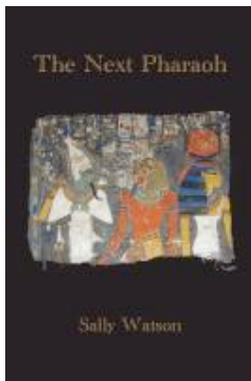


The Next Pharaoh



Sally Watson



General Horemheb is confident of becoming Pharaoh when Ay dies childless. Over-confident? He understands men. But not, alas, women, who are as unpredictable and disobedient as cats. The gods, possibly offended, challenge him with plots, pretenders, disappearances, assassins, magic, and willful women - not to mention an imperious kitten who rides his shoulder and whose goddess he had better not offend! Becoming the Next Pharaoh turns out more complicated than he had supposed!

The Next Pharaoh

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THE NEXT
PHARAOH

by

Sally Watson

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CHAPTER ONE: THE GREAT GENERAL

Dawn. On one side of the large oasis, it was the sun created by a single God Yawa on the fourth day, which obediently rose at the time and place designated, to shine over all of His world. On the other side, it was Ra in his chariot who leaped into the sky rejoicing, blessing the Two Lands of the Nile from Nubia far in the south to the Delta and the northern coast. His perilous nightly journey through the underworld had again ended safely, and now, shooting shafts of glorious warmth and light over a desert still chill from the winter night, he looked benignly down on all his people and even on anything that affected his people. Especially here, where Canaan met Egypt in a town of tents sharing a large oasis (usually fairly amicably) with a semi-permanent mud-brick garrison. The raging heat was almost always confined to the sun.

The exact nature of the sun was sometimes debated between the two peoples--though not often nor with rancor. This small isolated tribe of Amurru, who had acquired a god and language and customs from a large tribe of Habiru, held that there was nothing to debate: there was only one Truth, one God: theirs. The Egyptians (who called their country Khemet¹, Black Land) were comfortable with the principle of duality, wherein one thing (or god) was frequently also another, and all truths were possible. So Ra was a mighty god himself but also the Great Temu, also called Atum, who created the cosmos. In fact, Ra or Yawa, there was in fact little difference in the lands around the garrisons. To south and east, desert and mountains stretched along the Red Sea to the turquoise, garnet and copper mines. West, it humped and bumped, tawny-red, to the Black Lands and Nile. North was the sea called Great Green.

Effulgent Ra, ascending the lucent sky, sent his rays over the tumble of rocky outcrop and crag to shine on something as yet invisible to the Egyptian oasis or even the outposts. It was only a light inspection force, singing as it marched: there was peace on the Sinai frontier these

¹ Renamed Egypt, a thousand years later (along with most places, gods and pharaohs) by Alexander and his conquering Greeks.

days. Three large military barges waited back at the great river, but here were merely five wicker-sided chariots, a dozen Medjay archers and sixty foot-soldiers to be rotated with those in the garrison, a string of patient asses carrying provisions, the General's portable luxury pavilion--and General Horemheb himself, mischief behind his stern face, about to pay one of his Surprise Visits to the garrison.

A tall, hard-muscled man in his mid-forties with the powerful legs and shoulders of a seasoned warrior, he drove the leading chariot at the head of the not-quite-grinning foot soldiers who fondly hoped to catch the garrison, literally, on the hop, scuttling around trying to pretend they had not slept late. They stopped singing as they drew nearer. It was an old game enjoyed by all but any so caught--and much better for them if they were not. While laxity did not reap the severe consequences of--say--theft, Horemheb's men loved him not least for his stern justice.

They smiled into their god's exuberant rays.

Horemheb saw Ra with deeper knowledge. Forty years ago a willful small boy had been given into the tutelage of a wayward priest who during ten mutually challenging years taught him not only reading and writing, foreign languages and history, strategy and self-discipline, but also some of the ancient Wisdom preserved for thousands of years by the astronomer-mages of Innu. Consequently, Horemheb knew Ra as a major aspect of the Great Oneness who Created all. His education was a mixed blessing, robbing him forever of the comfort of a simple belief, and creating a deep, complex and often conflicted personality.

He turned his attention from the numinous. They were nearing the garrison. The warning trumpet should sound presently from the first outpost.

It had better!

They speeded up.

The Egyptian garrison, well-trained, were always up by dawn. They were a small race, warm brown of skin, with brown or black hair, brows and lashes. Though a short thick thatch of hair was encouraged as protection against Ra, all body hairs were sensibly plucked for coolness and cleanliness. The soldiers wore sturdy linen kilts reaching from waist halfway down the thighs, with spears and shields handy.

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This dawn, they were unusually alert. So, too, were the Amurru across the oasis, decently clad in long tunics and robes, and with luxuriantly long full hair and beards. Did they tend to glance westward? An Egyptian or two certainly did. Speculatively. Would the girl's prediction prove right or wrong?

Trumpets rang bright and sharp from a high lookout to the west. Soldiers, expectant and grinning, dropped their morning tasks, seized waiting spears, bows and tall shields, donned the thick pointed army aprons which protected their most precious attributes, and formed a double rank along the road. The garrison, headed by young Captain Simontu, was already waiting in full accoutrements by the time Horemheb had them in his keen predator's sight. They were far better prepared than Horemheb could account for, given the short time they had had.

Interesting.

A good general always takes note of the unusual, and Horemheb was a very good general. He pulled his chariot up, stood impassive for a moment while the garrison dogs rushed forward barking furiously, recognized a pack leader, and fawned. (Dogs always loved and obeyed the general--unlike cats, who, being sacred, obeyed no one.) He ignored them, still studying the ranks of men, eyes like a falcon's under thick brows.

This was a man of more elegance than beauty, with strong cheeks and nose, remarkably good teeth visible in a grin born of bone-deep understanding of man's frailty--including his own. He contrived to give the impression of a huge-jawed river-bull while actually looking more like the raptor he was named for, and moving like a lion. He dressed like his officers, short white linen tunic sleeved only on the left, leaving his right arm free for action. His sandals were sturdy, his headdress plain and practical, his apron that of his men--and while they waited at smug attention he stood there simply observing.

Across the oasis, the Amurru bustled around their own breakfast, a few of them volunteering smiles in Horemheb's direction. This, too, was unusual, since the two groups had for years coexisted in a state of mutual tolerance somewhere between wary peace and amicable

disapproval, far short of warm friendship. Unusual, therefore also interesting. Horemheb still watched, missing little.

So, over by the latrines, did an old itinerant priest. In his worn tunic of unbleached linen without the traditional lion-skin, only plucked brows identified him as a priest--much less a High Priest! At the moment, he was not identifiable at all. All eyes passed over him indifferently--even those of the very observant Horemheb, who was looking at something more immediately interesting. In the skimpy shade of two date palms, well over on this Egyptian side of the dividing oasis, an Amurru girl with fox-red hair sat lonely and idle--in a culture where women were never idle.

Why? Sick? Shunned?

Very interesting.

Instead of asking, the general loosed one of the spicy oaths for which he was famous. The soldiers froze, considered, and then sighed with relief. They knew--and he knew they knew--that his lurid invective was worse than his bite. Usually. (One must be wary.) But he was not angry now, only sensibly suspicious. They stood straighter, ready for inspection. He advanced, looming and menacing; moved growling between the ranks, adjusting a shield, straightening an angled spear, twitching at a headdress. They were good men, these. Most soldiers were no better than peasants: ignorant unquestioning men who knew the goddess Ma'at only as she who weighed the souls of the dead; who had little concept of Justice as anything that could be applied to their lives. Horemheb's troops were a cut above that: he worked hard to make it so. It took wit, judgment, strength of character and deep understanding of men to rule an army neglected and corrupted by thirty years of three unsatisfactory pharaohs in sequence. Particularly Ay, who kept appointing officers of doubtful ability and less integrity. (Being unable to fire them, Horemheb put them into what he called Intensive Training where, gods willing, they would either rise to the challenge or die.) He himself appointed officers who showed integrity, intelligence and leadership. Simontu, a lanky young man with a long chin, so far showed moderate promise.

Horemheb paid little attention to the faces in the ranks: he knew body language, watched shoulders in particular for anything furtive,

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resentful, bullying, guilty, triumphant or defiant--and found virtually nothing. Marked two men for observation. Reached Simontu, and turned to face his troops.

“Shameful!” he roared, tugging at an apron only fractionally out of line. “You rascals are a disgrace to Egypt. By Apep’s black balls--” They beamed, knowing praise when they heard it; and presently were dismissed to their usual tasks, quietly taking bets on who might be rotated back to Amon’s own land. The old priest, self-effacing, stayed quietly where he was, watching the oasis where the headman now seemed to be berating the foxy girl.

Horemheb, one eye on the same scene, recognized with the other eye and without pleasure the young archer at Simontu’s side. Pepi had perilous knowledge and an eager but impetuous nature. A sensible general would have ushered him kindly into to Intensive Training and the Field of A’aru four years ago when he first became a possible danger. But Horemheb’s goddess was Ma’at of Justice, so he did not condemn without proof nor kill without clear need. Moreover Pepi, though a feckless puppy, had courage; and Horemheb had a soft spot for puppies who did not cringe even with reason. So he had--unwisely?--stationed him at the outskirts of Egypt to grow up; and forgotten him. Ignoring him now, he jerked his chin at Simontu, led him out of Ra’s direct blessing into the wide shade of the sycamore fig, and produced his Amemait look: the one that reminded men of the terrible soul-eating monster who stood with the goddess Ma’at and the god Osiris² at the weighing of dead souls, eager to dine on those who failed.

“Presently,” he drawled with menacing affability, “you may choose to tell me just how you knew when to expect me?”

Simontu so far showed more incorruptibility than acumen. He began to look apprehensive. It was the irrepressible Pepi who stepped forward: wiry, small even for an Egyptian, but strong of chest and arm as were all archers, and insouciant from having once had--and

² Ausar in Egyptian. The Greeks renamed him Osiris a thousand years after this period.

survived--a full confrontation with the great general.³ He was buoyant, confident, beaming. His accoutrements were perfectly in order, he was clean even for a bath-loving Egyptian, and he clutched his amulet of Bes, the little dwarf god with a comically protruding tongue, who, he confidently assumed, was even now answering his request. Pepi was nothing if not loyal, primarily to his general and to his god, whom he seldom bothered with details. Especially when he was not sure, himself, precisely what he wanted. Primarily a new posting: not in this frontier garrison which was short of excitement, advancement, and pretty girls. He did not require heavy fighting: in fact, like most Egyptians, he could do nicely without killing--much less being killed, which could easily impair the health. He preferred, of course, to serve directly under the magnificent Horemheb, and given a chance, he would seize it. He was doing so now.

He stood straighter. Horemheb had asked a question, and it was up to Pepi to give the right answer before Simontu gave a wrong one. "Our sentries," he suggested modestly, "always try to be worthy of our General."

Horemheb frowned. Simontu glanced quellingly at Pepi and proceeded with the wrong answer.

"There's an Amurru seer, Sir. Seeress. She comes over to this side whenever she can, flirting and chatting--understands Egyptian quite well, speaks it badly. But she does get god-hints--I think. Don't know much about her gods: *she* says it's all her own magic. But she said the turquoise and garnets and copper from Sinai would arrive three days ago and it did. She told Pepi our far-away-too-much-big-king-man fell down with devils, but how did we know? But when she said our Too-much-big Soldier would come this morning--"

He was treading quicksands! Pepi bravely interposed himself.

"You see, sir, I-- we-- always remember what you say: that magic isn't like astronomy or mathematics: it's only for gods to understand, not mortals. And that gods are powerful independent beings, not mankind's pet dogs. And when humans dabble in magic, even

³ see *The Missing Queen*

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Symbolic Magic, it's unreliable. So not to depend on it without verification."

He had almost the exact words. Horemheb nodded, impassive. "So?"

"Well, so there I was, without verification, but it *might* be true, so--" He smiled artlessly. "I told Simontu, and he did just as you said. Didn't count on it, but prepared, just in case. And if you didn't come it was useful training, and if you did, maybe you'd be pleased with us."

Well, Horemheb could hardly fault his own commands. And in this case Pepi had made a safe and sensible decision. Magic was *not* dependable. Nor even god-hints, though sometimes they were true. Horemheb rather suspected that his own were merely some inner part of his mind being cleverer than the outer part at putting clues together. But one could never count on them without other evidence.

He felt Second-Commander Tchat's's gruff amusement behind his left shoulder, nodded rather grimly, caught another inexplicable smile from across the oasis. Interesting. What by Tawaret's tits, he demanded profanely of Simontu, was the cause of this sudden Amurru friendship? Where was the sand in the honey? Amurru seldom offered honey without sand--any more than did Egyptians. So--why?

Ah, said Simontu: yes, well, that was the other thing. "You have a message, Sir. It came only yesterday. By messenger bird. From Commander P'ramses." He handed over a very small bit of papyrus with writing on it. Papyrus being thick and P'ramses pithy, it was predictably brief.

"Ay ails."

As Pharaoh Ay was nearly seventy and ailing more often than not, this was hardly surprising. "He usually does," Horemheb observed, and handed the papyrus to Tchat. It might be inconsequential. Still-- if his highest officer thought it worth a messenger bird-- He and Tchat exchanged speculative glances, remembering all too well four years ago when young Pharaoh Tutankhamon died unexpectedly, without sons or even daughters, leaving General Horemheb as his only designated heir. He should have become the next pharaoh. But he had been had been on a punitive expedition far to the south, in Nubia, and Ay had got himself crowned before Horemheb returned.

Suspicious? Oh yes, indeed! But a good general does not start civil wars--*nor* challenge a crowned and therefore divine pharaoh.

And what had Ay's health to do with today's friendly Amurru? He turned back to his waiting officers and an unanswered question or two.

"And? All that honey across the oasis?"

Simontu redeemed himself--for the moment. "We *all* want you to be the next pharaoh," said simply. "If Ay dies. When he dies. The Amurru do, too. Well, they know you care about justice, and you keep your word--well, as much as you can. Achish says better a lion than a hyena or crocodile. So..."

No connection was yet apparent. "So?"

Pepi and Simontu both turned to look at the young woman, who just now much needed a savior and protector from the shaman whom she had very much offended. She gazed back with what she supposed to be the helpless innocence of a new-born lamb. Never having looked into a bronze see-face, how was she to know that with that reddish hair and brows, narrow jaw, pointed teeth and chin over round glaring honey-gold eyes, she looked far more like a desert fox than an innocent lamb? Horemheb stared.

"She's demon-touched?" he suggested tentatively.

"No. Well, perhaps. She's the seeress," Simontu explained. "The one who said you were coming. And that devils attacked our top headman." He waited for the string of invective, largely featuring divine anatomy, to end. Pepi listened with awed admiration, wondering why the gods never seemed to resent the general's profanity. (So far, they had not.) When blasphemy became ominous silence, Simontu went bravely on. "But Sir; people do say that seers can give an army a strong advantage--"

"Or disadvantage!" That was the point! Horemheb had mistrusted seers since his very first battle, long ago, lost because Pharaoh's seer had been disastrously mistaken. Still, a good general always looks into everything. Sternly, he did so.

"Who precisely is this seeress?"

"She's Achish's concubine, but they don't allow woman seers: they call them witches and demons. So when she said--" Simontu shrugged. "Well, you can imagine!" Horemheb could. Pepi was

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virtually prancing with self-importance. "Pepi claims he knows all about it. I think he's managed to bed her a time or two."

Horemheb was not astonished. Pepi was notorious for loving the ladies. He had outrageous lashes and a wickedly enchanting smile that few could resist. Now he stepped forward again, lean face alight. Horemheb set his teeth, remembered that the puppy--despite a fondness for danger, the tendency to take things at face value, and his weakness for girls--was also clever and tenacious. And had never been proved untrustworthy... And he was, Horemheb suspected, about to complicate his life.

The Amurru headman, stately and bearded, turned from berating the seeress and took a massive step toward him. Horemheb, not ready for that yet, merely jerked his chin at Pepi and moved further into the shade of the lush green fig tree, leaving Achish standing waiting under the palms. No one would dream of objecting. He was Horemheb, Great Commander of the Armies of Egypt. Letting nothing show on his face (a good general is inscrutable) he loomed.

"Well?"

Pepi had always found hazard invigorating, and this near-divine general of his could be more exciting than women or even battle. He beamed, jerked his head at the girl, who was watching as intently as a hungry vixen at a mouse tunnel. She at once dropped the half-veil and broke into a melting feral smile. Pepi smiled at her winsomely, turned to Horemheb.

"Unpronounceable name, something like Ririth. Ignorant. Ambitious. Never been anywhere, wants to go to Egypt, thinks it's another oasis a short walk away. She daren't tell the shaman about her Seeings, so she told me, instead--hoping I'd take her away, I think-- So I mentioned it to Simontu, casually, you understand--but then he asked *them* about it, and that put the gazelle among the lions! Their shaman is furious. So is the headman."

Horemheb, unsurprised, did not even shrug. Like most Egyptians, he held a low opinion of foreigners, who tended to be dirty and to despise women. Egypt respected its woman. They had even had women pharaohs--one or two, when there was no other royal heir. He launched some scathing invective, causing heads to turn warily. His men feared

only his red rages, as searing as Ra in midsummer, and the mercifully rare white fury, which tended to be lethal. This was neither.

The large lean army dogs had stopped growling at the foxy girl and were trying to kiss Horemheb's hands and feet. The Amurru shaman came to the entrance of his tent and stared dangerously at Lilith, who begun to feel serious alarm. Perhaps it had been imprudent to use her magic powers on him so openly?

The old priest in the background was thinking much the same thing. The girl was clearly mage-gifted. She might or might not have caused certain boils: the shaman *was* prone to them. But guilty or innocent, she had claimed credit and would certainly die for it--which he wished to prevent. It would be a waste offensive to the gods.

Still unnoticeable, he watched Horemheb drop the girl from his awareness, turn to Commander Tchat, a square man with a keen equable mind and great devotion to his General. Their thoughts sometimes ran in tandem. And Ay *had* had a previous seizure or three: mild ones, probably triggered by fury at the wife he had for years hated.

"Best to be sure, sir. Just in case. We all remember four years ago. Take chariots up the inland road and get to Thebes in a week or two if you start at once--"

Indeed! But Horemheb shook his head. Unfair. The charioteers were tired, and the men all deserved a treat. "Give them tonight. With a feast. I'll go at sunrise. You'll follow with the foot soldiers when you've completed inspection and rotation here. Go back up-river, check every report we've had for corruption, and act accordingly. No hurry. How do you think you'll enjoy sole command of the rest of this expedition?"

Tchat's face showed nothing. His eyes merely danced as he turned to keep his sharp eye on the unloading and preparation of Horemheb's pavilion. Horemheb, impassive, glanced at the foxy girl with brief curiosity. Small breasts jutted high under a worn and dirty mud-colored tunic. Alien amber eyes, wide cheeks and sharp chin augmented the vixen impression. She stared back, calculating, the forehead over her arched brows crinkling with it.

Lilith was never over-modest in her aims. She would *not* let herself be stoned or cast into the wilderness, just for a few curses! She had

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long planned to better herself by going to live in the fabled land of Egypt where men were not only unbearded but without a hair anywhere on their bodies (as she had good reason to know) and also very kind to women. She would, she now decided, become concubine to this Commander of Egypt's armies, who dwarfed everyone around him--at least in his spirit-self. (Physically, most Amurru were much larger than most Egyptians.) He had a forceful chin, all bare without a beard, jutting neither forward nor back, very beautiful. He would do nicely. She at once aimed her magical will at him as well as at Headman Achish.

Unfortunately, she had seen her own face only in wavering water surface. Just now it looked like indigestion, and caused a dog to go into a frenzy. Horemheb, impervious, glanced away without interest, talking to the faithless Pepi. Furious, she wished fleas on them both. Two more dogs came and barked at her, so she wished fleas on them, too. They paused for a scratch.

Pepi, unaware that she was really in peril, winked cheerfully and went on talking to Horemheb. "The shaman says their god wants her cast into the wilderness, sir. But he often goes on like that: he'll get over it. They aren't bloodthirsty, really. Anyway, she's how we know about Pharaoh's illness. If it's true, of course," he added with belated prudence.

Horemheb smiled. "And you think I, a commoner, should be the next pharaoh?"

"Oh, yes, sir. Of course!"

Horemheb, a specialist in dangerously bland smiles, produced another. "Just like that, mm? And how would a commoner get to become pharaoh?"

Pepi plunged into the trap. "Oh, just marry a royal woman, sir. To get the god-right. The way Ay did with-- er-- King Tutankhamon's widow--"

Horemheb's smile was subtly mischievous, wholly wicked. "Pharaoh Ay will leave many widows," he pointed out.

Pepi became suddenly silent. Simontu, a stickler for accuracy, spoke up. "But none have royal blood, have they? Even Queen Tey."

Horemheb smiled gently. “Indeed. A nice point, isn’t it? A commoner married a commoner who became Royal Pharaoh. Does she or does she not? I fancy it’s being debated urgently--if very quietly--around the palaces just now.”

No one answered. Few cared to discuss the fearsome Tey. Even Simontu thought it prudent to shift the subject slightly.

“The point is, sir, there are no *royal* women left, are there? No royals at all. They’re all dead.”

Pepi, who knew better, impulsively opened his mouth, thought again, and glanced at his general. He encountered the falcon: inhuman predator eyes on a tasty young *khen-ken-wer*, suggesting that he would do well to suffer severe and permanent amnesia. Horemheb wearing this look was at his most dangerous. Things could happen to cackling geese. Or even to *possible* cackling geese. Pepi clutched his amulet, thanked Bes for a near escape--if in fact he had escaped--shivered, and turned his eyes back to Simontu, who was still giving a history lesson.

“I’d think you’re old enough to remember, Pepi. Queen Ankhsenamon died right after she married Pharaoh Ay. A cobra, some said. And her sisters and niece all died too, and Princess Baketamon disappeared and was never found. And that was the end of the royal family.”

Ra, shifting, aimed his incandescent golden spears between different sycamore leaves. Everyone moved the necessary few inches without thinking about it. The flustered Pepi turned back to Horemheb, began to gabble--and put his other foot in the ox-shit.

“Well, but you could marry her aunt. Queen Ankhsi--Ankhsenamon’s. Nefertiti’s sister. Everyone--”

Simontu was a born teacher. Perhaps he should have been a scribe instead of a soldier. “But Lady Mutjodmet isn’t royal, either,” he persisted. “She’s a commoner. Like Nefertiti was. No royal blood. Everyone knows that.”

His general Looked at him. He stared back like a gazelle in the focus of a lion. What had he said wrong? It was all true, wasn’t it? (How was he to know that it was one little truth Horemheb very much wished Egypt to forget forever?)

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Pepi maintained a very cautious silence. This was like swimming with a river-bull! Because of that dangerous secret he shared with Horemheb and a few others? Simontu's tongue might prove even more dangerous to him than losing promotion--which, in fact, he just had. Pepi was not terribly fond of Simontu, but he did not really want to see him slain on the spot. He trod heavily on his toe. Simontu, never good at taking hints, regarded him severely and tried to right matters with further information.

"But with no one of royal blood left alive, General Horemheb, you can start a new dynasty: the Nineteenth. And it *must* be you: who else? Besides, the gods love you."

"Dismissed!"

Simontu vanished precipitately, Pepi retreated a full two steps, and Horemheb glanced back to the lake of the oasis. Achish--whom Horemheb knew and somewhat liked, and trusted perhaps as far as three cubits--stood under the date palm with massive bearded dignity, waiting. He moved his bushy beard, took Horemheb's glance as invitation and advanced with a warning sideways glance at his ungrateful and wicked concubine--who promptly edged nearer to hearing distance. He had tolerated much from her. But boils on the shaman (which Achish might have forgiven had no one else known) and then bragging of them! That had been going too far! Much!

"Our being helping you," he said in barbarously accented Egyptian, proud of being bilingual while the General was not. (The General was, in fact, fluently multilingual, but he saw no need to let the world know of this convenient advantage.) He turned, strong legs widely planted, arms akimbo, his smile suggesting that he was not born yesterday.

"Why?" he asked, dangerously mild.

Achish, never aware of subtlety, nodded over at the girl, who was surveying them like a customer considering an amulet. Her light head-cover failed to hide the mass of dirty russet curls; her smooth young skin was neither the warm red-brown of Egyptians nor the dark olive of the Amurru, but golden-brown. Freckles, alien to Egypt, danced across her sharp nose and cheekbones. Horemheb, an excellent judge of men,

found women, on the whole, about as comprehensible and compliant and predictable as cats or magic. He smiled, noncommittal.

The headman's smile was exactly as sincere as Horemheb's. He waved toward the putative seeress. "My giving you tribute for Pharaoh," he announced meaningfully. "A princess from--er--Damascus. Too much giving him sons."

Much was instantly clear to Horemheb. "Great Sobek's shaft!" he roared, so that the incoming troops, about to enjoy a long-delayed bath in the oasis lake, froze. He lowered his voice again. "Don't cat-foot with me, you wily old jackal! We both know Ay is too old. He's tried for years to sire sons, and can't get it up." (No need to mention seeresses if Achish did not. Useful to have a secret arrow in your quiver.)

"But what of Next Pharaoh?" Achish suggested smoothly. "My understanding your god Hor live in body of him-pharaoh? If present body--er--no longer can to enjoying women, Hor may wishing your waiting for next body. Or even--"

Horemheb smiled dangerously. "No, I won't help Ay die, if that's what you're hinting. There are things I won't do even to become Pharaoh, and one is to violate *ma'at*. Cosmic Order," he explained to the very puzzled expression before him. "We don't want the cosmos to fall apart, do we? Even your god wouldn't--" The puzzled expression had become more puzzled. Horemheb had a feeling that Cosmic Order was not a concept the Amurru would instantly comprehend. "Never mind. Let's just say I won't have his death weighed on the scale against me when I stand before Osiris and the great goddess Ma'at after my death. Anyway, I'm not Pharaoh now, for Ay is alive. So what do you expect me to do with her?"

The puzzled expression became reproachful at such plain speaking. Must one explain everything to these Egyptians? "Being doing as you will," Achish murmured. "Her being much loved by Yawa," he added hopefully but mendaciously. "Her name being Lilith." Then, assuming that the thing was beautifully settled, he smiled with satisfaction and wandered off to partake of good Egyptian beer before the feast.

The girl rose, luminous with joy, ambition and relief. Her magical spell had worked! Achish had given her to the great general. The eyes

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she turned on the headman--lambent gold with dark rims--even hinted of gratitude, though normally she did not indulge in such softness, nor have reason to. Then she went to stand by her new owner, her face alarmingly possessive and resolute.

Horemheb, impassive as the desert, eyed the unwanted gift. She bestowed a long languorous look intended to promise untold delights. He felt as delighted as if a puppy had just piddled on his sandals. Did they actually think he would take a bribe? Or even wanted the girl? Fools! And what by Geb's guts could he do with her? Give her to his beloved Nojet? Hardly! Put an unknown and possibly magical woman in his Djaseru estate with his cherished little niece? Never! Take her to Ay and his jealous harridan wife Tey, who thought nothing of getting rid of--er--inconvenient people?

He loosed a particularly salacious epithet, stood back a step, and quietly did the invisibility trick he had learned long ago from his demonic old tutor Piankh. Not real magic: just a trick of thinking, turning off his personality, somehow, so that people forgot he was there. No one even noticed that they had stopped noticing him, until he reminded them. Unnoticed (except by Lilith) he reflected.

Was Ay dying at last? Had the time come? This time Horemheb was prepared. He was again the obvious choice: born and trained to be Pharaoh, named heir before and had it snatched away. Ay had promised to name him *his* successor--for what that was worth. (Probably very little, in fact.) More important, P'ramses, whom he was training as his replacement, was now at Thebes with most of the army and would discourage anyone else from seizing the throne this time. Horemheb had always known that the gods had destined him for it. He was less sure about their priests. Still, having sampled Ay, many would support Horemheb. Best of all, he had a secret counter in this board game of Hounds and Jackals: one known to Pepi, but to few others...

It was time to produce it. On his way back to Thebes, he would stop at Akhet-Aten to see the two women whom, as Pharaoh, he planned to marry. One because he loved her; the other for that coveted god-right: a surer way to the double crown than an old man's promise, or even the approval of human priests, too often for sale.

He became visible. His new and unwanted possession hovered near, standing like a fierce young vixen over a juicy pigeon. Horemheb considered himself a tolerant man, but there were limits. He turned, frowned, pointed at the tree behind her. "Go!"

She ignored his finger, changed from fox to groveling dog, clutched his hand, and when he jerked it away, his tunic. He liked dogs--but only if they were well-trained and obedient, not obstreperous, abject, nor in heat. Particularly not in heat. He treated this one to some well-chosen epithets that made her eyes widen, ending again with "Go!" She instantly dropped, clasped his ankles, put her forehead on a foot--and then returned to her original position of jealous owner.

A familiar voice, of mixed honey and natron, spoke at his elbow. "Take her, Hor-bek."

Horemheb, who had not heard that voice speak his childhood name for nearly thirty years, managed not to jump, spin around or even freeze. It was not particularly easy. He turned ever-so-casually to look down at wickedly wise black eyes twinkling from a face that always looked altogether benign; at a common priest's tunic and headdress on a small, meagre, toothless man of incredible age who no longer needed to pluck his skull: in short, at Piankh, High Priest in the Temple of Hor at Hutnesu--and once the challenging tutor to a willful boy called Hor-bek: Chick-pea. He seemed to have altered not at all except to lose his few remaining teeth.

"Great Nuit's belly," Horemheb said mildly. "What are you doing here, old man?"

The toothless grin was as knowing as ever. "Acquiring more wisdom. I've spent many seasons with the Sages of *Shemsu-hor*. I now have another task."

Horemheb's heavy eyebrows were equally knowing. "You're not an astronomer."

"No. But not all wisdom is astronomy, as you're well aware. I'm now a priest of the Old Wisdom at Innu as well as High Priest at Hutnesu."

Horemheb shrugged, unastonished. Innu was the most vital temple in Egypt. Its Mage-Astronomers were Adepts of the Ancient Wisdom:

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sons of Nuit the sky, responsible for regulating the calendar, guardians of Time itself.

“I had thought you in the Field of Reeds with Osiris long ago.”

“Osiris can wait--” Piankh glanced sharply at the vixen, who, having failed to obey the finger, still hovered. “--until I see you crowned Pharaoh. I trained you for that, you know.” Horemheb produced a cynical grin. The old man matched it. “I educated you, boy, to be Scribe of Tahuti, devotee of Ma’at, and son of Hor the royal lion--in order to wear the double crown of Egypt. Never as Warrior of Amon. That is merely the road to the throne which you happened to take.”

Several things at once fell into place. Horemheb contemplated the new pattern, invoked Apep’s ass, and eyed his old mentor ruefully. “Wily old serpent!” he remarked.

Piankh took it as the compliment it was. “Hor of Hutnesu is not without power. I will travel the Nile soon, to tell Egypt’s nobility and priesthood that Hor favors you.” He regarded the General as if he were still young Hor-bek. “To start, you must take the girl.”

Horemheb looked over at her. She hopefully rotated her hips. Not like a bitch in heat, after all: merely trying to imitate one, which was perhaps worse. “Oh, no! I want no concubines, especially not this one. I’m sure she’s doing well enough here.”

Piankh glanced across the oasis where headman and shaman both watched them intently. “She’s made three accurate prophesies in the last week or so. They’ll kill her if she stays here. Probably the instant you leave. And now that you know, and Ma’at knows you know, you’d violate *ma’at* if you didn’t prevent it; and your goddess would be displeased.” He leered triumph. Horemheb restrained from smiting him--but barely.

“Set’s prick!” Horemheb was no more hard-hearted than he needed to be, far less than he pretended. He wished no harm to the wretched girl. But he would not take her! Not as concubine nor slave nor servant--much less free woman!

“Take Pepi, too,” Piankh commanded.

Horemheb, who had been considering just that, perversely almost changed his mind on the spot. The hovering Lilith, who had not grasped a fifth of what they said, produced her most alluring smile. He

had no idea it was alluring; she had no idea it was not. He turned back to Piankh.

“Why would our gods care about that one?”

Piankh bestowed on him the old look, of patience with idiocy. “Because they hate waste, and she does have magic.”

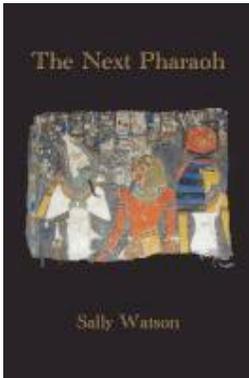
Oh ho! That was it! Horemheb had never been a willing or able student of magic. Probably Piankh still wanted one. So be it! “*You* take her, then. I give her to you! Take her to Merit-re and her school for mages. They’ll appreciate her!”

They turned as one to study the girl, and she again writhed her torso at him sensually. Horemheb averted his eyes. “And keep her out of my headdress.”

“You mean kilt,” Piankh murmured back amusedly.

“Quite.” He looked at the old face again, and underwent a very strong god-hint. “You intended to take her, all along!”

Piankh’s smile was beatific. “Headman Achish wouldn’t have given his favorite concubine to a disreputable old itinerant priest, now, would he? The Next Pharaoh of The Two Lands is quite worth his while.”



General Horemheb is confident of becoming Pharaoh when Ay dies childless. Over-confident? He understands men. But not, alas, women, who are as unpredictable and disobedient as cats. The gods, possibly offended, challenge him with plots, pretenders, disappearances, assassins, magic, and willful women - not to mention an imperious kitten who rides his shoulder and whose goddess he had better not offend! Becoming the Next Pharaoh turns out more complicated than he had supposed!

The Next Pharaoh

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