a sword with both hands and stabbing downward, after which the grip of the Hebrew loosened from Seti's throat.

"Traitor!" cried one, and struck at her, so that she reeled back hurt. Then when all seemed finished, and beneath the rain of blows my senses were failing, I heard the thunder of horses' hoofs and the shout of "Egypt! Egypt!" from the throats of soldiers. The flash of bronze

caught my dazed eyes, and with the roar of battle in my ears I seemed to fall asleep just as the light of day departed.