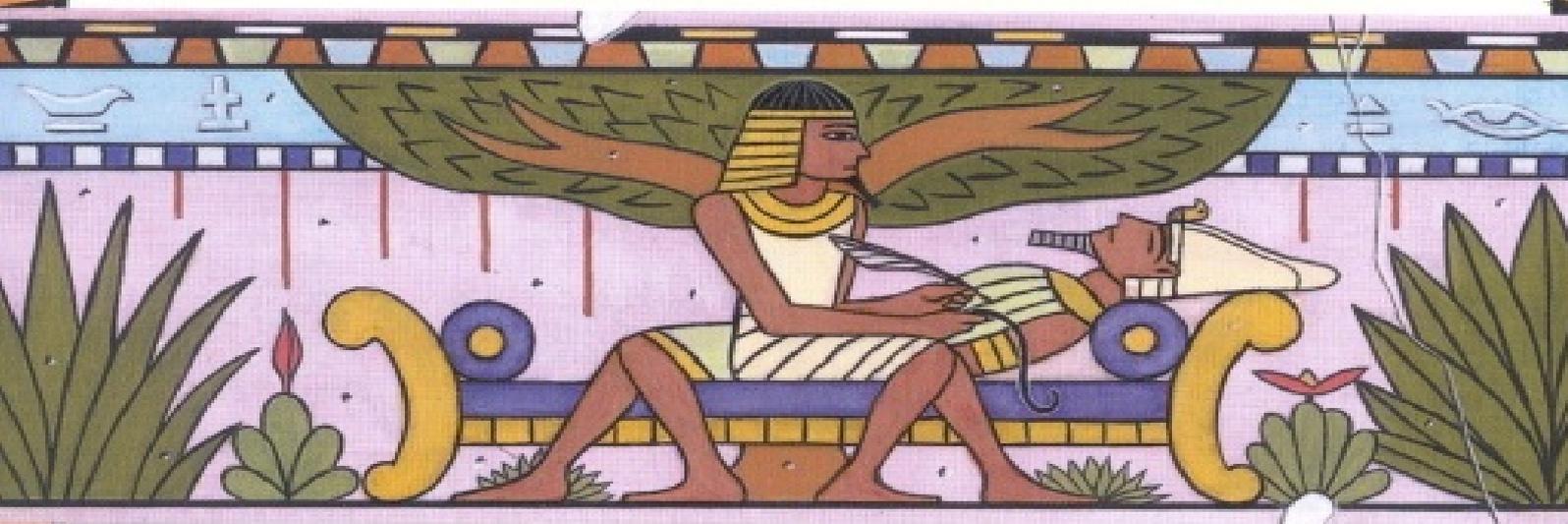


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VOLUME V

UNDER THE
WESTERN ACACIA



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RAMSES

VOLUME V

UNDER THE WESTERN ACACIA

CHRISTIAN JACQ

Translated by Mary Feeney



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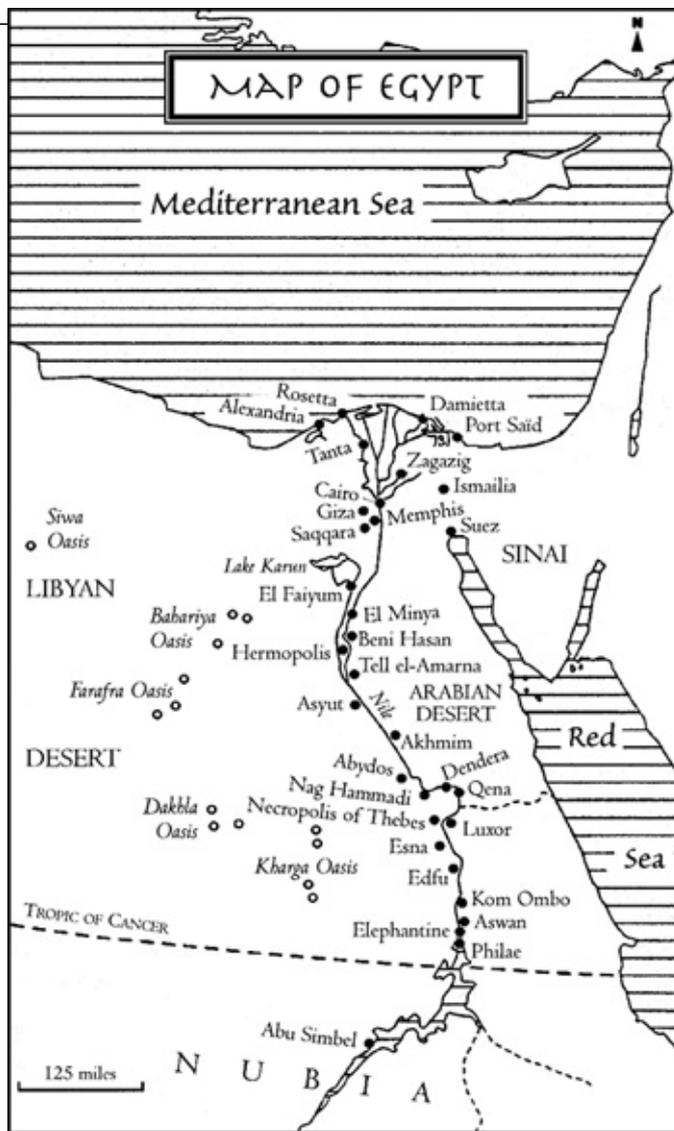
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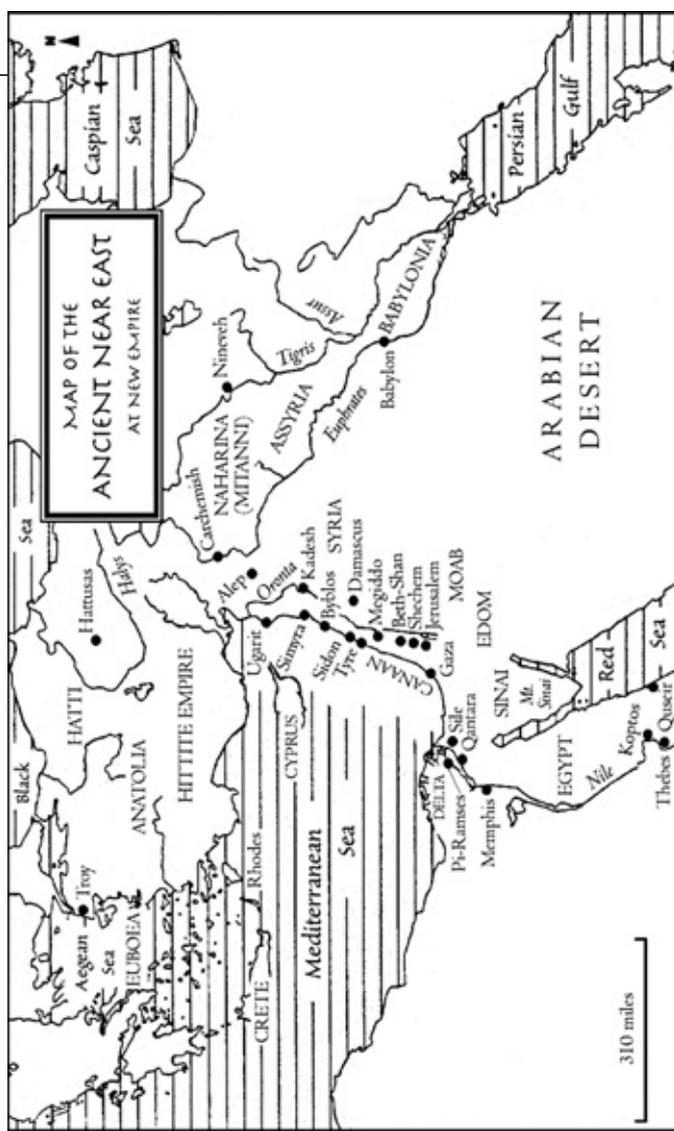
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ONE

The setting sun bathed the temples of Pi-Ramses in heavenly gold. Dubbed “the Turquoise City” after the colored tiles on its buildings, the capital Ramses the Great had built in the Nile Delta was the picture of wealth, power, and beauty.

Life was good in Pi-Ramses, but the Sardinian giant Serramanna took no pleasure in the balmy evening or the pink-streaked sky. Decked out in his horned helmet, sword at his side, whiskers curled, the former pirate who had become Ramses’ personal bodyguard rode grimly toward the villa where the Hittite prince Uri-Teshoop had spent the last several years under house arrest.

Uri-Teshoop, the deposed son of the late Emperor Muwattali, Ramses’ sworn enemy. Uri-Teshoop, who had usurped the throne from his ailing father, only to be outmaneuvered by Hattusili, the emperor’s brother. Uri-Teshoop had been spirited out of Hatti by Ahsha, the head of Egyptian diplomacy, who was Ramses’ boyhood friend.

Serramanna smiled. The fearless Anatolian warrior, a runaway! The crowning irony was that Ramses, the man Uri-Teshoop hated most in the world, was the one who had granted him political asylum in exchange for information about the Hittite troops and their state of readiness.

During Year Twenty-one of Ramses’ reign, to the surprise of both peoples, Egypt and Hatti had signed a peace treaty, pledging mutual assistance in case of outside attack. Uri-Teshoop feared the worst. Would he not make a prime scapegoat, the perfect token for Ramses to offer Hattusili to seal their pact? Yet the Pharaoh, respecting the principle of asylum, had refused to extradite his guest.

By now, Uri-Teshoop no longer counted. And Serramanna thoroughly disliked the mission that Ramses had sent him on tonight.

The Hittite’s villa was set in a palm grove on the northern edge of town. At least he’d had a comfortable life in this land of the pharaohs that he had dreamed of destroying.

Serramanna admired Ramses and would serve him faithfully to the end. However reluctantly, he would carry out the king’s terrible order.

The entrance to the villa was flanked by two of Serramanna’s handpicked guards, armed with clubs and daggers.

“Nothing to report?”

“Nothing, Chief. The Hittite is sleeping it off in the garden, down by the pool.”

The hulking Sard went through the gate and lumbered down the path to the pool. Three other guards kept a permanent watch on the former commander-in-chief of the Hittite army, who spent his time eating, drinking, swimming, and dozing.

Swallows swooped high in the sky. A hoopoe grazed Serramanna's shoulder. Jaws tense, fists clenched, eyes glowering, he prepared to do his duty. For the first time, he was sorry that he worked for Ramses.

Like an animal sensing danger, Uri-Teshoop awoke before the giant's heavy tread sounded on the path.

Tall and muscular, Uri-Teshoop had long, flowing locks; fleecy red hair covered his bare chest. Not even the Anatolian winter daunted him, and he had lost none of his strength.

Lying on the flagstone rim of the pool, eyes half-closed, he watched as Ramses the Great's bodyguard drew nearer.

So tonight was the night.

Ever since the signing of the outrageous peace treaty between Egypt and Hatti, Uri-Teshoop had felt his time running out. A hundred times he had thought of escaping, but Serramanna's men had never given him a chance. He'd escaped extradition only to be bled like a pig, slaughtered by a brute as ruthless as himself.

"Get up," ordered Serramanna.

Uri-Teshoop was not accustomed to being ordered around. Slowly, as if savoring his final act, he rose to face the man sent to slit his throat.

The Sard's expression was one of barely contained fury.

"Go ahead, butcher," spat the Hittite. "Do what your master told you. I won't even give you the pleasure of fighting me."

Serramanna's fingers gripped the pommel of his short sword.

"Clear out."

Uri-Teshoop could hardly believe his ears.

"What do you mean?"

"You're free."

"Free? To do what?"

"To leave this place and go where you please. Pharaoh is applying the law. There's no longer any reason to hold you here."

"Is this some kind of joke?"

"No, it's a sign of peace. But if you make the mistake of staying in Egypt and cause the least trouble here, I'll arrest you. You won't be a political exile anymore, just a common-law criminal. Give me the slightest cause to run you through with my sword, and believe me, I will."

"But tonight you're not allowed to touch me. Am I right?" Uri-Teshoop taunted.

"Get out!"



A reed mat, a kilt, a pair of sandals, a slab of bread, a bunch of onions, and two faience amulets to swap for food: that was all Uri-Teshoop was given upon his release. The Hittite prince had now been wandering the streets of Pi-Ramses for several hours like a sleepwalker. His newfound freedom made his head spin; he could hardly think straight.

There was no finer city than Pi-Ramses, ran the popular song:

*Long live the town of Pi-Ramses,
Where the hoopoe and nightingale sing
In the shade of acacia and sycamore,
Where the poor man lives like a king.
Long live the boats and the fishes,
Long live the breeze from the sea.
Long live the Turquoise City,
The most wonderful place to be.*

Uri-Teshoop fell under the spell of the capital built in a fertile region on a loop of the Nile framed by two broad canals. There were rich grasslands, orchards where prized apples grew, vast olive groves that yielded rivers of oil, vineyards producing a soft, fruity wine, flower-decked cottages . . . Pi-Ramses was far different from rugged Hattusa, the capital of the Hittite empire, a fortified city high in the central Anatolian plateau.

A painful thought wrenched Uri-Teshoop from his torpor. He might never become Emperor of Hatti, but he would get revenge on the Pharaoh who had freed him, the fool. Eliminating Ramses, considered a god since the victory at Kadesh (where he had defeated a coalition that should have crushed him) would plunge Egypt—perhaps even the entire Near East—into chaos. Fate had treated Uri-Teshoop cruelly; his only consolation was that his destructive urges had survived intact.

Milling around him was a colorful crowd of Egyptians, Nubians, Syrians, Libyans, Greeks, and others who had come to admire the capital that the Hittites had hoped to raze—before they caved in to Ramses.

Destroying Ramses . . . how could a fallen warrior possibly pull it off?

“Your Highness,” murmured a voice behind him.

Uri-Teshoop wheeled around.

“Your Highness, do you remember me?”

Uri-Teshoop looked down at a compact man with lively dark eyes. A linen headband held his thick hair in place; he sported a trim goatee. This obsequious character wore a brightly striped robe that reached to his ankles.

“Raia . . . is it really you?”

The Syrian merchant bowed.

“But you were our spy. What are you doing back in Pi-Ramses?”

“It’s peacetime, Your Highness. A new era has begun. There’s been an amnesty. I was a rich trader with a good reputation in Egypt; I’ve simply started back in business.

No one tried to stop me, and I’ve rebuilt my upper-class clientele.”

Raia had been near the top of a Hittite spy ring that operated for years, attempting to destabilize Ramses’ regime. When Serramanna broke up the network, the Syrian had managed to escape and then return to his adopted homeland after a stay in Hattusa.

“Well, good for you, Raia.”

“Good for us.”

“What do you mean by that?”

“Do you believe that this is a chance meeting?”

Uri-Teshoop studied Raia more attentively.

“You mean you trailed me?”

“I heard conflicting rumors about what might happen to you. For more than a month, my men have kept up a constant watch on your villa. I gave you time to get your feet on the ground, and now

. . . well, now here I am. May I offer you a cool beer?"

~~Uri-Teshoop wavered. It had been an eventful night. Yet his instincts told him that the Syrian merchant could help him move forward with his plans.~~

In the tavern, their discussion was lively. Raia encouraged Uri-Teshoop's gradual metamorphosis from released prisoner into ruthless warrior, ready for any conquest. The Syrian merchant had not been mistaken: despite years of exile, the former commander-in-chief of the Hittite army was as bloodthirsty as ever.

"I'm not a big talker, Raia. Tell me what you want from me."

The merchant spoke confidentially. "I have only one question, Your Highness. Do you want revenge on Ramses?"

"He humiliated me. Peace with Egypt was no doing of mine! But overcoming this Pharaoh seems impossible."

Raia nodded.

"That depends, Your Highness, that depends . . ."

"Do you doubt my courage?"

"With all due respect, courage won't be enough."

"Why would you, a merchant, want to throw yourself into such risky business?"

Raia smiled a twisted smile. "Because my hate is as ardent as your own."



TWO

Wearing a golden collar and the pharaoh's traditional simple white kilt, Ramses the Great was celebrating the rites of dawn at his Eternal Temple, the Ramesseum, on the West Bank of Thebes. Gently he roused the divine power hidden within the *naos*, or inner sanctum, thanks to which energy would circulate between heaven and earth, Egypt would be at one with the cosmos, and the human tendency toward destruction would be curbed.

At the age of fifty-five, Ramses was tall and athletic, his large head crowned with a mane of red gold hair. He had a broad forehead, arched eyebrows, and piercing eyes; his curving nose was long and thin, his ears round and delicately rimmed. He radiated magnetism, strength, and natural authority. In his presence, the sturdiest of characters lost their composure. A god clearly lived within this Pharaoh who had covered the country with monuments and flattened every enemy.

Thirty-three years on the throne . . . Ramses alone knew the true weight of the ordeals that he had endured. First came the death of his father, Seti, leaving him rudderless at the very moment the Hittites began to wage war on Egypt. Without the help of Amon, his heavenly father, Ramses, deserted by his own troops, would never have triumphed at Kadesh. There had been years of happiness and peace, certainly, but then his mother, Tuya, the model of rectitude, had joined her illustrious husband in the country of light where the souls of the just dwelt for all eternity. Fate's next blow was even crueler, inflicting a loss from which the king would never recover. His Great Royal Wife, Nefertari, had died in his arms at Abu Simbel in Nubia, where Ramses had built twin temples to glorify the royal couple's indestructible unity.

Pharaoh had lost the three beings he loved most in the world, the three people who had made him who he was and whose love was limitless. Still, he must continue to reign, to embody Egypt with the same faith and the same enthusiasm.

Four other faithful companions had also left him: his pair of war horses, so valiant on the field of battle; Fighter, the pet lion that had more than once saved his life; and Watcher, the yellow dog, now a royal mummy. Another Watcher had taken his place, then a third, who was just a pup.

Gone, too, was the Greek poet Homer, who had ended his days beneath the lemon tree in his beloved Egyptian garden. Ramses nostalgically recalled his conversations with the author of the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*, who had come to admire the civilization of the pharaohs.

After Nefertari's death, Ramses had been tempted to step down and transfer power to his eldest son, Kha. But his circle of friends had opposed the idea, reminding the monarch that his life was no longer his own and that a pharaoh must serve until he died. No matter what he suffered as a man, he must fulfill his duty to the end. The law of Ma'at required it, and Ramses, like his predecessors, would bow to this principle of justice and harmony.

It was here, in his Temple of Millions of Years, which emitted the magic flux that protected his reign, that Ramses drew strength. Although an important ceremony awaited him, he lingered in the halls of the Ramesseum. It comprised a vast enclosure with two great courtyards where pillars depicted the king as Osiris, a huge hall with forty-eight columns, and a sanctuary where the divine presence resided. Access to the temple was through massive monumental gates, or pylons, inscribed with texts saying that they rose to the heavens. On the south side of the forecourt stood the palace, and around the holy site were an extensive library, storerooms, a treasury containing precious metals, the scribes' offices, and the priests' quarters. The temple complex hummed with activity night and day, for the service of the gods knew no rest.

Ramses spent a few too-brief moments in the part of the shrine dedicated to his wife, Nefertari, and his mother, Tuya. He contemplated the reliefs showing the queen's union with the scent of the god Amon-Ra, at once secret and luminous, and then the scenes where she nursed the Pharaoh, guaranteeing him eternal youth.

They must be growing restless in the palace, he realized. The king tore himself away from his memories, not stopping to look at the colossal statue carved from a single block of pink granite and entitled *Ramses, the Light of Kings*, nor the acacia tree planted in Year Two of his reign. He headed straight for the audience chamber with its sixteen columns, where the foreign diplomats had gathered



With her saucy green eyes, pert nose, and rounded chin, Iset the Fair was vivacious and charming. Even though she was past fifty, the years never seemed to touch her; she was as graceful and winning as ever.

“Has the king left the temple yet?” she asked her chambermaid, a note of concern in her voice.

“Not yet, Your Majesty.”

“The ambassadors will be furious!”

“Don't you worry. An audience with Ramses is such a privilege that no one minds waiting.”

To be with Ramses . . . yes, it was the greatest of privileges! Iset recalled their first summer of love, when he was a brash young prince, not yet destined for power. How happy they had been in their reed hut at the edge of a wheat field, secretly discovering pleasure in each other! Then the sublime Nefertari appeared on the scene, unaware that she had all the qualities required of a Great Royal Wife. Ramses had chosen well in Nefertari; yet it was Iset the Fair who had given him two sons, Kha and Merenptah. For a short while she had felt some resentment toward Ramses, until she realized that she was quite unprepared for a queen's overwhelming responsibilities. Her lone ambition was to share the existence of the man she loved, to however great or small an extent he allowed.

Neither Nefertari nor Ramses had shunted her aside. As “secondary wife,” according to protocol Iset had been blessed to stay close to the king, living in his shadow. Some claimed she was wasting her life, but Iset only laughed. To her, even being a servant to Ramses would be better than marrying some stupid, pretentious diplomat.

Nefertari's death had been profoundly distressing. The queen was no rival, but a friend for whom Iset felt the greatest admiration and respect. Realizing that no words could lessen the monarch's

heartbreak, she remained on the sidelines, silent and discreet.

~~And then something inconceivable occurred.~~

At the end of the mourning period, after Ramses himself had sealed the door to Nefertari's tomb, the king asked Iset the Fair to assume the position of Great Royal Wife. No King of Egypt could reign alone, for Pharaoh united the masculine and feminine principles, joined in harmony.

Iset the Fair had never expected to become Queen of Egypt; any comparison to Nefertari terrified her. Yet Ramses' will was law. Iset assented, despite her anxiety. She became "the Sweet of Love, She Who Sees Horus and Set at One in Pharaoh, Lady of the Two Lands of Upper and Lower Egypt, She Whose Voice Gives joy." These traditional titles were of no importance. The true miracle was sharing Ramses' existence, his hopes and sorrows. Iset was the wife of the greatest king the world had ever known, and his faith in her was enough to make her happy.

"His Majesty is asking for you," said the chambermaid.

In her vulture headdress festooned with two tall plumes, her long white robe and floating red sash, her golden necklace and bracelets, the Great Royal Wife made her way to the audience chamber. Her noble upbringing served her well in official ceremonies. She knew the gathered dignitaries would be watching her like a hawk, just as they watched Pharaoh.

Iset the Fair stopped a few steps from Ramses.

He was her first and only love, yet he never ceased to impress her. He towered over her; she would never take the full measure of his thought. Yet the magic of passion had bridged the yawning gap between them.

"Are you ready?" he asked.

The Queen of Egypt bowed her head.

When the royal pair appeared, the room fell silent. Ramses and Iset the Fair took their place on the throne.

The Pharaoh's boyhood friend and secretary of state, elegant, debonair Ahsha, stepped forward. His refined appearance—impeccable robe, trim mustache, intelligent, sparkling eyes—and somewhat haughty manner made it hard to believe that he had worked as a daring undercover agent in Hittite territory. With his love of women and the finer things in life, Ahsha might have looked on the world with jaded eyes, yet he burned with a mission that nothing and no one could quench: working for the greater glory of Ramses, the one man for whom he felt a boundless, if unspoken, admiration.

"Your Majesty," declared Ahsha, "the south submits to you and brings you its riches, requesting the breath of life from you. The north implores the miracle of your presence. The east offers all its land; the west kneels humbly, its chiefs approach with their heads bowed."

The Hittite ambassador broke away from the crowd of diplomats and kowtowed to the royal couple.

"Pharaoh is the guiding light," he declared, "the fire that gives life or destroys it. May his *ka* live forever, may the weather favor him, may the inundation be provident. It is he who channels divine energy, he in whom heaven and earth are joined. For Ramses has quelled insurrections, and all the world is at peace."

Presents followed the round of speeches. From deepest Nubia to the northern protectorates of Canaan and Syria, the empire paid tribute to its master, Ramses the Great.



The palace was asleep; a single light shone in the king's office.

"What's going on here, Ahsha?" asked Ramses.

“The Two Lands are thriving, every province is prospering, the granaries are full to bursting, you’re the life of your people, you—”

“No more official speeches. Why was the Hittite ambassador so fulsome in his praise?”

“Diplomatic language.”

“No, I sense something more. Don’t you agree?”

Ahsha ran a manicured index finger through his scented mustache.

“I admit that I’m troubled.”

“Could Hattusili have second thoughts about our treaty?”

“No, he wouldn’t couch it in those terms.”

“Tell me what you really think.”

“Believe me, I’m puzzled.”

“With the Hittites, leaving questions unanswered could be a fatal mistake.”

“Am I to understand that you want me to find out the truth?”

“We’ve had too many peaceful years; lately you’ve lost your edge.”



THREE

Short, slight, and thin despite the enormous quantities of food he consumed at all hours of the day and night, Ahmeni, like Ahsha, was a boyhood friend of Ramses. A scribe to the core, a tireless worker, he reigned over a limited staff of twenty specialized aides who prepared briefs for the Pharaoh on essential issues. Ahmeni displayed remarkable efficiency, and despite the envious souls who heaped unfounded criticism on him, Ramses held him in the highest confidence.

Despite his bad back, Ahmeni always insisted on lugging piles of confidential documents on wooden tablets or papyrus. His face was so drained of color that he often seemed on the verge of fainting. Yet he wore out his assistants, required very little sleep, and wielded reed pens and brushes for hours on end to compose reports for Ramses' eyes only.

Since Pharaoh had decided to spend several months in Thebes, Ahmeni had gone along with several members of his staff. Officially "sandal-bearer to the king," the scribe cared nothing for titles and honors. Following Ramses' example, his sole obsession was the country's prosperity. So he allowed himself no respite, for fear of committing a fatal error.

Ahmeni was shoveling down some barley porridge and farmer's cheese when Ramses entered his document-filled office.

"Finished your lunch?"

"No matter, Your Majesty. The fact that you're here doesn't augur well."

"Your last few reports seemed rather positive."

"*Seemed?* Why *seemed?* You aren't implying that I'm missing something, are you?"

With age, Ahmeni had grown defensive and snappish.

"I'm not suggesting any such thing," Ramses said serenely. "I'm only trying to understand."

"Understand what?"

"Isn't there one area that concerns you somewhat?"

Ahmeni thought out loud: "The irrigation system is running smoothly; so are the dikes. The provincial governors are obeying directives, with no undue tendency to act on their own. Agriculture is thriving, the people have enough to eat and adequate lodging. Religious feasts are observed as planned, the companies of builders, quarrymen, stonecutters, sculptors, and painters are at work throughout the country. No, I see no problem."

Ramses should have been reassured, for Ahmeni had no equal when it came to spotting flaws in Egypt's administrative and economic system. Yet the king still looked thoughtful.

"Is there something Your Majesty hasn't told me?"

"You know that I can't keep anything from you."

"Then what is this all about?"

"The Hittite ambassador was much too flattering about Egypt."

"Bah! All the Hittites know how to do is make war and tell lies."

"I sense a storm brewing right inside Egypt, a storm with deadly fallout."

Ahmeni took the monarch's premonition seriously. Like his father, Seti, Ramses had strong ties to the terrifying thunder god Set, who also defended the bark of the sun against attacking monsters.

"Right inside Egypt?" repeated the scribe, unnerved. What did this omen mean?

"If Nefertari were still in the land of the living, she could see into the future for us."

Ahmeni rolled up a scroll and straightened his brushes—everyday gestures to dispel the waves of regret that now washed over him as well as Ramses. Nefertari had been the soul of beauty, intelligence, and grace, the peaceful smile of an accomplished civilization. She had almost made him forget his work—unlike Iset the Fair, who was no favorite of the Pharaoh's private secretary. Ramses had no doubt been right to elevate her rank, although in Ahmeni's opinion the role of queen was beyond her. The one real compensation was that she loved Ramses.

"Does Your Majesty have anything specific in mind?"

"I'm afraid not."

"We'll have to be twice as vigilant, then."

"I don't like waiting for trouble."

"I know, I know," grumbled Ahmeni. "Here I thought I might finally take a day off, but I see that will have to wait."



Predominantly white, with touches of red on the top and green on the sides, several feet long, flat-headed and thick-tailed, the horned viper slithered sideways toward the foot of the palm tree where a couple lay entwined. After a day beneath the sand, the reptile had come out to hunt at nightfall. In the hot season its bite was instantly fatal.

Neither the man nor the woman, in their passionate embrace, seemed aware of the danger. Felin limber, and laughing, the lovely Nubian obliged her lover, a swarthy, solid-looking man of fifty, to call on all the resources of his virility. Now tender, now demanding, the Egyptian stood no chance against the Nubian beauty, making love to her with the eagerness of a first encounter. In the balmy night, their shared pleasure was as torrid as the summer sun.

The viper was within striking distance.

The man gently wrestled the woman onto her back and kissed her breasts. She was ready for him. Eyes locked, they consumed each other hungrily.

Lotus reached out a quick, sure hand to grasp the horned viper by the neck. The reptile hissed and bit into empty air.

"Nice catch," commented Setau, without breaking his rhythm. "We'll get some fine venom without even having to hunt."

Suddenly Lotus seemed to lose interest.

"I have a bad feeling."

"Because of the viper?"

“Ramses is in danger.”

~~Setau always took such pronouncements seriously. He might be a snake charmer, a boyhood friend of the Pharaoh's, and Ramses' man in the province of Kush—but his wife was a sorceress. Together they had caught an incalculable number of reptiles, each one more dangerous than the next, extracting the venom for medicinal purposes.~~

Fiercely independent, Setau and Lotus had nonetheless accompanied Ramses on his military expeditions in both the north and the south, caring for the sick and wounded. In peacetime they had been in charge of a vast research laboratory until Pharaoh asked for their help in Nubia, much to their delight. The spineless viceroy to whom they reported would have tried to interfere with their initiatives, yet he feared this couple whose official residence was guarded by cobras.

“What sort of danger?” Setau asked with a frown.

“I don't know.”

“Do you see a face?”

“No,” replied Lotus. “It was just a sick feeling. For one split second, I sensed a threat to Ramses.”

Still gripping the viper firmly, she stood up.

“You've got to do something.”

“What can I do here in Nubia?”

“Let's leave for the capital.”

“Once we're gone, the viceroy will undo all our good work.”

“I'm sorry, but if Ramses needs our help, we ought to be by his side.”

Burly Setau took orders from no man, but he had long ago learned never to contradict his soft-spoken wife.



The high priest of Karnak, Nebu, had lived to a great age. As the sage Ptah-hotep wrote in his famous *Maxims*, advancing years meant perpetual fatigue, recurring weakness, and a tendency to doze even during the day. Eyesight and hearing diminished, the heart slowed, speech failed, bones ached, the sense of taste disappeared as nasal congestion increased, and standing and sitting grew equally painful.

Despite these ailments, old Nebu continued to fulfill his mission from Ramses: to tend the temple of Karnak and its vast estates, preserving the riches of the great god Amon. The high priest delegated the daily running of the complex to Bakhen, the Second Prophet, who oversaw eighty thousand construction workers, craftsmen, field hands, fruit growers, vintners, and other employees.

When Ramses first named him high priest, Nebu had no illusions. The young monarch wanted to bring the state-within-a-state under his control. He demanded loyalty. Yet Nebu was no mere figurehead; he had fought to keep other temples from plundering Karnak's wealth and power. Since Pharaoh took care to maintain harmony in the country as a whole, Nebu had considered his tenure blessed.

The old man, who was kept informed by Bakhen, rarely left his modest three-room dwelling near Karnak's sacred lake. In the evening he liked to water the iris beds on either side of his front door. When he found he could no longer care for them, he would ask the king to release him from his duties.

Nebu was astounded to see a stranger pulling weeds in his flower bed. “No one but me touches those irises!” he said testily.

“Not even the Pharaoh of Egypt?”

Ramses stood up and turned to face him.

~~“Your Majesty, I beg your—”~~

“You’re right to take personal care of this treasure, Nebu. You’ve done well by Egypt and Karnak. Planting, helping things grow, keeping them alive, so fragile and beautiful . . . is there any nobler calling? After Nefertari died, I considered leaving my cares behind and becoming a gardener.”

“Unthinkable, Your Majesty.”

“I thought you’d be more understanding.”

“An old man like me can retire with a clear conscience, but you . . .”

Ramses contemplated the rising moon.

“A storm is brewing, Nebu. I need reliable, competent men to deal with the forces that may be unleashed. I’m not letting you retire yet, no matter how old and frail you claim to be. Keep running Karnak with a firm hand.”



FOUR

The ambassador from Hatti, a wiry little man around sixty, entered the State Department lobby. According to custom, he laid a bouquet of chrysanthemums and lilies on the stone altar and bowed to the looming statue of a baboon. This was the animal form of Thoth, the patron of scribes, god of language and knowledge.

Then the ambassador addressed a lance-wielding officer.

“The secretary is expecting me,” he said crisply.

“I’ll announce your visit.”

Attired in a fringed robe of red and blue, his dark hair shining with aromatic oil, a short beard framing his jaw, the ambassador paced.

A smiling Ahsha came out to greet him.

“I haven’t kept you waiting too long, have I? Let’s go into the garden, dear friend, where it will be quieter.”

Palm and jojoba trees pleasantly shaded a blue lotus pool. On a pedestal table, a servant placed alabaster goblets full of cool beer along with a basket of figs, then withdrew discreetly.

“Rest assured,” said Ahsha, “we’re quite alone.”

The Hittite ambassador hesitated to sit down on a folding wooden chair with a comfortable-looking green linen seat pad.

“What are you so afraid of?”

“You, Ahsha.”

The Egyptian diplomat’s smile never left his face.

“I’ve been a spy in your country, I grant you, but that’s all in the past. Today I’m an official with a reputation to uphold and no desire at all for wild adventures.”

“Why should I believe you?”

“Because, like you, I have only one goal in mind: strengthening the peace between our two peoples.”

“Has Pharaoh replied to Emperor Hattusili’s latest letter?”

“Of course. Ramses sent excellent news of Queen Iset and his horses, repeating how pleased he was to note that the peace treaty is in full force, forever uniting Egypt and Hatti.”

The ambassador's face closed.

~~“From our point of view, that's quite insufficient.”~~

“What were you hoping for?”

“Emperor Hattusili has been shocked by the tone of Pharaoh's last few letters. They made him feel that Ramses considers him as a subject, not an equal.”

The diplomat's own tone was almost aggressive.

“Would you say that his discontent has reached alarming proportions?” inquired Ahsha.

“I'm afraid so.”

“How could such a slight misunderstanding affect our alliance?”

“The Hittites are proud. Anyone wounding their pride attracts retribution.”

“Aren't we blowing a minor incident out of proportion?”

“From our point of view, it's a major incident.”

“I'm afraid I see . . . But couldn't we seek a negotiable solution?”

“Our position isn't negotiable.”

Ahsha had been afraid this was coming. At Kadesh, Hattusili had been commander of the coalition that Ramses defeated. Now the emperor was seeking any possible means to reassert his dominance.

“Does this mean you'd consider . . .”

“Breaking the treaty? It does,” the Hittite ambassador said flatly.

Ahsha decided to use his secret weapon.

“Would this help to smooth things over?”

He handed the Hittite a letter Ramses had written. Intrigued, the ambassador read it aloud:

May this letter find you in the best of health, dear brother Hattusili, and your wife, family, horses, and provinces as well. I have just examined your complaints: you believe that I treat you as one of my subjects, and that grieves me. Be certain that I hold you in all the consideration due your rank, for you alone are emperor of the Hittites. I assure you that I regard you as my brother.

The envoy was obviously astonished.

“Did Ramses write this?”

“It's in his own hand.”

“Is the Pharaoh of Egypt acknowledging his error?”

“Ramses wants peace. And I have an important announcement: an International Center will soon open in Pi-Ramses, permanently staffed and at the disposal of the diplomatic corps. The Egyptian capital will host a permanent dialogue with its allies and vassals.”

“Remarkable,” conceded the Hittite.

“Our hope is that this initiative will pacify your country.”

“I'm afraid it won't.”

Now Ahsha began to worry in earnest. “Am I to conclude that nothing will allay the emperor's dissatisfaction?”

“I may as well tell you straight out that Hattusili also wishes to keep the peace. Except that he's proposing one condition . . .”

The Hittite ambassador spelled out the emperor's true intentions. The smile quickly faded from Ahsha's face.



As they did every morning, celebrants said prayers for Seti's *ka*—his spiritual essence—at his magnificent temple of Gurnah on the West Bank at Thebes. The priest in charge of funerary offerings was about to set a tray of grapes, figs, and juniper wood on the altar when one of his subordinates whispered a few words in his ear.

“Pharaoh, here? But no one told me!”

Turning around, the priest spied the monarch's tall silhouette in a white linen robe. Ramses' power and magnetism set him apart from the other celebrants.

Pharaoh took the tray and entered the chapel where his father's soul lived on. It was here at Gurnah that Seti had proclaimed Ramses as his successor, having guided his younger son lovingly yet firmly toward that point ever since adolescence. The twin crowns of Egypt, “Great of Magic,” had been carefully fitted to the prince's head. He was the Son of Light, and now his destiny was entwined with Egypt's.

Succeeding Seti had seemed impossible. Yet Ramses' true freedom had lain in having no choice but living the law, and satisfying the gods in order to benefit humankind.

Today, Seti, Tuya, and Nefertari roamed the byways of eternity, sailing in their celestial barks. On earth, their tombs and temples immortalized their name. It was toward their *ka* that humans would turn when they felt the need to pierce the mysteries of the afterlife.

When the service was over, Ramses headed for the temple gardens, which were dominated by a sycamore full of herons' nests.

The sad, sweet sound of an oboe enchanted him. A quiet tune, grave yet lilting, as if saying that hope could bring an end to pain.

Seated on a low wall, framed in foliage, a woman sat playing. Her hair was black and shiny, her features as chiseled as those of a goddess, Meritamón, aged thirty-three, was at the height of her beauty.

Ramses felt a pang, for she was the image of her mother, Nefertari. A gifted musician, Meritamón had known since girlhood that she was suited to the religious life, playing tunes for the gods in some secluded temple. Such a cloistered existence had been Nefertari's dream—an impossible dream once Ramses' love had led her to become his Great Royal Wife. Meritamón could easily have claimed a prominent rank among the temple musicians at Karnak, yet she preferred to remain at Gurnah, close to Seti's soul.

The final notes filtered toward the sun. The lovely musician set her instrument down on the wall and opened her blue-green eyes.

“Father! Have you been here long?”

Ramses took his daughter in a long embrace.

“I've missed you, Meritamón.”

“Pharaoh is the spouse of Egypt; all her people are his children. With more than a hundred royal children, I'm flattered that you still remember me.”

He stepped back and admired her.

“You know that the title of royal son or daughter is an honorary one. And you're the only child of Nefertari, the love of my life.”

“Now you're married to Iset the Fair.”

“Do you mind?”

“No, you made the right decision. Iset is devoted to you.”

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