

## CHAPTER VIII

### SETI COUNSELS PHARAOH

Dream upon dream. Dreams of voices, dreams of faces, dreams of sunlight and of moonlight and of myself being borne forward, always forward; dreams of shouting crowds, and, above all, dreams of Merapi's eyes looking down on me like two watching stars from heaven. Then at last the awakening, and with it throbs of pain and qualms of sickness.

At first I thought that I was dead and lying in a tomb. Then by degrees I saw that I was in no tomb but in a darkened room that was familiar to me, my own room in Seti's palace at Tanis. It must be so, for there, near to the bed on which I lay, was my own chest filled with the manuscripts that I had brought from Memphis. I tried to lift my left hand, but could not, and looking down saw that the arm was bandaged like to that of a mummy, which made me think again that I must be dead, if the dead could suffer so much pain. I closed my eyes and thought or slept a while.

As I lay thus I heard voices. One of them seemed to be that of a physician, who said, "Yes, he will live and ere long recover. The blow upon the head which has made him senseless for so many days was the worst of his wounds, but the bone was but bruised, not shattered or driven in upon the brain. The flesh cuts on his arms are healing well, and the mail he wore protected his vitals from being pierced."

"I am glad, physician," answered a voice that I knew to be that of Userti, "since without a doubt, had it not been for Ana, his Highness would have perished. It is strange that one whom I thought to be nothing but a dreaming scribe should have shown himself so brave a warrior. The Prince says that this Ana killed three of those dogs with his own hands, and wounded others."

"It was well done, your Highness," answered the physician, "but still better was his forethought in providing a rear-guard and in despatching the charioteer to call it up. It seems to have been the Hebrew lady who really saved the life of his Highness, when, forgetting her sex, she stabbed the murderer who had him by the throat."

"That is the Prince's tale, or so I understand," she answered coldly.

"Yet it seems strange that a weak and worn-out girl could have pierced a giant through from back to breast."

"At least she warned him of the ambush, your Highness."

"So they say. Perhaps Ana here will soon tell us the truth about these matters. Tend him well, physician, and you shall not lack for your reward."

Then they went away, still talking, and I lay quiet, filled with thankfulness and wonder, for now everything came back to me.

A while later, as I lay with my eyes still shut, for even that low light seemed to hurt them, I became aware of a woman's soft step stealing round my bed and of a fragrance such as comes from a woman's robes and hair. I looked and saw Merapi's star-like eyes gazing down on me just as I had seen them in my dreams.

"Greeting, Moon of Israel," I said. "Of a truth we meet again in strange case."

"Oh!" she whispered, "are you awake at last? I thank God, Scribe Ana, who for three days thought that you must die."

"As, had it not been for you, Lady, surely I should have done--I and another. Now it seems that all three of us will live."

"Would that but two lived, the Prince and you, Ana. Would that I had died," she answered, sighing heavily.

"Why?"

"Cannot you guess? Because I am outcast who has betrayed my people. Because their blood flows between me and them. For I killed that man, and he was my own kinsman, for the sake of an Egyptian--I mean, Egyptians. Therefore the curse of Jahveh is on me, and as my kinsman died doubtless I shall die in a day to come, and afterwards--what?"

"Afterwards peace and great reward, if there be justice in earth or heaven, O most noble among women."

"Would that I could think so! Hush, I hear steps. Drink this; I am the chief of your nurses, Scribe Ana, an honourable post, since to-day all Egypt loves and praises you."

"Surely it is you, lady Merapi, whom all Egypt should love and praise," I answered.

Then the Prince Seti entered. I strove to salute him by lifting my less injured arm, but he caught my hand and pressed it tenderly.

"Hail to you, beloved of Menthu, god of war," he said, with his pleasant laugh. "I thought I had hired a scribe, and lo! in this scribe I find a soldier who might be an army's boast."

At this moment he caught sight of Merapi, who had moved back into the shadow.

"Hail to you also, Moon of Israel," he said bowing. "If I name Ana here a warrior of the best, what name can both of us find for you to whom we owe our lives? Nay, look not down, but answer."

"Prince of Egypt," she replied confusedly, "I did but little. The plot

came to my ears through Jabez my uncle, and I fled away and, knowing the short paths from childhood, was just in time. Had I stayed to think perchance I should not have dared."

"And what of the rest, Lady? What of the Hebrew who was choking me and of a certain sword thrust that loosed his hands for ever?"

"Of that, your Highness, I can recall nothing, or very little," then, doubtless remembering what she had just said to me, she made obeisance and passed from the chamber.

"She can tell falsehoods as sweetly as she does all else," said Seti, when he had watched her go. "Oh! what a woman have we here, Ana. Perfect in beauty, perfect in courage, perfect in mind. Where are her faults, I wonder? Let it be your part to search them out, since I find none."

"Ask them of Ki, O Prince. He is a very great magician, so great that perhaps his art may even avail to discover what a woman seeks to hide. Also you may remember that he gave you certain warnings before we journeyed to Goshen."

"Yes--he told me that my life would be in danger, as certainly it was. There he was right. He told me also that I should see a woman whom I should come to love. There he was wrong. I have seen no such woman. Oh! I know well what is passing in your mind. Because I hold the lady Merapi to be beautiful and brave, you think that I love her. But it is not so.

I love no woman, except, of course, her Highness. Ana, you judge me by yourself."

"Ki said 'come to love,' Prince. There is yet time."

"Not so, Ana. If one loves, one loves at once. Soon I shall be old and she will be fat and ugly, and how can one love then? Get well quickly, Ana, for I wish you to help me with my report to Pharaoh. I shall tell him that I think these Israelites are much oppressed and that he should make them amends and let them go."

"What will Pharaoh say to that after they have just tried to kill his heir?"

"I think Pharaoh will be angry, and so will the people of Egypt, who do not reason well. He will not see that, believing what they do, Laban and his band were right to try to kill me who, however unwittingly, desecrated the sanctuary of their god. Had they done otherwise they would have been no good Hebrews, and for my part I cannot bear them malice. Yet all Egypt is afire about this business and cries out that the Israelites should be destroyed."

"It seems to me, Prince, that whatever may be the case with Ki's second prophecy, his third is in the way of fulfilment--namely that this journey to Goshen may cause you to risk your throne."

He shrugged his shoulders and answered:

"Not even for that, Ana, will I say to Pharaoh what is not in my mind. But let that matter be till you are stronger."

"What chanced at the end of the fight, Prince, and how came I here?"

"The guard killed most of the Hebrews who remained alive. Some few fled and escaped in the darkness, among them Laban their leader, although you had wounded him, and six were taken alive. They await their trial. I was but little hurt and you, whom we thought dead, were but senseless, and senseless or wandering you have remained till this hour. We carried you in a litter, and here you have been these three days."

"And the lady Merapi?"

"We set her in a chariot and brought her to the city, since had we left her she would certainly have been murdered by her people. When Pharaoh heard what she had done, as I did not think it well that she should dwell here, he gave her the small house in this garden that she might be guarded, and with it slave women to attend upon her. So there she dwells, having the freedom of the palace, and all the while has filled the office of your nurse."

At this moment I grew faint and shut my eyes. When I opened them again, the Prince had gone. Six more days went by before I was allowed to leave

my bed, and during this time I saw much of Merapi. She was very sad and lived in fear of being killed by the Hebrews. Also she was troubled in her heart because she thought she had betrayed her faith and people.

"At least you are rid of Laban," I said.

"Never shall I be rid of him while we both live," she answered. "I belong to him and he will not loose my bond, because his heart is set on me."

"And is your heart set on him?" I asked.

Her beautiful eyes filled with tears.

"A woman may not have a heart. Oh! Ana, I am unhappy," she answered, and went away.

Also I saw others. The Princess came to visit me. She thanked me much because I had fulfilled my promise to her and guarded the Prince. Moreover she brought me a gift of gold from Pharaoh, and other gifts of fine raiment from herself. She questioned me closely about Merapi, of whom I could see she was already jealous, and was glad when she learned that she was affianced to a Hebrew. Old Bakenkhonsu came too, and asked me many things about the Prince, the Hebrews and Merapi, especially Merapi, of whose deeds, he said, all Egypt was talking, questions that I answered as best I could.



"Here we have that woman of whom Ki told us," he said, "she who shall bring so much joy and so much sorrow to the Prince of Egypt."

"Why so?" I asked. "He has not taken her into his house, nor do I think that he means to do so."

"Yet he will, Ana, whether he means it or not. For his sake she betrayed her people, which among the Israelites is a deadly crime. Twice she saved his life, once by warning him of the ambush, and again by stabbing with her own hands one of her kinsmen who was murdering him. Is it not so? Tell me; you were there."

"It is so, but what then?"

"This: that whatever she may say, she loves him; unless indeed, it is you whom she loves," and he looked at me shrewdly.

"When a woman has a prince, and such a prince to her hand, would she trouble herself to set snares to catch a scribe?" I asked, with some bitterness.

"Oho!" he said, with one of his great laughs, "so things stand thus, do they? Well, I thought it, but, friend Ana, be warned in time. Do not try to conjure down the Moon to be your household lamp lest she should set, and the Sun, her lord, should grow wroth and burn you up. Well, she

loves him, and therefore soon or late she will make him love her, being what she is."

"How, Bakenkhonsu?"

"With most men, Ana, it would be simple. A sigh, some half-hidden tears at the right moment, and the thing is done, as I have known it done a thousand times. But this prince being what he is, it may be otherwise. She may show him that her name is gone from him; that because of him she is hated by her people, and rejected by her god, and thus stir his pity, which is Love's own sister. Or mayhap, being also, as I am told, wise, she will give him counsel as to all these matters of the Israelites, and thus creep into his heart under the guise of friendship, and then her sweetness and her beauty will do the rest in Nature's way. At least by this road or by that, upstream or downstream, thither she will come."

"If so, what of it? It is the custom of the kings of Egypt to have more wives than one."

"This, Ana; Seti, I think, is a man who in truth will have but one, and that one will be this Hebrew. Yes, a Hebrew woman will rule Egypt, and turn him to the worship of her god, for never will she worship ours. Indeed, when they see that she is lost to them, her people will use her thus. Or perchance her god himself will use her to fulfil his purpose, as already he may have used her."

"And afterwards, Bakenkhonsu?"

"Afterwards--who knows? I am not a magician, at least not one of any account, ask it of Ki. But I am very, very old and I have watched the world, and I tell you that these things will happen, unless----" and he paused.

"Unless what?"

He dropped his voice.

"Unless Userti is bolder than I think, and kills her first or, better still, procures some Hebrew to kill her--say, that cast-off lover of hers. If you would be a friend to Pharaoh and to Egypt, you might whisper it in her ear, Ana."

"Never!" I answered angrily.

"I did not think you would, Ana, who also struggle in this net of moonbeams that is stronger and more real than any twisted out of palm or flax. Well, nor will I, who in my age love to watch such human sport and, being so near to them, fear to thwart the schemes of gods. Let this scroll unroll itself as it will, and when it is open, read it, Ana, and remember what I said to you this day. It will be a pretty tale, written at the end with blood for ink. Oho! O-ho-ho!" and, laughing, he hobbled from the room, leaving me frightened.

Moreover the Prince visited me every day, and even before I left my bed began to dictate to me his report to Pharaoh, since he would employ no other scribe. The substance of it was what he had foreshadowed, namely that the people of Israel, having suffered much for generations at the hands of the Egyptians, should now be allowed to depart as their prophets demanded, and go whither they would unharmed. Of the attack upon us in the pass he made light, saying it was the evil work of a few zealots wrought on by fancied insult to their god, a deed for which the whole people should not be called upon to suffer. The last words of the report were:

"Remember, O Pharaoh, I pray thee, that Amon, god of the Egyptians, and Jahveh, the god of the Israelites, cannot rule together in the same land. If both abide in Egypt there will be a war of the gods wherein mortals may be ground to dust. Therefore, I pray thee, let Israel go."

After I had risen and was recovered, I copied out this report in my fairest writing, refusing to tell any of its purport, although all asked, among them the Vizier Nehesi, who offered me a bribe to disclose its secret. This came to the ears of Seti, I know not how, and he was much pleased with me about the matter, saying he rejoiced to find that there was one scribe in Egypt who could not be bought. Userti also questioned me, and when I refused to answer, strange to say, was not angry, because, she declared, I only did my duty.

At last the roll was finished and sealed, and the Prince with his own hand, but without speaking, laid it on the knees of Pharaoh at a public Court, for this he would trust no one else to do. Amenmeses also brought up his report, as did Nehesi the Vizier, and the Captain of the guard which saved us from death. Eight days later the Prince was summoned to a great Council of State, as were all others of the royal House, together with the high officers. I too received a summons, as one who had been concerned in these matters.

The Prince, accompanied by the Princess, drove to the palace in Pharaoh's golden chariot, drawn by two milk-white horses of the blood of those famous steeds that had saved the life of the great Rameses in the Syrian war. All down the streets, that were filled with thousands of the people, they were received with shouts of welcome.

"See," said the old councillor Bakenkhonsu, who was my companion in a second chariot, "Egypt is proud and glad. It thought that its Prince was but a dreamer of dreams. But now it has heard the tale of the ambush in the pass and learned that he is a man of war, a warrior who can fight with the best. Therefore it loves him and rejoices."

"Then, by the same rule, Bakenkhonsu, a butcher should be more great than the wisest of scribes."

"So he is, Ana, especially if the butcher be one of men. The writer creates, but the slayer kills, and in a world ruled of death he who

kills has more honour than he who creates. Hearken, now they are shouting out your name. Is that because you are the author of certain writings? I tell you, No. It is because you killed three men yonder in the pass. If you would become famous and beloved, Ana, cease from the writing of books and take to the cutting of throats."

"Yet the writer still lives when he is dead."

"Oho!" laughed Bakenkhonsu, "you are even more foolish than I thought. How is a man advantaged by what happens when he is dead? Why, to-day that blind beggar whining on the temple steps means more to Egypt than all the mummies of all the Pharaohs, unless they can be robbed. Take what life can give you, Ana, and do not trouble about the offerings which are laid in the tombs for time to crumble."

"That is a mean faith, Bakenkhonsu."

"Very mean, Ana, like all else that we can taste and handle. A mean faith suited to mean hearts, among whom should be reckoned all save one in every thousand. Yet, if you would prosper, follow it, and when you are dead I will come and laugh upon your grave, and say, 'Here lies one of whom I had hoped higher things, as I hope them of your master.'"

"And not in vain, Bakenkhonsu, whatever may happen to the servant."

"That we shall learn, and ere long, I think. I wonder who will ride at

his side before the next Nile flood. By then, perchance, he will have changed Pharaoh's golden chariot for an ox-cart, and you will goad the oxen and talk to him of the stars--or, mayhap of the moon. Well, you might both be happier thus, and she of the moon is a jealous goddess who loves worship. Oho-ho! Here are the palace steps. Help me to descend, Priest of the Lady of the Moon."

We entered the palace and were led through the great hall to a smaller chamber where Pharaoh, who did not wear his robes of state, awaited us, seated in a cedar chair. Glancing at him I saw that his face was stern and troubled; also it seemed to me that he had grown older. The Prince and Princess made obeisance to him, as did we lesser folk, but he took no heed. When all were present and the doors had been shut, Pharaoh said:

"I have read your report, Son Seti, concerning your visit to the Israelites, and all that chanced to you; and also the reports of you, nephew Amenmeses, and of you, Officers, who accompanied the Prince of Egypt. Before I speak of them, let the Scribe Ana, who was the chariot companion of his Highness when the Hebrews attacked him, stand forward and tell me all that passed."

So I advanced, and with bowed head repeated that tale, only leaving out so far as was possible any mention of myself. When I had finished, Pharaoh said:

"He who speaks but half the truth is sometimes more mischievous than a liar. Did you then sit in the chariot, Scribe, doing nothing while the Prince battled for his life? Or did you run away? Speak, Seti, and say what part this man played for good or ill."

Then the Prince told of my share in the fight, with words that brought the blood to my brow. He told also how that it was I who, taking the risk of his wrath, had ordered the guard of twenty men to follow us unseen, had disguised two seasoned soldiers as chariot runners, and had thought to send back the driver to summon help at the commencement of the fray; how I had been hurt also, and was but lately recovered. When he had finished, Pharaoh said:

"That this story is true I know from others. Scribe, you have done well. But for you to-day his Highness would lie upon the table of the embalmers, as indeed for his folly he deserves to do, and Egypt would mourn from Thebes to the mouths of Nile. Come hither."

I came with trembling steps, and knelt before his Majesty. Around his neck hung a beautiful chain of wrought gold. He took it, and cast it over my head, saying:

"Because you have shown yourself both brave and wise, with this gold I give you the title of Councillor and King's Companion, and the right to inscribe the same upon your funeral stele. Let it be noted. Retire, Scribe Ana, Councillor and King's Companion."



So I withdrew confused, and as I passed Seti, he whispered in my ear:

"I pray you, my lord, do not cease to be Prince's Companion, because you have become that of the King."

Then Pharaoh ordered that the Captain of the guard should be advanced in rank, and that gifts should be given to each of the soldiers, and provision be made for the children of those who had been killed, with double allowance to the families of the two men whom I had disguised as runners.

This done, once more Pharaoh spoke, slowly and with much meaning, having first ordered that all attendants and guards should leave the chamber. I was about to go also, but old Bakenkhonsu caught me by the robe, saying that in my new rank of Councillor I had the right to remain.

"Prince Seti," he said, "after all that I have heard, I find this report of yours strange reading. Moreover, the tenor of it is different indeed to that of those of the Count Amenmeses and the officers. You counsel me to let these Israelites go where they will, because of certain hardships that they have suffered in the past, which hardships, however, have left them many and rich. That counsel I am not minded to take. Rather am I minded to send an army to the land of Goshen with orders to despatch this people, who conspired to murder the Prince of Egypt, through the Gateway of the West, there to worship their god in heaven or in hell.

Aye, to slay them all from the greybeard down to the suckling at the breast."

"I hear Pharaoh," said Seti, quietly.

"Such is my will," went on Meneptah, "and those who accompanied you upon your business, and all my councillors think as I do, for truly Egypt cannot bear so hideous a treason. Yet, according to our law and custom it is needful, before such great acts of war and policy are undertaken, that he who stands next to the throne, and is destined to fill it, should give consent thereto. Do you consent, Prince of Egypt?"

"I do not consent, Pharaoh. I think it would be a wicked deed that tens of thousands should be massacred for the reason that a few fools waylaid a man who chanced to be of royal blood, because by inadvertence, he had desecrated their sanctuary."

Now I saw that this answer made Pharaoh wroth, for never before had his will been crossed in such a fashion. Still he controlled himself, and asked:

"Do you then consent, Prince, to a gentler sentence, namely that the Hebrew people should be broken up; that the more dangerous of them should be sent to labour in the desert mines and quarries, and the rest distributed throughout Egypt, there to live as slaves?"

"I do not consent, Pharaoh. My poor counsel is written in yonder roll and cannot be changed."

Meneptah's eyes flashed, but again he controlled himself, and asked:

"If you should come to fill this place of mine, Prince Seti, tell us, here assembled, what policy will you pursue towards these Hebrews?"

"That policy, O Pharaoh, which I have counselled in the roll. If ever I fill the throne, I shall let them go whither they will, taking their goods with them."

Now all those present stared at him and murmured. But Pharaoh rose, shaking with wrath. Seizing his robe where it was fastened at the breast, he rent it, and cried in a terrible voice:

"Hear him, ye gods of Egypt! Hear this son of mine who defies me to my face and would set your necks beneath the heel of a stranger god. Prince Seti, in the presence of these royal ones, and these my councillors, I----"

He said no more, for the Princess Userti, who till now had remained silent, ran to him, and throwing her arms about him, began to whisper in his ear. He hearkened to her, then sat himself down, and spoke again:

"The Princess brings it to my mind that this is a great matter, one not

to be dealt with hastily. It may happen that when the Prince has taken counsel with her, and with his own heart, and perchance has sought the wisdom of the gods, he will change the words which have passed his lips. I command you, Prince, to wait upon me here at this same hour on the third day from this. Meanwhile, I command all present, upon pain of death, to say nothing of what has passed within these walls."

"I hear Pharaoh," said the Prince, bowing.

Meneptah rose to show that the Council was discharged, when the Vizier Nehesi approached him, and asked:

"What of the Hebrew prisoners, O Pharaoh, those murderers who were captured in the pass?"

"Their guilt is proved. Let them be beaten with rods till they die, and if they have wives or children, let them be seized and sold as slaves."

"Pharaoh's will be done!" said the Vizier.