

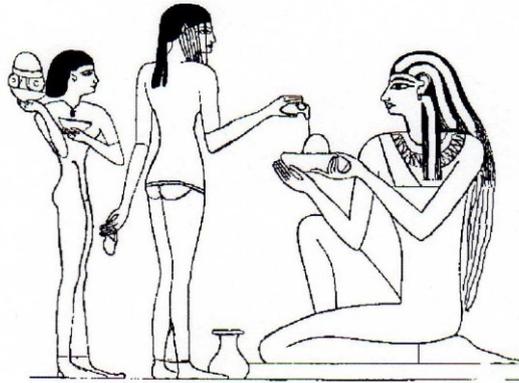
*When Gods Grow Old*

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## Scroll One

### The Goddess

(1212 BC 'June' Thebes)



*“In this Year 66 of the reign of Pharaoh Ramesses the Great, worshipped by His many courtiers, His Majesty successfully completed the thirteenth Triennial Jubilee. Ramesses – Life, Health and Prosperity to His Majesty. He had already served thirty years upon the double throne before the first of the Jubilees; such is the wonder of our Great King. Now our venerable Pharaoh, bent double and choking for breath, has run the sacred miles this thirteenth time, only to collapse in the merciless sun – a ridiculous business.” – thus wrote Sethos the Superior Scribe in his private notes – long since lost in the ravages of time.*

The heat, the bright hot silver heat of the Sun-god’s peak encroached upon the inner coolness of Seraphut’s sandstone-walled sleeping chamber. Sek-met, the Nubian eunuch slave, was wafting a feathered cooling fan slowly. He was half asleep in the borrowed heat which stole through the huge opening in the east wall of the apartment. A few busy flies came and went in the shadows cast by the

heavy woollen drape which had been drawn back from the opening, once the morning heat had begun.

Seraphut was entirely naked. With her body sprawled she attempted to absorb something of the cooler air in the chamber. Her long golden hair alone covered her firm amber flesh, reaching down to her upper legs, having first draped the valleys and crests of the small of her back. She lay facing down, her wooden headrest cast aside in her sleep, her right arm now serving as a blood-warm pillow. She was just fifteen years old.

Keti, her slave, entered the room with stealth. Seraphut turned in half slumber onto her back, her body sensuously twisted so that both her legs lay sideways, to her left, drawn up, covered in a fine film of sweat which had formed in her sleep. Traces of her hair clung to the wet skin. Keti stared at her mistress with unhidden admiration, for she was looking upon the acclaimed *Most Beautiful Woman in the World*, for here lay the daughter of the renowned Parida, who was herself the love-daughter of Helen of Troy. Keti knelt very close to what remained, for her, a dreaming child, her own child. Aware of the soft movement of the fan she glanced at the eunuch, annoyed by his presence. The beast was falling asleep, the movement of his fan slowing to nothing.

Keti snapped her fingers.

Sek-met opened one sleep-red eye, smiled, stroked his fat belly, yawned, and put the most marginal extra effort into his fanning. Keti frowned at him but he smiled again in return, continuing to stroke his belly with a free hand, as if that belly was far more important than his work. Keti turned to the apparition of beauty she adored to the point that her heart thundered each time she saw her mistress afresh. She bent very close.

“Mistress,” she whispered, and air disturbed by the passing of the word caressed the lips of the sleeper.

Seraphut woke, did not move at all, but in her stillness was aware of Keti, her intimate proximity. Seraphut was irritated by the slave’s duty to wake her, and showed an annoyance at the invasion of this intruder. Then she turned fully onto her back, languidly, legs edging slightly apart. She moved an arm across her own breasts, drifting in and out of blurred dreams, half woken again at her own caress.

The observing eunuch smiled, a waxen, bored smile; then he eased his hold on the fan, lowering it to swirl the warm air about the beauty’s body. He had no great care for Seraphut – one Pharaonic concubine was the

same as another – but he did have vast experience in these matters and intellect enough to recognise that in her lay something of great worth... even an attraction, to match the young priest who had just recently shown such willingness towards this senior but aging eunuch. He watched the foolish Keti, that Dardany whore, go close to her mistress and with infinite care caress her shoulder. She lusted after the child, he could see that. He smiled at the thought that her interest could be fatal.

The sleeper was like a corpse, unnaturally still. She was waiting for something very nice, a special touch, he thought, and his tongue shot out like a frog's and dampened his lips, expecting that he was about to view a moment sensual and interesting, even report-worthy.

Keti knelt, caressed the child's naked breast, just touching the rising nipple so that there was no accident to the contact, then she set her lips to meet the shoulder of the seemingly sleeping form. Seraphut, having waited for the touch, lifted her arm luxuriously and let an index finger move toward Keti's face, missed and knocked Keti's wig sideways. Keti, in a frantic movement to stop the plaited wig's fall, knocked it clean off her shaven head.

Sek-met's giggle, Keti's cry of annoyance, and the clump of the wig striking the floor and sending, in turn, a cool water jar crashing to its side – all this noise opening Seraphut's eyes, wide.

The water hissed as it spread across the light dust which lay on the floor. The eldest of the doorkeepers looked across at once, startled by unusual movement.

"What's that?" he snapped, seeing the water but not hearing.

"Nothing – get back to the door, you fool," snapped Keti.

They had been standing there as if they were wooden door supports, so unimportant they were invisible, but vital for security, alert, watching, of course. And what they saw would be passed on.

Sek-met's belly wobbled with his unsuppressed mirth. He stroked himself, enjoying the escaping rivulets of sweat which oiled their way towards his damp loin cloth.

"I'll have *you* beaten!" snarled Keti at the eunuch.

"What for?"

"Silence," said Keti.

He smiled back after a quick look of feigned terror, then with a lazy arm he continued to fan the swirling air, whilst lifting his free hand back

to scratch at his belly again. He flicked away a pair of blue-backed flies, but they stayed close, buzzing on the air, thirsting for his salt sweat.

Seraphut laughed lightly, not interested in Keti's threat which was really a request to herself to have the creature thrashed, and said, "Leave him."

She stretched away the last of her sleep and smiled at Keti. The Dardany slave stood close, by a great hanging bronze shield. The war square was polished to a glass-like sheen.

Keti was adjusting her recovered heavy woollen wig, tutting with her lips, cursing the eunuch inside her head. The wig would not set firm on her shaved scalp.

The grand-daughter of Helen watched, amused, and thought herself fortunate that she was in possession of her trailing locks and thus avoided the wearing of the Egyptian trappings, so hot and prone to slipping.

"Why do you wake me – it is still too hot!" complained the young beauty.

"Mistress – you are called to the Great King tonight."

The girl shrugged her shoulders, lying there.

"You must be prepared for Him."

There was a lurch in Seraphut's stomach.

At last the wait was over.

She was to join the bed of the greatest king in the whole great world – Ramesses, the second of that Name of Names, the Great Bull, King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Warrior Prince, Defeater of the Hittite Hordes – a thousand titles could follow. Priests took an hour to recite, each dawn, the ranks and titles of the Great King. Such a man the world had never known before. He was father of one hundred and ninety-four official children, and others, randomly spawned from five thousand explored caverns. Some said a further two hundred had been born here and there, in distant lands and in palace places. No one knew his sacred score. Such a man of men. Half the palace staff were his children – sometimes you could see it in their faces.

"Why do you look so sad, little Keti?"

"Nothing, Mistress."

"Do you envy me – that I am to be the queen-bride of the greatest man in the world? Are you alarmed that I should be one of the Queens of Egypt?"

"Mistress, I am proud for you – that you must know."

“Then why so sad?”

“She loves you, mistress – don’t you see?”

Both women turned on the plump black creature. How dare he!

“Call a guardian,” snapped Ketu. “He must be beaten at once!”

“Keep your lips together, creature,” hissed Seraphut, “or you will lose them!”

The eunuch smiled, changed hands on the fan, made it whip through the warm air, startling even the more confident flies and sending a single feather tip soaring towards the ceiling.

He was there to keep the courtesan cool... and to spy, like the guardians, but more so... to listen... to watch... to report to Asha, the Friend of Pharaoh, Asha the Iron Warrior<sup>1</sup>, Fan Bearer on the Right Hand Side of Pharaoh, Prince of the Gafralla, Warrior King of the Sherden, Cup Bearer and Grand Marshal of the Army of Re<sup>2</sup> for Life, Marshal of the Chariots and Supreme Shemsu of all Egypt. The eunuch believed himself to be very safe.

A few well chosen words in the ear of Asha and these bitches would have their arms dislocated, their legs broken, and then would be passed out to the Temple Builder-Slaves to play with, still writhing in their agony. Sek-met smiled at the limitless possibilities of pain that his tongue could weave into realities, if he had the desire. He, Sek-met, had the ear of the First Friend of Pharaoh, whilst these women were playthings of the King, and were nothing. He smiled, stroked his belly, and slowed the pace of the fan, his hidden anger abating.

But the women were already ignoring the creature. Seraphut rose, pulling a delicate, brilliantly white, linen robe about her. She moved lightly to the delight of her adoring slave. The garment was so fine that her body was totally revealed through the material. She placed her arms round the slave and they stared at each others reflections in the shield, their body-warmth shared and intimate, their perfumes mingling.

“I must join the King, but you will not lose me – I shall always keep you as my own, my little Ketu.”

The slave girl sighed.

Sek-met coughed, but was ignored.

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<sup>1</sup> Asha gained this honour following his acquiring the great iron sword - described later in *The Archives of Kadesh*, the second volume in the series.

<sup>2</sup> Re and Ra are the same god, the sun god, both spellings are used in this book and are interchangeable.

“I know,” whispered Keti.

“Think – I shall be Queen of Egypt. And you will be my most senior slave.”

Sek-met’s smile broadened – he thought on all those other bitch queens, this latest one would be the least of them all.

There were twenty-seven living ‘Queens’ at that time, but for the most they were nothing, honoured in word, but not in power, concubines, not rulers. Of all of them only one was a true Queen, the last of the eight true sharers of Ramesses’ throne. No future concubine or true Queen would replace Neferure, ancient hag that she was – for she was also the lover of his Master, the Shemsu. At least, they used to be lovers, decades ago... when they could muster the juices.

Sek-met’s face showed a wan smile at that thought.

But those ancient ones were still all powerful. Both sworn to die for and protect Pharaoh, even beyond death. And there lay the truth, they had sworn to die at the same time.

That moment of love they had, the three of them, maybe thirty years before, all three drunk with sensuality and beer, but they still spoke of it as if it were a poem, that foolish oath, as if it were yesterday.

Sek-met knew they would not keep to the absurd agreement, and yearned for the day when the oath would be called for by the gods. Then their failure would be displayed, and punished by the gods.

Sek-met’s eyes narrowed and his dreams were put away as he heard the sound of distant footsteps: many feet, an escort, an important one was approaching.

“Queen Neferure is here!” came a shout from one of her escort, heard from far down the network of corridors.

Sek-met’s hands tightened on the fan and the beat increased to a military and effective regularity, a further feather snapped free and was blown at once on the currents of air to the great opening which led outside to the hanging garden. Caught on the warm up-flows of the sunlit day the feather continued to rise until out of view

“Queen Neferure is here!” came the shout, closer, very close.

There was a flurry of movement at the other end of the great room, the light linen hangings were swept aside, two handsome drivers of the Pharaoh’s Royal Chariot Squadron entered, the same Phoenix Squadron Pharaoh himself commanded as a youth.

The bronzed young drivers were clad in full ceremonial robes, carrying long curved bronze hacking swords. They immediately turned apart and away from each other and halted in a position of muscle-rippling attention, all but pushing the doorkeepers to one side.

An old woman entered, almost briskly, but her chest was rising and falling quickly beneath the scrawn of her skin. Her many years were hidden with a face of paint, a light-weight wig, and a linen robe finely adorned with threads of gold and silver. A necklace of simple seeds, all painted and gathered to a glittering geometric pattern, lay across her totally flat and panting breasts. At a distance she was an elegant young courtier, slim like a boy. Close-to, the wear of her many years of glory were there to be seen, despite the hours bathing, oiling and painting.

The two young women dropped to the ground, their heads touched the marble floor; they were both aware of the coolness of the stone on their foreheads.

Keti's wig sagged out of position once more.

Sek-met had no expression on his face as he watched but his eyes grew narrow, and his ears sucked in all the words he could hear for future carriage to his Master.

Neferure noticed with pleasure that Asha's eunuch was there. She had wanted a reliable spy present, and had expressly asked the Iron Warrior to place Sek-met at the new concubine's compulsory disposal. But, she noticed with displeasure that Seraphut's witless slave girl was also present.

There was a time when she would have had such a silly little thing poisoned; now such trivialities were less urgent – that matter could wait. Indeed old fat belly over there may already have a few tales to tell later in the day, which might alter the need for waiting... Neferure would see, she would be patient, she would hear the tales first.

The old Queen's tired eyes settled on the young girl who was to be presented to His Majesty that night. Neferure was impressed.

Few human affairs impressed Neferure, Premier Queen of Upper and Lower Egypt, beloved of Hathor, goddess of love, First Princess of the Hittite Empire and Premier Daughter of the long dead Great King Hattusil. Neferure saw again that here was a beauty of...

Neferure's heart skipped a beat, her hand rose to her chest as the tight pain gripped her. Her heart was frequently missing a beat in these

summer days of heat and flies, warning that perhaps its next throb would lead her into an eternal darkness. Her song was almost done.

Her heart again missed a beat. Beads of sweat, droplet echoes of fear, oozed through the carefully designed paintwork of her face. Curious pains spread upward in her neck and were echoed by an ache first in her left arm then her right, then both, down to the wrists. She belched, and the pains went, and came back within moments. She thought to herself that she had walked too quickly through the corridors. The thought annoyed her.

“You are quite, quite exquisite, my dear child,” came the voice of the Premier Queen, a soft voice, words forming slowly, gathering a charismatic force as they issued from her demi-god lips, yet there was a faint quiver there, the words shaky as they had never been before.

“Majesty, you are kind,” replied Seraphut from the floor.

“Rise!” said the Queen.

Seraphut got to her feet.

Keti remained where she lay.

The Premier Queen’s heart began to race and jumped in her chest, a fresh tightening pain encircled her tired old breasts, and ran down her arms so that her wrists were heavy with the agony of it. She looked for somewhere to sit.

Seeing a chair near the high bed she moved to it slowly, painfully, still frightened but knowing that she was not showing the fear. Expressions did not show easily on that painted face. Having sat, the pains softened as swiftly as they had grown.

She regained her inner and secret composure – and no-one in the room had been aware that she had momentarily lost that composure, except Sek-met.

Neferure stared at the young girl and smiled once more. Then she glanced down at the girl slave and wondered why she had taken this slave into the slightest account – and decided to leave the slave on the floor where she belonged. She was an insect.

Seraphut began as if to speak, but stopped the words, awaiting permission.

“Yes, my child?”

“I am honoured. Honoured that you should come.”

The words were tinged with awe.

“Not at all – I am come because I shall be present this evening when you are taken to the King, and I had heard of your beauty, your renowned beauty, and I felt that I should gaze upon you for a moment, in private, closely so. I am not disappointed, I have to tell you that, my dear.”

Seraphut blushed, and glanced down at Keti, hoping that the Queen would have her rise.

Neferure was aware of Seraphut’s unspoken request that the slave should rise. She smiled a gentle smile at the slave girl, just a gentle smile, the kind reserved for a pet cheetah perhaps, but left her where she was.

“I have not come for that reason alone,” said the Queen softly.

“Majesty?”

“I have a small favour to ask you.”

“Majesty?”

“Yes, my dear, I would have you kill the King!” her voice falling to a whisper.

“Majesty?”

The old Queen leaned forward, shaking, and whispered in the ear of the young Queen. On the youthful face a smile appeared.



The news that the Premier Queen was not well was taken to Lord Asha by one of the Phoenix Charioteers.

Moments before she had lifted a slow arm, which had a death-feeling of its own. At once the warrior youth had stepped close to her as with shaking fingers she touched his naked stomach, smiled with a fading pleasure and said, “Boy – tell Asha the Shemsu what you see.”

“It is already done, my Queen.”

Asha the Nubian had great apartments in the main palace building, adjoining Ramesses’ quarters, for he was First Friend and Shemsu to the Great King.

The old Nubian had been seated in the broad chair, which was his favourite. He was staring out across the Nile, smiling at some inner thought, watching the movement of shipping, enjoying the green of the vegetation against the astonishing blue of the river itself, a cup of warm Thebes beer at his side.

He turned his head with a fresh smile for the charioteer who had been sent at a run to bring the news was one of his favourites, especially selected by him for he knew of the old Lady's tastes.

The smile was gone at the youth's face and words. The many lines on Asha's face seemed to deepen, as one, as the charioteer told him what he had seen.

He was on his feet at once, swiftly, unlike an old man, but even he had used the thick arms of the chair to thrust himself upwards. Asha immediately left his quarters and went to the Queen.

She lay on her bed ashen with pain.

She lifted her hands with a weak greeting. The three priest-physicians moved away from the bed-side. Asha noticed the cluster of leeches on her naked chest, glistening and pulsating with her own weak rhythm. There were several more biting home down each of her arms. She was extremely pale. Any old blue veins were faded to brush marks within the wrinkled whiteness of her flesh.

"Lord Asha, I think I am dying," she whispered. "I have such pain. There is less now, perhaps it is the leeches, but the pain, Asha, the terrible pain... worse than the springing forth of my largest infant." Even so she winced at that memory.

The fabulous old Nubian, tall, ebony, stately – dressed in the sky-blue linen kilt edged with gold of the highest rank, leaned over the bed and kissed her on her forehead. He found her skin icy, yet running with sweat.

His eyes dwelt on hers and memories passed between them, their minds sang of moments of love even now. Their touch conjured memories of devilment in politics, raised triumphs in their minds, and sour thoughts of defeats, also they saw again secret horrors long part forgot, now springing for a moment from the interstices of their surging sadness.

"Tell Ramesses."

"He himself is weak, my Queen."

"Tell him... tell him that I carried out his wishes."

"You told the Dardany woman!"

"I did – you chose well, old man. You have not lost your eye."

"She is but a part of what *you* were."

Neferure beamed.

The pain had grown much less.

She smiled at the empty chasm where pain had ruled as much as at her lover's words. She closed her eyes. Her breathing halted. At once the priests came forward.

"Remove the leeches!" said the youngest.

It was not unknown for the youngest of the physicians in such a group to be executed on the death of such an important one – for collective failure. "Quickly!"

"Too early," said the eldest, a thin man with a back which twisted him to his left, following a chariot fall twenty years before. His voice was confident.

"What is your name?" asked Asha of the eldest.

"Great General, I am Archo the Physician from Crete." His Egyptian tongue was excellent.

"Ah – the famed Archo – we have not met," said the Iron Warrior.

"Great Shemsu, we have not."

"Indeed," muttered Asha as his heart fell for he had heard that Archo was an idiot, old and senior, but an idiot who was trusted by Ramesses because he was foreign.

Archo had been specially called to tend the Pharaoh and had arrived that week, worn out by his travels, but been rushed to aid the Queen before even meeting Pharaoh. Archo's knowledge of medicine was legendary, it was said, but younger physicians with strength in their arms had Asha's ear and modern methods.

"She lives," said the youngest of the physicians, putting his nose to her mouth to smell out her soul. The young man was of the Egyptian Theban School, and attached to the old Queen's staff and thus approved of by Asha.

"Her heart is old," said Archo. "She may not live through the night."

"Then why do we drain so much blood?" asked the young one through his fine teeth.

"It is good for the tired heart," said the third priest-physician, another gaunt figure, younger than Archo, and an Egyptian Priest-Physician but trained in the Cretan school as a youth. "I have found that an abundance of leeches takes away the bad blood which ages the heart, and makes what is left flow more swiftly, I..."

"Remove the leeches!" ordered Asha.

All three priests looked startled at the words of the Iron Warrior.

How dare he interfere in the business of priests and doctors, Ramesses' *own* physician-priests? Yet the younger of the priests was at once clawing off the leeches on his side of the bed with cunning pressures which causes the leeches to surrender, for the Shemsu *did* dare to interfere, and they in turn dare not disobey even a flick of his golden hawk-eyes, red edged and tired as they were.

The Queen's eyes opened, closed, there was a faint mist-smile at the Shemsu, and she died.

All at her side knew she died, all had seen the moment of death before – many times.

Asha's face took on a dark look, directed at the senior priests, but in a moment the terrifying expression evaporated.

All three of the priests had paled, for she had died as they touched. One of them must die. Archo relaxed for he was the senior, and safe.

Asha looked down upon Neferure's pale figure.

There was a sad vulnerability about her frail body, once so firm and round, and tender, and so full of hunger. There was a smile upon her face. Now, the only life about her was manifested in the tortured trickle of her own stale blood at the point where leeches had been removed and the subtle writhing in the gorged bodies of those which remained, still sucking. Neferure the Hittite was dead. The world was coming to an end.

Asha turned to leave, stopped, glanced back at Archo, then the youngest physician and said, "There will be no executions."

In their relief, none noticed the tears in his eyes.



Keti, elsewhere, was still alive because the Queen was already dead. Keti did not know this.

In spite of her initial decision not to have Keti removed, the old Queen would have resolved later that day that Keti was to be taken away and broken in the dark cells, all of her bones, at intervals of a day, until she was dead – for Neferure had not liked her, at all.

So Keti lived, for the fate-threads had been jerked earlier by those beyond the mortal world, to bring a final roar of pain to beset the Queen as she walked along the great corridors leading back to her apartments. All thoughts of death in others went silent in her faltering mind, as she was carried to her chambers by the youthful charioteer who had caught

her in her fall. He wondered at how light she was, as if life were gone already – his companion walked alongside with a hand on the carrier's arm, as if to lend his strength if needs be.

Later, in that eye-flickering moment as the leeches were withdrawn, and she moved beyond her mortal body, she had indeed thought of Ketu and determined to talk with the Iron Warrior, but the gods demanded her soul too quickly leaving her with a disappointment for eternity. She died an unhappy woman in that final failure. Her departing smile was false.

To the Iron Warrior Ketu was of little importance, but he still had to be certain that the message had thoroughly entered the mind of Seraphut. Sek-met would know. He was summoned to speak to the great man, and was soon waiting in the ante-room to the Queen's apartments.

The small wooden door opened and the Iron Warrior himself came out, carrying the death-dealing sword that was his badge of terror. Sek-met began to tremble, a forced tremble to show fear, to bring mercy to him from all who threatened, if they did threaten, or even if they did not.

"Stop it!" snapped the Iron Warrior. "You die with the departure of the sun if you do not speak well, and all your shaking will not save you!" Asha felt a simple pleasure in the grimace of true fear which then displayed itself so obviously on the eunuch's features. Sek-met did not stop trembling, for it was already almost dusk.

"Well?"

"Master? What?" In spite of the danger, he dared play his Master with hesitations.

"You foul eater of boys and dogs – what took place, what was said, what was done?"

"The maiden slept..."

"And?"

"She slept a lot..."

The iron blade whooshed through the air, slashed across the eunuch's belly, leaving a scratch no deeper than a thorn's mark, but the old eunuch leapt the length of a man backwards, stumbled further and almost fell, regained his footing, and began to cry.

His energetic imagination saw that a cut a few fingers deeper and he would have been staring at his own glistening entrails on the marble floor, and the sun still not set!

"Perhaps you should die, now! Stop snivelling – tell me all that took place."

“Master... she slept...”

“Sek-met!” bellowed Asha.

“Master, Master it is true... for hours she slept... then her silly slave came and kissed her.”

“Kissed her?”

“Master, she did.”

“What?”

“They are *lovers*, master,” said Sek-met with a winsome smile.

“You die!”

“NO!... MASTER!... please... Master... they *are* lovers... they are... I know about these things...”

“Speak, or I shall have your nose at least!”

“The maiden rose, and took the slave in her arms, and said things to her so quietly that I could not hear... then Her Majesty arrived... and said that the maiden was beautiful... and then the Queen – oh, she did look poorly sick, Master, really poorly sick... she had to sit... and then she asked a favour of the maiden...” The eunuch put his hands to his cheeks in fear of what he had to say, what he must say, or die.

“Yes – what favour?”

“Master... the Queen... the Queen... MASTER!” screeched the fat man, retreating rapidly as the Iron Warrior advanced. “The Queen asked that the maiden should kill the King, oh Life, Health and Prosperity to His Majesty!”

The Iron Warrior, Supreme Shemsu of Egypt, lowered his sword. The smile played across his dark face: “You may live through the day yet, and a few more besides,” he said and, turning on his naked heel, left the shattered eunuch not knowing what he should do as the first keening from the professional mourners began to rend the air from the rooms next door, announcing to all that the Queen was dead. Their near-screeching hurt Asha’s ears.

The Shemsu left, headed for his own section of the palace, pleased that the walls stifled the haunting voices. Doors opened at his approach and closed behind him under the pressure of doorkeepers, slaves made deaf to guard the inner doors to Pharaoh’s quarters. Barbed bronze needles had maimed them for the honour, when they were strong enough to be selected, for the doors were heavy.

His own keepers, on the final doors, were both selected for their total deafness from birth and for their engaging good looks, except for the scar

on their foreheads indicating that they were Shemsu-slaves of the palace. Both dropped to their knees as the Shemsu swept by, then rose without orders to close the doors. Asha did not appear to be aware that they were there, giving them no glance. But he had noticed them, noted their movements, approved of them within himself. Would that Sethos were so obedient.

The Iron Warrior walked through his rooms, Sethos his personal scribe glanced up from rolls of papyrus, a small smile of greeting on his face. Asha put his hand on Sethos' shoulder, he squeezed it firmly. The youth looked with warmth at his Master. Their eyes engaged and Sethos' dark orbs narrowed at his Master's frown.

"Sethos, I fear our world is at an end."

"Master?"

"The Queen is gone."

"Where?"

"Dead!"

"Ah!" a swift gasp of shock, ignored by Asha.

"I am old. Today I am very old. I cry for her and my tears are dry. I am a desert. The King must die soon too... and then?"

The great iron sword felt heavy.

It seemed heavy for the first time.

Even when made, in the time of the Sherden Dwarf, taken out of the fiery furnace, cooled with the hiss of men's urine, all those years ago, there had been a balance to the blade, so that its weight seemed to fall away from the wielder's fist. Now it weighed and weighed.

With care he placed the weapon on the table before the scribe who felt a small jerk of awe at the rare iron which lay clean and glittering in front of him, only the leather-clad hilt was lacking a polished sheen where it had recently rested in the Shemsu's hands.

The scribe was aware of the old man looking at the papyrus, parts of the *Scrolls of Asha* and the *Sacred Scrolls of Ramesses the Great*.

"What number is this?" Asha looked into the young man's open face, admiring the youth behind the face and the set of his intelligent eyes.

"It is the five hundredth, but for three."

"It has been a long time. Pharaoh has had many three year ceremonies," mused Asha.

"Thirteen," advised the scribe.

The Nubian nodded, remembering Pharaoh's near collapse at the end of the ceremonial run earlier in the year. Bent over, aged; incredible that He dared to try the sacred run once more. From that moment the old King had weakened, the magic had run its course, the King's soul was wasted and wished to fly away. So sad that she had gone first. Now all three must go, and the maiden too, for His Majesty.

"I must tell the King," Asha said, almost to himself.

He looked over the shoulder of the scribe to see him just completing the cartouche of the Queen overhung with the sign of death. Sethos the beautiful youth, student of the past times, would soon be free to be master of the present, for the history of Asha was almost complete. In that moment Asha's mind's eye conjured a memory of the cobra, and his own dive in the darkness to save the life of He who became his master, Ramesses. Asha shuddered – it was all so very long ago, yet seemed just a moment.



Seraphut insisted that Ketu go with her to the King.

She was *her* slave, and she, Seraphut, was to be Queen. Instruments sounded down the corridor as the small procession of courtiers led the way to the Pharaoh's personal chambers. The gentle sough of harps and flutes hung on the cooling night air as if part of the ether itself, complementing the watery perfumes being splashed about the corridor by the half dozen dancers leading the procession. Finger drums beat a rhythm of joy. Sweat flicked from the gold-fleshed dancers, and smiles were on all their faces for silver awards would be given to them that night.

As the dancers whirled deeper into the confines of Pharaoh's quarters, drapes or doors were pulled aside or opened, without command. The gloom of the interior of the palace was reduced by thousands of oil lamps attached to walls and pillars or held by slaves and retainers on the processional way. The oily smoke rose on the still warm air of the deeper interior of the building and escaped through the great openings where wall met ceiling. The sandalwood shutters had been seasonally removed to allow a free flow of air. Small bats swooped and tweeted through every gap in the flickering air, slaughtering moths before those night insects threw away their lives anyway, in the torch and lamp flames.

Life and death hung on the air, passing unnoticed, hidden by the cascade of music, whilst the dancers moved like breezes which conjure whispers with the fallen leaves of uncountable trees.

In the midst of the beauty and movement Seraphut felt no fear, for she was to be Queen; instead an excitement coursed through her veins now. She did not, even for a moment, think that elsewhere, in a room weighed down with the scent of preserving fluids, the priests with sacred qualifications for the burial rites were sucking free the brain of Queen Neferure with great straws thrust up her nostrils – her side was already an open flap, gaping, and bereft of organs – all done quickly, before the summer's heat made their difficult embalming duties both dangerous and more noxious than they already were.

Seraphut saw the Iron Warrior ahead. He who had taken her city, and slaughtered her family. The evil one. Then others spoke of how it was *he* who had swept the fateful Helen to Egypt and safety after the fall of Troy; Helen, to be for a brief year, a diplomatic object bargained for against the might of the Hittites and the lust of the Warriors of the Sea, the dreaded Sherden. And it was he who took her own mother as his prize... all mysteries now.

Yet Seraphut had found him persuasive and gentle when he had crossed the seas to collect her for the Great King. She even admired Asha's youth-like body set beneath the fine grey head, the age-colour mostly obscured with an oily red-ochre which brought back the hue of his youth, the witch-colour, which was said to match that of Pharaoh's side-lock when first they met. She felt a twinge of sorrow that it was not Asha who was Pharaoh. He was said to be eighty, she thought this impossible for his frame was too magnificent. Now he stood in her way, as if to halt the procession.

To her astonishment the old Nubian dropped to his knees, first one, then the other – she heard the second 'crack' with age – and then he touched his forehead to the marble floor. There was a boy, a youth, at his side in the flowing robes of a scribe which accentuated the perfection of the boy's shape. The youth copied his master's movement. It was briefly done, but it was done. She was, for the first time, shown the honour done to a Premier Queen of Egypt.

Asha stood and moved to her side, the swift choreography of his movements, and that of the youth, following a moment behind, being such that the procession did not halt its measured advance for more than

the time of a stride or two. She found her attention drawn to the young scribe as she swept passed.

Only for a moment did she see his eyes, and catch the rounded beauty of his shoulders. It was a glance, and it was gone as two great doors in front of her slowly opened.

The movement was heavy but with little sound. Their shifting revealed a rich room with an unusually low ceiling, painted with squares of red and gold. There were fewer lamps, yet the room was brighter, for many large metal shields reflected the light of the lamps. The lesser 'Queens' of Egypt lined the way. She looked for Neferure, but could not see her. Then she saw Pharaoh for the first time.



Ramesses the Great sat on a large chair close to his bed. Two huge Nubians stood on either side of him, both operating large fans, they wore nothing save for a brief and flesh revealing kilt of the finest white linen, pleated and wound about their narrow loins. Their lithesome bodies glistened with untold diamonds of perspiration, sometimes gathering in rivulets to meander down their frames to floor or kilt – there to gather in dampness only to evaporate invisibly in the evening's warmth. Seraphut caught her breath at the sight of them and was disturbed at her thoughts, and drove them from her mind. She looked instead towards His Majesty.

At Pharaoh's feet two naked girls with smaller fans wafted air upwards, quickly, towards His face. He was bent over seemingly staring at his knees. Suddenly the Iron Warrior fell to the floor, and instantly everyone else copied the movement – except for the four with fans, the guards at the door, the doorkeepers and Pharaoh's Scribe sitting cross-legged some distance from the chair.

Seventeen times they bowed to the Pharaoh, and then Pharaoh's Scribe coughed; it was a signal, for he had been counting for them. Ramesses raised His head a little and His sharp whisper caught the still air around the courtiers: "Rise, and let thy Pharaoh see thy faces."

Seraphut was unable to understand the words properly, despite her intense preparation for this moment – her learning of the tongue. He was using the royal archaic form, reserved for Pharaohs, so she rose with the Iron Warrior as he came to his feet. She became aware that everyone else

remained prostrate. Pharaoh beckoned them to Him. Asha led Seraphut forward by the hand.

Pharaoh's hair was red. The red of the witch. The red of the evil one. The red of Pharaoh, Ramesses the Second, was secretly improved with a little ochre now, less than the Shemsu used – Ramesses was proud of that. His face was gaunt with age, His aquiline nose stretching His skin to a bloodless white wherever skin crossed bone.

He seemed to have trouble raising His head. His hair was receding somewhat from His forehead, and was thin on the top of His head, which was revealed for He wore no headdress except for a band of gold about His forehead which formed a base for a single modelled feather of gold which rose from the back of His head. It was also from the back of His head that the thickest of His amber-red coils of hair still flowed.

His lips had kept a wide and sensual fullness, but were etched with grooves of age. Whilst His eyes seemed to struggle to look out from beneath His bent down head, they still sparkled with all the wicked magic in His soul.

“Why, my noble Cup Bearer – thou hast searched and found well.”

Asha was always suspicious of Pharaoh when he slipped into the archaic court style of speech. Perhaps it was meant for Nados the Court Scribe, such a pedant – at least his own Sethos was imaginative, even inventive, almost a crime in the eyes of Nados.

Pharaoh now raised His hand, so Asha guided Seraphut forward for His touch. She hesitated. Pharaoh beckoned her impatiently with claw fingers. She went very close. Pharaoh immediately caressed her face with his gnarled knuckles and smiled: “By Hathor, she is a goddess too.”

There was an immediate mumbling from the floor as Nados looked up in anguish. Even Pharaoh should not totally destroy protocol in this way. Such a declaration of fresh deity from Pharaoh, even in jest, could have terrible repercussions – a new building programme, art work, a new priesthood.

Of course it was already budgeted for in part – it had to be as soon as it was learned the concubine was to be a full Premier Queen and an escort into eternity rather than just a temporary bed companion. The blood-cursed Shemsu was behind this – and with Neferure dead... so many problems. He dreaded Pharaoh's next words – whatever they were – and the dread was justified.

“Where is Neferure?” asked Pharaoh.

The hush was absolute.

Asha was bewildered at Pharaoh's confusion – but only for a moment. Two hours before, Pharaoh had been *told* of the Great Queen's death.

He had seemed disinterested, and had muttered something to the effect that He had lost many queens, and more would follow. Clearly the notion that the most powerful woman in the world was dead had not penetrated the Pharaoh's mind. He knew then and had forgotten now. What to do?

Kindness came from Asha as he said quietly, so that few heard, though Nados frowned at the deceit which flowed before Pharaoh: "The Queen is indisposed, not well, your Majesty."

Now Pharaoh was squinting at his latest queen.

"Oh – jealous is she? But no matter... such a beauty, noble Asha! Where did you find her?"

Pharaoh touched Seraphut's shoulder; Nados quickly noted on his papyrus sheet... *such a beauty... Where did you find her?* and paused, straining to hear, for Asha was about to speak, and the final secret would be out, but Pharaoh said: "Everybody go!"

Nados could not believe his eyes when he read what he had just written – *Everybody go! Everybody?*

Nados was trained to react to the words and write them at once without a thought. At this he was the finest scribe in all Misr. The words had hardly been heard by the others.

Only when they were scribbled on the open roll of papyrus did they sink into his consciousness... *go! Go?*

A ceremony had been planned... cancelled at a whim, again... what would everyone say? Where was the certainty in the court? That was gone too. Yet Nados rose at once like a startled water fowl when Pharaoh half snarled: "Are you all as deaf as the door men?"

"Pharaoh..." began Asha.

"Asha – stay... but only to get the rest *out*, mind... she stays..." The claw pointed to Seraphut.

The Iron Warrior turned to face the court, dismissed Nados' angry look with a glance of death, and the court melted away, silent, but for Nados muttering darkly to himself.

Asha made a mental note to have him given a light flogging later on, to remind him of his place.

Within moments the Pharaoh, the Iron Warrior, the guards (who were as walls, or carpets of purest papyrus, or fruit in a bowl... they could see

all, but absorb nothing; they could hear, but would ignore all – or die), the door openers (who had the added advantage from the kiss of the bronze hooks), the fanners (who were as trustworthy as the shaduf, the ancient machine which lifted up the precious liquid in the water lands) and Seraphut. They were as alone as friends in an empty campaign tent about to do pleasant things, out of the sight of others. But...

“Everyone!” said Pharaoh to the guards, pointedly, firmness in his piping voice, almost kindly.

Even so they looked for guidance from Asha. He nodded.

The doors complained once more, and then they were alone, except for the Nubian caressers of the warm air and the deaf door-openers who alone remained.

Pharaoh nodded to them, and the loyal men sank to their haunches, and lowered their eyes in case they witnessed something which could still be deadly for them. Only the sheening jet-skinned fan-bearers worked on, untouched by Pharaoh’s wishes – the little girls at his feet had been the first to go, of course, for they had been mere decoration and were tired.

For a moment there was silence then Pharaoh turned to the Iron Warrior and said: “So – we are together – three gods: I, Pharaoh; you Asha, the living god of the Sea People; and here – why is this not the very Hathor incarnate, our young, ever young goddess of love? My Neferure!”

Asha, in that unguarded moment, let his face betray his thoughts and Pharaoh giggled.

“Oh Asha – I know she has gone. My brain still speaks to me. Sometimes an old man should play the stupid old man – to make the others more stupid in their assumptions. But this one – surely she is my Queen come back, grown young. But you. But I. We are worn to dust. Tonight I shall touch the secret places, her places – perhaps for the last time. And I shall still be a god.”

Asha nodded.

Ramesses paused for a moment then added, an infinite sadness in his voice: “Tell me Asha, my perfect friend, what happens when gods grow old?”



Outside the night was a drape of insect sound strung from cords of heat; inside it was cool. The desert breeze, wafting through the night, was

almost dead. Night's heavy air was trapped in the echoing confines of the Palace's mighty walls, almost chill to the throat in contrast to the throb of warmth beyond the stone mansion. Sethos the Superior Scribe felt sick with shame. A pain, dull and hungry, gnawed at Sethos' mind, for his soul had moved inside him. He had dared to catch her eye, the eye of Pharaoh's woman, he sweated at the memory of that moment.

She had walked on by, leading her little procession, head erect, face pale so that the delicate lines and shadows which had been drawn about her eyes to accentuate her beautiful features were themselves enhanced. The paint lines had stolen from the truth but had combined to make a face so stunning that guards, door-minders in their buzzing deafness, even the Nubians, chosen for their power over their erotic potential, had blinked with a twisted fear that her appearance might arouse them and expose the reality of their levels of control.

She was to be Queen.

She was to be taken by Ramesses the Great.

To even think the thoughts that swam through Sethos' mind was to court the breaking of his bones and the darkening of his sight. It was a monstrous desire to unclothe her, and...

Asha knew the scribe's thoughts, sensed them even as they were thought, and a single glance of death from the Iron Warrior was enough to slow the blood-rush of Sethos' hopes and imaginings.

Sethos had followed her into the sleeping place of the King, had watched the sway of her movements as she passed in front of him. Then he had fallen to the cool floor with the rest before His Majesty, forehead to the stone seventeen times as was demanded by the full rites of protocol. He had not dared look up – that evil thought at least had not crossed his mind – and then he had withdrawn with the rest, to leave Pharaoh, the new goddess, Asha and the Nubians, alone.

In the corridors there was a soft chatter of comparisons as the escorts discussed the latest Queen. Sethos moved through them all and made his way to the quarters of the Iron Warrior.

He went at once to his own scribe's table and began to write out love from his mind in lyric poems which encompassed his thoughts of sacrilege, captured them, and placed them on the papyrus; so that they could be destroyed with fire later on, soon and quickly.

Three sheets of papyrus were used; four times he trimmed his paint-pens such was the flow of dreams from his fingers, purging the sins from

his soul. The process did not work. He let his fingers stray elsewhere, urgently. Emptied, he tried again.

Unaware, as he wrote on, of the smooth dawn which began to drown the flickering oil lamp with its dark-consuming light, he was startled by the arrival of Asha, his Master. Sethos immediately dropped to his knees.

“Up,” said the stern old Nubian. “What have you done, Sethos, that you drop to your knees in this place with no watching slave, or visitor present – what is it boy, what unspeakable sin?”

“Nothing, Master,” whispered Sethos with his forehead touching the floor in apology for his previously hidden thoughts, now displayed on his table in strokes of grey-blue, neat from his skill but hurried in his agony. Sethos’ heart raced for the old man was already looking towards his work.

The Iron Warrior saw the fresh papyrus at once and walked to the table, he placed the great sword on its surface, covering the sheets so that he had to slide one sheet free of the weight of metal in order to inspect it.

He glanced at Sethos with half amusement and half irritation, for the young man still had his forehead fixed to stone, his body curled into a ball, the line of his spine showing through his robes.

“What is this? Verse? *Hot* verse from my scribe? *You* wrote this?:

‘So, to touch your eyes with my eyes  
Effortlessly to taste your love at dusk and dawn  
Rush to enter dream-lands with the cymbals of your soul  
And Caress the secret partings of your thighs  
Putting deeply in  
Honey in my yearning  
Upwards driving...’

Who is this, boy – who is your lucky victim? Oh get up boy!”

“Master...” Sethos began, looked up, but dared say no more.

“Sethos! Do I see an ‘S’ to begin this verse? ‘S’ as title, as rank and name?”

Sethos’ head was bowed.

“This is a classic verse, written in the Theban style, boy?”

“Yesss,” hissed Sethos in panic.

“And does the second line begin with an ‘E’?”

The Shemsu bent down, slow with age at this late hour of an early morning, and reached towards the boy.

Sethos was red with guilt and in horror felt his jaw taken by the Nubian's fingers, and his face was brought up to meet his Master's savage view. Sethos stared at the great hanging rings pulling the Nubian's ear lobes low, and Sethos felt fear when he dared to look into those golden eyes, edged with grey. His chin was released and Sethos curled once more in a heap on the floor. Stiffly, Asha straightened his own back.

"Can I guess which other letters will lead each line, when this verse is full poured from your hot and dark night head, impudent steaming scribe?"

"Master..." came a whisper from before the Nubian's feet.

"Get up – are you a frog?"

"No, Master!" and Sethos wished that he was, able to leap into the undergrowth, into the Mother Nile.

He did not move, there was no undergrowth just the grey ankles of his dreaded Master, nothing wetter than a pin-prick of sweat on the old man's old toes. The Shemsu, looking down, speculating on what awfulness the youth might have done.

"Up!" snapped the Shemsu – to be obeyed.

The youth, sweat showing on his naked skull, rose to his feet, but did not lift his face, so that the old man took the boy's chin again and raised it so that their eyes did meet.

"Master – I dream of the new Queen!" he dared the birth of the words of sin, looking through his dark eyes, now laced with fear.

The Iron Warrior was not startled, but he did not smile either, for he wished to let the fear run: "It is a woman of Ramesses the Pharaoh – you are speaking of such a one?"

"Master... "

"I chose her, boy. You knew that she was beautiful, you know that the old Shemsu never fails his Pharaoh."

"I had not yet seen her, Master, I had only your words – another queen, another..."

"Such talk could cause you never to see again – she is of the Pharaoh and does not exist in the world of any other – she is a goddess!" There was now an edge to Asha's voice born of his affection for the youth, sensing a remote danger springing from the boy's indelicate dreams.

“Master,” Sethos turned his dark doe-eyes down once more and fell to the floor to touch the refreshing stone again with his forehead, now red with the touching; his mouth searched for the Shemsu’s toes. The Shemsu stepped back in insult, refusing the tongue.

Sethos was glad that dawn had entered the room in the footsteps of his Master. Yet each time he attempted to let the vision of her depart from his mind with the growth of dawn – each time she came back. Though the air was chill Sethos continued to sweat, and he hoped that the old Nubian could not see inside his mind. Within his skull there was no release from the vision: her white neck gashed with sawing bronze and the spurt of life, so that she might travel at the side of Ramesses for ever. There was nothing he could do.



One of the Nubians had been forced to lay down his fan so that he could assist Ramesses onto the bed. It was as well that the Nubian was regarded as furniture and did not exist for he saw the repulsion on the face of the girl as the old man’s aroma invaded her nostrils.

Ramesses, His spine curved by decay so that He was permanently bent double, turned awkwardly onto His side and beckoned the girl to join Him. His ninety years were a reek on the night air.

Mesmerised, she overcame repulsion, for here was a living god. She obeyed the gesture of His arm. She sat on the side of the bed and as she did so her elbow brushed the youth-flesh of the Nubian as he regained his fan and station, and with immobile face recommenced his duties of refreshing the air.

She glanced at the ebony frame, taut, selected for its perfection to stand by Pharaoh. She looked back at the old man as the odour of age was dissipated by the flowing fan and Seraphut forced a smile.

“Thou art beautiful,” whispered Ramesses, using the tense of a Pharaoh and reaching out so that his antler fingers touched her shoulder.

“Majesty, you...”

Ramesses’ cackling laughter, broken with a cough, interrupted the compliment that Seraphut was about to offer in the form of the deepest of lies – that Ramesses was beautiful too.

“There was a time. Can you believe my words, when you look on this death frame? A time when you would have blushed with lust at the mere

hint of my being present – and to touch me would be to taste eternity.”  
Ramesses gave a brief giggle to stress the absurdity of his present form.

“Majesty, I...”

“I was very very beautiful, no woman or man could resist me, Prince or Pharaoh or nothing – had I been a fellahin I would have been much sort after. But more: once I could drive great horses across a field of dying men and send flights from my bow which would strike dead a man fifty paces away after passing through his shield and shirt of bronze... I could leap and run and swim against the flow of the inundation... and no woman...”

“Majesty... you...”

“Silence, child – I’m Pharaoh, you have to listen to me – did they not tell you?”

He paused for a moment and then said, “What was I going to say?”

Ramesses looked into her eyes; He smiled through his wrinkled face, moving his head slightly away from her to focus the better. He smiled as He saw youth beyond his dreams. “I have lived too long,” he sighed.

Ramesses turned to the fan-bearers and nodded.

They came to the bed and eased the old man further up and to one side. Ramesses patted the linen space. As the beautiful child moved closer to His Majesty, the Nubians resumed station.

Seraphut, trembling as if with cold, lay by the side of the Great King on the linen sheet. With a weary slowness His hands moved towards her shoulder and then unerringly redirected towards the upper reaches of her robe. With little warning His eyelids fluttered, His head flopped back, and the Great King started to snore with drooped jaw and a hint of dribble seeping from His crinkled lips.

Seraphut was aware of grins stealing onto the faces of the fan-bearers. She looked their way and their faces were expressionless at once, seeing nothing anymore, forgetting all. Seraphut felt relief rush through her veins, but at once the sense of momentary safety was overtaken by confusion as to what she must do – wake the Great King? Leave Him to sleep...?

She looked at the doorkeepers and saw that they slept; looked at the Nubians – they were stirring the air according to their vocation. Seraphut lay back, deciding to wait for events and fate to solve her confusions; perhaps a new day would come with solutions. But her instructions were clear – kill the old man with love.

Two hours before dawn began to butcher the sky once more the Nubians stopped their fanning. The air was cool, even chill. Seraphut had moved, wide awake, closer to the old man. He had not moved. She had committed herself to destiny and nothing had happened. She drifted into a broken sleep, close to His withered form not daring to touch him.

She was disturbed once, as the silent Nubians drew a light linen sheet across the pair soon after the fanning was ended. The Nubians then lay, curled on their sides, one on either flank of the bed, after first waking the deaf doorkeepers to take over the watch. Only then did the Nubians sleep, and only lightly, still alert in their own dreamless darkness.

Seraphut also fell asleep, but Seraphut became aware of a deeper coldness, she shivered in her brief and already departing sleep.

She woke.

She could see everywhere, yet the lamps were out save for two which flickered, dying, marked by faint blue plumes of smoke rising up straight in the still air. She realised it was beyond dawn.

Nauseous with broken sleep she raised herself on one elbow, and she remembered that she was in the bed of the King of Egypt. She saw that the doorkeepers had their eyes on her, and even as she noticed their eyes went from her to gaze on nothing. On either side of the bed the dark forms of the Nubians rose to their feet as one, woken by her movement. Seraphut's knee beneath the covering sheet touched the leg of Pharaoh and it was very cold. She withdrew her leg.

She looked upon the old man, one hand, mottled with the bruises of age, lay across the brilliant royal linen gown He wore. His jaw had dropped. She could see a minute slit of eye-white between the painted lids of His eyes. In alarm she touched His shoulder. It was dry and cold.

“He's dead!” she gasped, stifling the delight.

The Nubians darted forward to see with a wild excitement and relief lighting up their faces too – their pension was to be release from slavery on Ramesses' death. At the sudden movement of people Ramesses sat up, twisting sideways, angry at the pain of His movement, and snapped: “Beer! I'm thirsty!”



“After all these years, after all thy training, after all this – do you not understand?” The Shemsu reached towards the Scribe's cheek and

touched him with affection. He caressed his cheek with his powerful old hand, the huge fingers grey with years, their texture gone from dark oil-sheen to dry papyrus. He enjoyed the feel of the boy's pliant youth; soft, smooth, yet firm with sinew, without a wrinkle. Sethos was pleased, for that touch meant that he was only slightly in trouble with his Master, and was a long way from a beating. Sethos lowered his head, in submission, but leaning towards his Master almost in caress.

"Pharaoh is weak, and old, and will die," smiled the Shemsu.

"He is Pharaoh and a god!"

"He is a god – but His son Merenptah rides the chariot-way and throws back the Libyan hordes; Merenptah rules, whilst my Master withers His way towards eternity. The Libyans!" The Shemsu stopped. He smiled. "Ramesses found His courage against the Libyans..."

"But, Master!" Sethos interrupted for he had heard that tale ten times. His interruption brought a bad look from the Shemsu.

"Listen! – I love Ramesses as no-one loves Him. I feared to love Him, but I did. I do. I will. I am His man. I am His Shemsu. I am His Asha. But He must die very soon – and when He dies then I shall die, and I shall die no longer fearing to love Him."

"Master – there is no need for you to die."

"I gave my Word of Words to the winds – you know it! I said I would kill myself if I did not kill Him. I broke my word, I did not kill him, so... when he dies.. and it *is* my will that I go – there is no need of a need, if it is my will. I am too old to speak to you on these matters of my own soul. I must go with my Lord. So must the young Queen. He must take with him a final broken bride."

"I know this, Lord Shemsu, but why the Lady of Dardany – why? There is no law. There was a time, I have read it Master, that when the Pharaoh died, then a thousand slaves would lose their lives with a slash," the scribe caressed his own throat. "But these are not the times of barbarians. This is a modern time. We know better!" His young voice rose a pitch in his pleading.

"It is a residual thing," said Asha. "The Queen wanted it so."

A smile was conjured on the old Nubian's face, he who was Marshal of the Chariots of Egypt and First Servant of Ramesses the Great, he who had built the tombs, and all the Ramesside monuments of Egypt.

“More!” Pharaoh had commanded. “Build more. Let eternity know that this land was ruled by Ramesses. Let me live forever in the minds of men! Build!”

And the Shemsu had built from border to border and beyond so that his Master might live for more than a thousand years, even two thousand, even for ever on earth as well as in the sky with the gods.

And he alone had brought three hundred beauties to the bed of Pharaoh so that Ramesses sired two hundred infants by the skill of Asha, and Ramesses’ blood now ran through untold veins, and would continue to do so until the centuries ceased. It would run until all humanity was born of the milk of Ramesses the Bull. Now, to be the crown upon His many crowns of love came the flowing silver-gold hair of Seraphut to shimmer in the old man’s rheumy eyes. The most beautiful of them all. This would be the one to sleep with Pharaoh for eternity, once broken in this world. It was not written that it would be so, but Asha had made it so.

The plan was Neferure’s and Pharaoh had agreed. To die in lust! The Shemsu would see that it would be done. The idea was very beautiful in Asha’s mind. Ramesses so weak and gasping, still lusting like an ancient bull, presented with a dream of dreams. It would kill him! Now this cursed boy has lost his head to her, after all this time, and the expense of his training, and the beauty of his great intelligence. Perhaps he should be whipped; it was the only way... or the gelding claws! How dare he beg for mercy from the Shemsu. But to harm this beautiful youth?.. not really.

“Perhaps you should be whipped,” hissed the Shemsu pleasantly, dismissing the gelding on account of the pleasure the boy had brought him when the nights were cold, also warm. And Sethos knew that he was lying. He knew from the old man’s eyes that he was lying, also from his lips which smiled.

“She is too beautiful,” whispered Sethos, looking up into the hawk-eyes.

“That is why!” said Asha. “That is exactly why she is chosen.”



The fan-bearers dared to listen, and the doorkeepers watched the Shemsu’s lips, their spirits made reckless by the words they saw. They watched even closer as the light faded when the moon went down. Nados used five pens that second night, forgetting the one behind his ear until

the very last moments. He was surrounded by papyrus as he wrote down every word. As an old man in the retirement college twenty years on he would still boast of that evening.

Sethos himself had rushed for more sheets, and ink and pens, passing them to Nados. Later he begged Nados for a copy and was obliged with a personally copied papyrus scroll after he had submitted to the older scribe's touch in his private room. Nados had recorded everything.

Gods and Kings were speaking of the unspeakable, it was well that Nados could write so fast. Each time Ramesses or Asha stopped to think Sethos dared to say to Asha: "And then, Master, what took place?"

Then Sethos would glance at Nados to see that his pen ran well. Sethos even spoke to Pharaoh and called him *Master* as if he were his friend. And Pharaoh cared not for he knew that this boy was of his loins; even as the Shemsu did. It had been that Cretian girl – what a beauty. He puckered his brow to remember what happened to her and could not.

At one point the great conversation slowed. The scribes eased their hands. It seemed at another point that the Shemsu was about to leave, and the lids of Pharaoh's eyes drooped. Ramesses was lying on His side, with some discomfort. The increasing pains seemed to drive away the wanderings of His mind, so that His memories came fresh and clear. Ramesses said, even as Asha stood to go, flanked by Sethos looking back on the young Queen who still had to work her magic: "Remember the Sherden Dwarf?"

Asha stopped.

He looked at Pharaoh, he turned to Sethos, nodded at the youth that the night was not yet ended and said: "My Lord, he was more faithful even than this one."

Asha flicked the back of Sethos' head, so that His Majesty smiled.

"What was his name?" croaked the King, exhausted now by the night of tales.

"He was Habdi – and a Prince."

"And a little Shemsu, a very little little Shemsu!" giggled Pharaoh. "Faithful as a dog."

"Dogs are faithful, and they do not lie!" smiled the Shemsu.

"But the Dwarf did!"

"Many times!" smiled the Shemsu again.

"Like Paser!" said Ramesses, and they both laughed.

"Ah *Paser!*" growled Asha.

“Paser!” said the King. “*Paser.*”

“The only truth in Paser was the certainty of untruth,” said Asha. “I should have left him to rot in the Beast Tower.” Asha’s mind had filled with memories of the Evil One, Paser the Vizier, he who had tried to kill Ramesses, then saved Asha himself before the walls of Troy. But for Paser Helen would have perished.”

“He saved my father!” said Ramesses.

“Who?” asked Asha.

“Paser – and it was *your* father who would have killed Seti, my father. Paser drove off your father!”

“Impossible!” snapped Asha, so that everyone looked up startled at the vehemence of Asha’s tone. “It was Luny – the Foulmouth...”

“Do not mention *his* name,” commanded Pharaoh, “for to mention it will give him life once more and we shall all be in trouble.”

“They are all gone – for ever!” said Asha. The Shemsu made as if to go away.

“Sit!” Ramesses commanded, but the Shemsu had already eased himself back onto the royal bed, sensing the wishes of Ramesses. The King’s eyes turned to Sethos, so that the boy blushed with pride. “You – boy, Shemsu’s delight... did this old beast tell you of the times we had..? We used to hunt in the reed beds at Thebes. After we had shared a handful of female caverns!”

“Two handfuls!” laughed Asha.

Pharaoh smiled, held up his hands: “*Four* handfuls!”

They giggled like young scribes.

“He saved my life, this Master of yours, not once, but many times. Everyone was saving lives... or taking them.”

“It was mine they were after,” said the Shemsu.

“Mine – you were a slave – my boy, my little ape, my creature.”

“I had enemies! For I was between them and you, my Lord.”

“Yes – but you *were* my slave! You were. They called you my rod, my play thing. And you were. They said you ate me in the night. And you did. And I’ll tell you something!” Pharaoh glowered at Sethos. “I was *his* play thing too! Yes. We loved the morning world didn’t we? – the ducks rising on the air! You had an arrow, a special arrow, made by the Sherden Dwarf... I remember? I remember! I can see feathers bursting from ducks in flight in the dawn as the arrow hit home.”

Ramesses sighed and was quiet for a time and seemed to half drift into sleep. Then His eyes opened wide. “I released you from slavery. Ah! I see it in my eyes now – you were lashed by my father. I saved you.”

“It was nothing,” Asha whispered as that memory flowed back for him too, and his right hand involuntarily rose to touch the ring in his right ear.

“You looked up at Seti, my father, the Pharaoh, the warrior king – and got a beating! A look was enough in those days. Today pretty boys stand in my presence – what is the world coming to?” Ramesses had looked at the tired Sethos who had been standing with his Master waiting to leave and had not moved when the Shemsu rejoined the Pharaoh on the bed. Sethos dropped to his knees at once and his forehead pressed the cool stones. Pharaoh smiled.

“We are as fathers and many sons,” whispered the Shemsu. “Grown familiar in our love. My boy is your boy, everyone belongs to you, as I do.”

“Remember,” said Pharaoh ignoring the excuse, delighted at the thought, leaving the youth out of sight on the floor. “Do you recall how I caught you in the desert – an animal? I made you a Prince of Egypt.”

Sethos raised his head so that Ramesses saw his face at the edge of the bed. “Listen!” whispered Pharaoh to the face so that it stayed there, “I’ll tell you how I caught him. Sethos! Boy! Get up! Ah such a lovely boy – you have an eye my Shemsu... Sethos – this Master of yours was once a desert creature.”

“I was the son of a King,” came a protest from Asha. “As he is!” Asha nodded towards Sethos, who blushed at once.

“Ha! So he is – his mother? The beauty from Crete, I think. I can see her eyes in him.”

“And I see your eyes there too,” smiled Asha, and winked at Sethos who blushed anew.

“Seti, *my* father, He did kill *your* father!” Pharaoh pointed a withered hand at Asha.

“*My* father,” growled the Shemsu, “put a spear through *your* father’s leg from more than a fifty paces! My father was killed by traitors in your father’s pay! Not by Seti, the war prince!”

“In Seti’s pay though! And Seti was Egypt. ’Twas the hand of Egypt did it!” wheezed Pharaoh happily.

And for the rest of the night the old men argued as they had argued for more than half a century, and the scribes wrote down the sacred words –

even those of the Shemsu, for he was with Pharaoh and his words were echoes of the mind of their god. Then a curious thing happened. Not noticed at first, a bird, a hoopoe, crested and proud, flew into the chamber. It had glided in with the dawn, and alighted on the bed of the king. It paused, silent and still, then dropped down to the foot of the bed. Ramesses looked at the bird, ignored it, and said: "I had courage in the end – I showed them at Kadesh – Iuny died – I stayed and lived."

The fluttering bird rose and with a straight flight was gone through the half draped opening which overlooked the streaming Nile.

Asha turned to Ramesses to announce that it was he and not the King who had saved the day at Kadesh, and he saw that Ramesses' eyes had closed, and His wheezing had stopped. He knew at once that the bird had been the carrier of the Great King's soul. It had come, and it had gone, and no-one had realised.

Asha, Prince of the Gafralla, for no reason that he could understand, suddenly sensed the perfume of the hills in his nostrils, carried on the West Wind, which was his mother. He felt a freedom beyond freedom. He saw the Great Green Valley once more, and heard the tellers of tales on the night air, speaking of his mother the Witch, and of his father the Snake Warrior who found a good day to die. When he looked again at his Pharaoh, and he saw that He was perfectly still. It was all, all, almost at an end.

Then the scribes looked up in their excitement, attracted by the silence – hoping that they would hear at last who had truly saved the day at Kadesh. All they saw were the tears on the face of the Iron Warrior, and for a moment did not know why, for they too had not noticed the silent going of their King, borne on the wings of the bird of dawn.

*When Gods Grow Old*

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