

Out of Darkness is a rollercoaster of storytelling. It's a journey of reality interspersed with whimsy when exploring the effects of a fallen creation through the lives of three ordinary characters. The goal is to bring all to salvation.

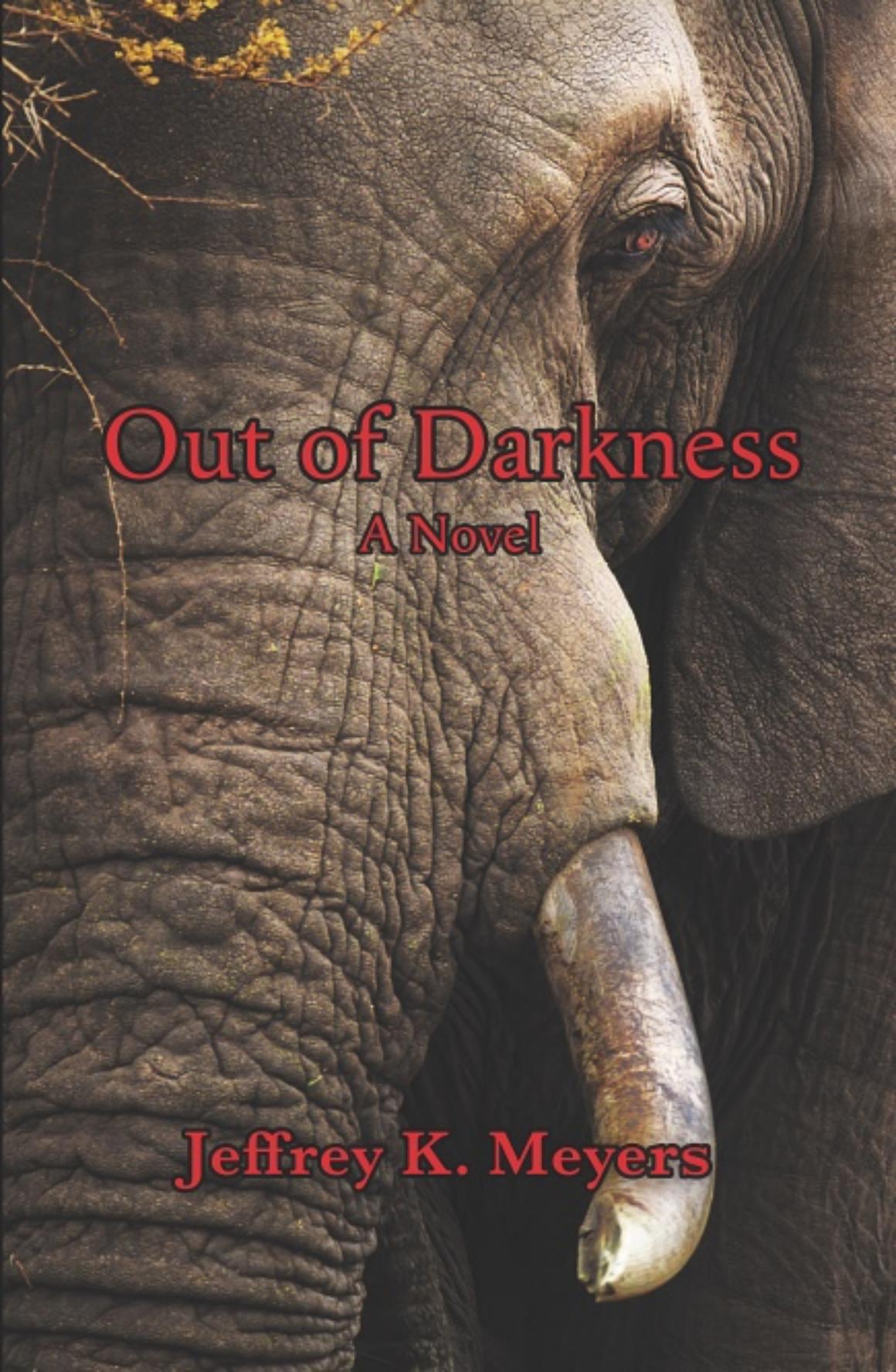
Out of Darkness: A Novel

By Jeffrey K. Meyers

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A Novel

Jeffrey K. Meyers

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Four

The years pass. The numbers of Jews swell with the births of so many babies. The Hebrew people follow the tenets of their faith, as commanded by the Holy One. Be fruitful and multiply and pray for those who are in positions of authority over you. The Jewish population has grown to an immense size. In spite of their loyalty, the Egyptians are convinced that the Jews will someday lash out against Egypt. It is falsely believed that the Hebrews will destroy Egypt by treacherous activity. No one bothered to question the fear that gripped their hearts is an illusion. Trepidation replaced trust. The Egyptians eventually speak freely of their irrational fears. The magi of the Pharaoh understand a simple adage: when a lie is stated often enough it is destined to become truth.

The lie was spoken too often and believed by so many it was accepted a self-evident fact. Paranoia about the conspiring Jews was spread by those who sought to use the Jews as a means to achieve an unholy end. They were denounced as usurpers of power. Excoriated as treacherous and reviled as having treasonous intentions. They were falsely accused of fomenting rebellion within the ranks of the Egyptian army. The Jews were defamed as co-conspirators by having alliances with the enemies of Egypt seeking to overthrow Pharaoh. The loyalty of the Jews was questioned, thus resulting in the accepted fact that a Hebrew should never be believed. Many expressed a singular opinion as fact; a Jew is not trustworthy.

The solution is simple advised the courtiers of Pharaoh. Break the will of the Hebrew people by enslaving and beating them without mercy. Force the men to toil with back breaking labor. If some die, it is of no consequence for the Kingdom of the Pharaoh. Simply replace those who perish with another Jew; a body is a body. It is easy to grind them down, thus breaking their will.

Every successive Pharaoh was counseled by his advisors of the evil intent held by the Hebrews. To keep their numbers low Pharaoh was eventually advised to kill all the newborn male babies but allow the females to live. By the third century following Joseph, the plan was fully in place and executed. Afterall, it is the boychild who becomes a man, one who will wage war against Pharaoh.



The time is the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt during the reign of Pharaoh Thutmose the First and Queen Ahmose. The place is near one of the palatial residences of the pharaoh along the Nile River. The banks are thickly shrouded with a sedge called papyrus.

A mother is torn by an evil decision she is forced to make. Either a quick death by a *khopesh*, the lethal sickle sword carried by Egyptian soldiers. Or choose death by one of a thousand cruel ways that can occur on the currents of the Nile. She chooses, unknowing, if the decision is wise or not. The choice made holds a glimmer of hope to preserve life; the life of her son.

The infant child is lowered into a simple container by his fretting mother. The rectangular casket is crafted by the boy's father and her husband, Amran. The exterior surfaces are constructed of ebony coming from east Africa. The variety of woods lining the interior are acacia, sycamore, carob, and juniper. These wood products are grown locally. The black wood exterior is carefully burnished until it is smooth. Amram laboriously rubs a flat stone lubricated with boiled linseed oil along the surface. The wooden interior is likewise treated with an application of oil. The infant's father seeks to seal the interior against any intrusion of water. After drying the linseed oil hardens as a shiny coat to become a water tight preservative.

Jochebed looks at the beautiful casket once again, all the while thinking the unthinkable. *This ark may very well serve as my baby's sarcophagus.*

It is a perfectly made vessel for carrying an infant child to heaven or to a far bank where salvation is found.

The mother chases the thoughts away by putting each into flight. She banishes the harsh images from a condemning conscience. Jochebed focuses on the artisanship of her husband's hands. Amran built the vessel of hope with tools crafted from scavenged metal over many months. The materials required were traded with items he possessed or purchase outright. The remainder of the materials were found in the refuse heaps outside of the walls of the city. The construction was done in secret at night after laboring long and hard under the oppressive sun.

She finds the interior joints are sealed with myrrh and frankincense, the funerary spices whose pitch is tapped from the desert trees. Myrrh is waxy and quickly coagulates as does the gummy resin of frankincense. The mother prays that the unyielding resins will prevent water from seeping into the ark since it is the sanctuary holding her son as it travels towards the sea. Tears flow out of her eyes. This will be the last time Jochebed will ever see him. Kissing her son on the forehead, Jochebed closes the tight-fitting crown that caps the upper extremity to the main body of the box. Without looking Jochebed sets the small craft adrift in the aquamarine current of the river.

She prays, "Oh merciful Creator of the Universe, I beg that You to watch over my son. I know that You may not think of me as worthy, but please do not hold my shortcomings against my son. He is but an innocent child who is untainted by the world. I release my claim over this babe as his life has always belonged to You. I fully surrender my will so You are glorified by the life of this child. For it is Your will, not mine that shall be done. Amen."

A wailing mother turns about to run home. Jochebed's heart is so burdened with grief it is heavier than her sandaled feet laboriously striking the ground where she treads. Spent by an overwhelming avalanche of weariness brought on by travail, Jochebed slows her pace to a quick walk. She only desires to get home as quickly as possible so she

may escape the pain of her deed. Jochebed fails to notice her daughter is standing in the sedges next to the path. The girl is also held by a weighty silence. The grieving mother trudges past her daughter. Jochebed does not see her invisible daughter crouched next to the trail.

As the scene unfolds, the young girl watches her mother walk by with heavily downcast eyes. Once her despondent mother passes, the daughter knows that she must continue with her mission. She runs and watches the casket, so the fate of her brother may be recorded. The girl knows she doesn't have the power within her to prevent the loss of a baby brother. The only power who can redeem the boychild is silent. He has not spoken a word in four hundred years.

Her thoughts begin to freely follow an uncharted course, much like the meandering river she runs alongside. *Then again, maybe too many of our people have not spoken to Him with earnest conviction.*

Grieved by her mother's keening, the maiden nearly trips when stumbling. She loses focus of the task from the distraction. After regaining her balance, the girl resumes her observation of the container while it is tugged by a steady flow of water. She picks up the pace. Now she gingerly places each foot on the soft soil near the riverbank. The girl maintains her vigil while waiting for the most likely, yet horrid outcome.

A princess, the daughter of Pharaoh Thutmose and Queen Ahmose, is bathing on the river with her maidens who are in attendance. She is lulled into drowsiness by the noonday heat along with the hypnotic sound coming from the lapping and gurgling as the river washes towards the Great Sea. Lethargy slowly overcomes her. It falls on her shoulders as a comfortable mantle. Her concentration drifts. She cannot even focus on the river. Inertia overtakes and holds the princess with its pleasant languor.

Sunlight bounces off of the glistening craft. The mirrored surface reflects the rays of light. The radiance penetrates the semi-opened eyelids of the princess. The unwelcomed intrusion of light forces Hatshepsut to

close them before she opens her leaden eyes. The pupils constrict as the eyes come into focus. The sudden flash draws her attention to an object bobbing up and down on the water. She attentively watches the ornate casket. It is by the hand of Providence that the container is ensnared in a tangle of reeds so the princess may get a better view of the object.

It looks to be a small covered boat, a toy crafted by the hands of the child's father.

Hatshepsut decides it is well within reason a child could have easily lost the toy to the river's grasp while playing near the bank.

Curious as to what the diminutive yet skillfully-made boat might contain within its hold, Hatshepsut and her entourage move towards the trapped craft. They walk along the bank of the river, where the reeds are most plentiful to avoid sinking into the bog to get caught up in the muck and mire. The princess stops near the river's edge. She asks her favored handmaiden to venture into the water. The maid servant retrieves the ark from the bulrushes and tows it back to the shore.

Opening the box, Hatshepsut is amazed to discover a comely infant child lying inside. What is more startling is the fact that someone discarded a child in such a callous manner. Those who know the princess can attest that it is her nature to hold tender feelings for all life. However unlikely, the principle of *noblesse oblige*, the inferred responsibility to care for the lesser subjects of the realm is readily accepted by her.

A sense of generosity and nobility is firmly rooted in the maturing Hatshepsut. As a gentle and kind-hearted person, the princess is not aloof from the subjects of Egypt. She freely associates with the throngs who populate the expanding community. The princess does hold herself above anyone nor does she shy away from them. Hatshepsut is a monarch of and for the people.

The talk of the commoners throughout the kingdom is Hatshepsut cares for all life, even the lowly rekhyt. It is the plover, the overly abundant bird of the marshes. It is dubbed the crocodile bird

because of a symbiotic relationship that the bird has with the crocodile. The rekhyt ventures around the opened mouth of a basking crocodile to devour the parasites infesting the lips, cheeks, and gums of the water dragon.

The all-too-common hieroglyph of the rekhyt is the exemplar of all the unnamed individuals who comprise the teeming masses of Egypt. It is also emblematic of the foreigners who are forced to reside in the kingdom as slaves or war captives. It is noteworthy that the glyph of the rekhyt was most often engraved during the time of Hatshepsut, more so than any other monarch before or since her reign.

The foundling is wrapped in clean swaddling clothes. The infant vocalizes a whimpering sucking sound as if he is about to cry. He fixes his gaze upon the princess to express the desire to be taken up by the one who is peering down at him. She lifts him up and holds him close. Hatshepsut notices the child's mother bathed her son prior to setting him in the ark. Taken in by his beauty, Hatshepsut immediately loves the infant without question or equivocation. It is not unexpected that the princess would claim the boychild as her own.

“I will call you *Musa*. Yes, my new son, Moses it shall be. For you are drawn out of the water. What the gods have spared, I shall rear you as my own.” The declaration uttered by Hatshepsut is a clear enunciation meant to be heard by all who attend to her. It is a covenant the princess freely and knowingly enters into.

Hatshepsut hasn't given birth to this or any child. She has no milk to feed the newborn. The decision creates a bit of a quandary. As a maven at the game of *senet*, the Egyptian board game of strategy which predates chess. Hatshepsut contemplates the numerous possibilities laid out on the board of her mind's eye. She thinks through several iterations as if every successive move is against an actual opponent. The princess is confident. She ponders the conundrum; *Before me is a dilemma but is shall soon to be resolved.*

Distracted by a sound, Hatshepsut looks around at the rushes as she muses over the challenge set out by an unexpected infant. The princess sights in on the movement in the river grasses where she spies an interloper hiding in the reeds.

She calls out with a warm and affable voice. Although older by a few years, the princess still addresses the slave girl as if she were significantly younger. Yet, the princess uses a term having familiar endearment when she speaks.

“Please come to me. Tell me, daughter, what is your name?”

The girl is startled. She is alarmed by having been discovered from a secret hiding place. The lass cannot deny being caught while keeping a furtive watch over the princess. Her stomach quivers. The girl begins to fear for her safety upon being summoned into the presence of a royal. Drawing away from the papyrus with slow measured steps, Miriam bends in obeisance. Her steps come more quickly as the girl maneuvers towards the princess.

Standing within conversational distance from the royal, the girl breaths in deeply. She holds her breath momentarily, then exhales with a soft sigh. The slave begins by introducing herself. “Your Highness, my name is Miriam.” She stoops deeply when bowing. Her eyes remain oriented at the feet of the princess. Protocol does not allow for a commoner to look upon or into the eyes of royalty.

With twinkling eyes Hatshepsut smiles at a girl who is obviously a slave. In the spur of the moment, Hatshepsut is about to implement her newly formulated plan. In an upbeat mood, she optimistically considers: *This ploy just may be audacious enough to succeed.* The princess proposes to inform Pharaoh that she had delivered a son, who was fathered by a lieutenant commander of the Imperial Army. Of course, this ranking officer shall remain forever nameless to protect his life due to a reckless indiscretion with Pharaoh’s daughter.

“Miriam, please rise. I want to see the face of the young woman who would have the courage to spy upon me from a secret place.”

Hatshepsut continues to smile warmly at the young woman. By her action, Hatshepsut conveys a non-verbal message that no insult was perceived by Miriam’s action. More importantly, there is no threat behind the statement. It is followed by a seemingly unrelated and spontaneous question. A line of inquiry which is unexpected by Miriam.

“Please, tell me, do you know of a woman who is nursing?”

From out of the blue the question shocks the girl. Although startled, Miriam does not let her face betray the feelings of her heart. She answers boldly, “Yes, my lady, I do know of such a woman. She does not live far from this place.”

Anticipating the reason for the question, the slave girl provides information not yet asked for. Her speech is rapid and pressured resulting from the excitement of what is heard. “I am sure she can care for my bro...”

Hoping that the princess didn’t detect the slip of the tongue, Miriam recovers quickly, “She would care for the boychild as if he was her own. I know her well. She is a woman who takes extremely good care of her family. She cooks, washes, sews fabric together to make sturdy garments, and mends clothing when needed. She knows the art of bargaining as she shops for her family. The woman is a perfect wife and mother.”

Unable to suppress or choke off a giggle, Hatshepsut announces, “Well, go and fetch her for me. I need such a woman to nurse my son. Before you leave, just answer me one thing. Is she a Hebrew?”

Miriam is troubled with the advent of the final question. As a slave girl, Miriam has no choice but to answer with complete honesty. Deception is too easily uncovered. Any untruth would be severely punished. Hope begins to slip away from the young girl as easily as does

water when passing through tightly held fingers of cupped hands. It is only by her faith that buoys Miriam against the sinking feeling of a fleeting hope. Yet, she winces with distress before answering.

“Your highness, she is a Jewess. I pray this does not prejudice your decision or it becomes a hinderance for you. Although she is a faithful to the LORD Most High, she is a committed wife and mother. Pray tell, let me say once again, I have watched her cook, clean, mend, and shop. She seems to have one purpose. She is committed to bringing only the best for her family. The joy of her family is her joy. She is gentle and kind and would never bring any form of wickedness into your house.”

Hatshepsut face changes. It shows the concern and compassion that she feels for the girl. Wanting to allay any fear Miriam is experiencing, Hatshepsut immediately announces her thoughts. “Far be it for me to consider being a Hebrew is an obstacle. I am gratified at hearing your willingness to defend a mother whom you know so well. I ask because this is something I must know. Call it a confirmation of an intuition coming over me when speaking with you.”

Miriam kneels and bows her head before Hatshepsut. She asks if she might be permitted to take leave, “Princess, may I go and collect the wet nurse for you? I am sure your son will soon hunger.”

“Please do, the babe needs a mother’s milk for him to grow strong and healthy.” The princess smiles at Miriam, then gently touches her shoulder. “Go now, daughter. Be quick, and may your God bless you and the wet nurse who shall care for my child as she would care for her own son.”

Running towards the village, Miriam’s heart is gratified. She will immediately share the news with her mother. Miriam prays a simple prayer. She repeats words resounding with joy in her ears and being. “*Jehovah Jireh, the LORD Will Provide.*”

The young girl's prayerful thoughts are suddenly derailed by a corrosive feeling so pervasive it causes her to shudder. *Will he remember who birthed him? Will he remember his people? Will my brother care about the LORD who delivers us?*

Miriam pushes the invasive thoughts from her mind as she prays aloud. "I give all my praise to You. For You are the LORD of Hosts having sovereignty over things seen and unseen. You, my LORD, coming from everlasting to everlasting as the Eternal One. Abba Father, I thank You for being immovable, unbreakable, a safe place for retreat, and a fortress in our time of need. I give all my cares to you. Amen."

The fear and anxiety depart as quickly as they came. Miriam smiles and whispers, "Thank You. You have ransomed me from my fears as I have known You always to do."

Moses is delivered from the waters of the Nile. He is carried by a servant woman from the river to the court of Pharaoh, Thutmose the First and his daughter, Hatshepsut. Moses begins his new life as an Egyptian. Living as royalty and is educated in all the arts of Egypt.

The many years that are yet to pass will mold this Hebrew child into an Egyptian man. The infant will eventually come to learn of his heritage. The truth is, Moses is from the seventh generation in the lineage of Abraham. There is another truth, Moses will never know the life as a slave, the chattel of Pharaoh. Yet, he will walk a precarious balance between the two worlds. His life depends upon his ability to reconcile them.

As is the circumstance for all men, the earthly time of Thutmose the First comes to an end. Hatshepsut is the favored child of Pharaoh, over her half-brother Thutmose the Second. Yet, she will not see the day that she will rule before him. Egyptian tradition and custom require a male to rule over Egypt. After the death of Thutmose, the successor is Thutmose the Second.

Thutmose the Second was born the son of a common woman. His mother is a concubine who was housed in the majestic court of Pharaoh. As such, he lacks the full blood of nobility.

To keep the bloodline of royal succession pure, Hatshepsut resolves to marry her half-brother. Thutmose and Hatshepsut reign over the kingdom as co-regents. Yet, Thutmose the Second will ascend to the position as the head of Egypt. He is the one who shall be called Pharaoh.



It moves without sound, a thing that cannot be readily seen or heard but is recognized by those with discernment. Caution is not required at the present, so it speaks aloud without any fear of discovery.

“I was once the beloved of Heaven’s court. They called me by my name. A name so sweet, I adored hearing others call me by my name. Truly, as *Helel ben-Shabar*, I am the brilliant one, son of the morning.”

Unseen, he prances about. The creature dances to the sound of music. The hideous chords that are only heard by the one called Helel ben-Shabar. Banished to the shadowlands, Helel moves freely and undetected. He has acquired a penchant for the darkness. This preference was developed over the ages after operating in and out of the shadows through which he drifts. It is ancient and ageless. Helel was the foremost of life created before the spark of genesis had cooled. He was present from the start and is a lesser divinity who heard the words spoken by the Eternal. They are the utterances this adversary wholly despises. They are the words that El spoke on day six.

Helel ben-Shabar is adept at changing forms as required to accomplish its self-serving agenda. Seductive and sensuous or repulsive and monstrously hideous, these are the means by which an end is accomplished. It is the master of deception. He may let prey look upon him. It may permit the prey to see what one desires as to be manipulated

by any number of delusions. Those who encounter it, deny with certainty as to the true nature of it.

Helel is given free rein as the prince of the power of the air and ruler of the world. It chooses whom to manipulate, destroy, and devour. Young or old, all are stalked with alacrity. He relishes the hunt. When pursuing those masquerading behind a veil of self-righteousness, he is fully tantalized with the prospect of shaming his prey when their hypocrisy is exposed.

He muses over thoughts having oppressive and dark dimensions to them. *The young provide a lifetime of servitude to me as I hold them in bondage.* When it finds the prey is no longer amusing or useful, destruction comes rapidly. Wholly unexpected, the fall surely comes to all quarry.

In this case, the chosen prey shall never be redeemed but held in bondage for an eternity. The fallen angel repeats the singsong phrase as pleasure is gleaned from the simple words.

Forever mine. Forever mine. Forever mine. He repeats the sing song trinity of mocking utterances.

Swirling about as an undetected vapor, rising and suddenly falling to the floor, it creeps. It fills the void. The victim is culled from the herd. It has chosen. Soon, the catch shall be assimilated, becoming one with it. A silent chill fills the air.

Two boys, pad about the palatial home. Both are barefooted. The younger one is nude. The elder is dressed in a shendyt, a kilt-like garment which is the customary attire of Egyptian males who are above the age of six. The cloth is spun from the finest sun-bleached Egyptian cotton. The tight weave incorporates a broad band of golden threads along the waist and at the hem. The material is pure white. It blazes with the dazzling brilliance of the sun as an homage to Ra, the god of the sun. Crisp pleats fall down around the garment highlighting the craftsmanship of the tailor. The shendyt is secured with a golden belt riding at the waist. Moses quickly grows accustomed to his new attire.

Moses drapes his arm over the younger child's shoulder. He is protective of Thutmose and loves him dearly. Moses is unashamed to announce his affection by speaking these tender words, "I love you, my brother."

Thutmose giggles out his response, "I love you too, dear brother." However, Thutmose is thinking of mock combat, a playtime fantasy that boy children often engage. It is the righting of wrongs, and bringing glory and honor home to Egypt. This is the stuff of their play.

Thutmose says to himself, "Today is the day I win the battle." He squirms away from his brother deciding this is moment to launch an attack.

Thutmose looks up at his older brother, a boy who is larger and stronger than he. Although younger and smaller, Thutmose decides he will best Moses on this day with his new sword. He handles the khopesh made by the palace furniture maker who is a craftsman and master woodworker. The artisanship is immaculate. The craftsmanship and the gilding of the lacquerware are exquisite. The wooden surfaces give the impression of a weapon made from precious metals where the grip is studded with gemstones.

Thutmose the Third follows his brother in an attempt to overtake him. They role play their fantasy of combat. Both children brandish swords fabricated from a pulpwood. Though non-lethal, receiving a blow from the faux sword still delivers a smarting sting. They are armed in the style of the Imperial Guards who serve to protect them.

Moses is fully aware that he is being stalked. He turns and faces his opponent. Moses giggles out a warning, "Prepare to be vanquished, you barbarian!"

Thutmose squeals in delight. He readies himself for the coming onslaught. He raises his sword and prepares to fend off the attack. In the excitement of child's play Moses swings his wooden sword with a force greater than intended. Thutmose unexpectedly lowers his khopesh

before jumping forward to thrust his sword. Thutmose runs plans to run his nemesis through to quickly end the battle. Both seek the status as the victor by overwhelming a make-believe foe.

Moses delivers a sharp rap across Thutmose's bare chest with the wooden sword. The moment the toy makes contact with Thutmose, there is an ominous feeling swirling in the pit of Moses' stomach. He groans as the realization sinks in. The sound of joyous laughter quickly turns into an ear-piercing shriek of pain. Moses watches with a mixture of horror and fascination as the thickening angry red welt rises. It swells and expands across the boyish physique of the younger child.

Pharaoh runs into the room where the children are playing. He grabs his son, Thutmose the Third, by the arms to lift the crying boy. Pharaoh holds the injured child near his chest. The man is inscrutable. His eyes are penetrating. Pharaoh's countenance gives little away. Moses watches the change occur across his face. It is rapid. The austere expression becomes glacial. Pharaoh is the epicenter of a frigid chill that spreads across the room.

Without asking what had occurred, Pharaoh harshly berates Moses. "You, bastard child, do not lay a hand upon my son again! Ever! Leave before I have you flayed out and feed your remains to the crocodiles along the riverbank! GO! **NOW!**"

Moses does not cry, yet the hurt from the shocking rebuke causes tears to well up around his small dark eyes. Moses clearly understands the heavily laden emotional intent behind the sounds hurled at him, yet he fails to comprehend the definition of all the words. Eyes and head are down cast. He is ashamed by the crime which remains unclear to him. Powerless and without recourse, Moses silently moves away. His limp arm holds the wooden toy that once brought him great joy. Now, the facsimile battle implement, a child's toy, only brings unspeakable pain and guilt. He holds the instrument of wrongdoing loosely, the thing he hurt his brother with.

Today is the day the archangel of evil overtakes Thutmose the Third. As quickly as the strike of a viper, an evil infuses the young target with a venom of distilled rage coupled with an unnatural dose of concentrated hatred. Darkness more easily enters the guileless than it does so with the worldly and sophisticated.

He grins while ruminating over the ease at which an undeveloped mind is manipulated: *Victory over the naïve is facile. Yes, this is much too easy, effortless as child's play.*

Thutmose the younger, clings to his father's neck. He is able to stifle the whimpering. Overlooking the shoulder of Pharaoh, the young boy's features darken. His eyes are small, appearing as two dark slashes cutting across his face. The slits are devoid of the signs of life. Thutmose lifts his right hand. He clenches his tiny fist and extends the index finger. He is sighting down his arm as if drawing an arrow on a bow while pointing a tiny index finger at Moses.

The boy's face reveals the murderous rage burning within him. In the pitch of a four-year old child's voice, Thutmose shouts out a sentence that defies his ability to conceptualize or understand the meaning of. The words are incomprehensible to him. The words that Thutmose gives life to gravitates the child towards the power of rage. In his fit of vitriolic malignity, he hollers out a descriptive term, a byname. Seething with anger, the child spits out the epithet just spoken by his father. Thutmose's mimicry of Pharaoh is uncanny.

“You, baster chile!”

Hatshepsut hears the commotion. She rushes to enter the room. Hatshepsut focuses in on the responsible party and glares at her husband with eyes of daggers. She heard what Thutmose and his scion had shouted. Thutmose the Second intended for all within earshot to hear his words. Speaking calmly, Hatshepsut directs her young son, “Moses, go out and wait for me in the courtyard. I have something to say to Pharaoh.”

Moses looks over his shoulder and dutifully complies with the request of his mother. The fear the boy experiences is for his mother, not himself. Concern is clearly written over the lad's face.

Once Moses is outside of the room where he cannot witness what comes next, Hatshepsut strides towards Pharaoh. She maintains eye contact with her husband, the co-regent of Egypt. She stands toe to toe with Thutmose the Second. Her eyes bore into his soul with a white-hot gaze. Hatshepsut fights to maintain her fragile composure. She dares not to succumb to the anger coursing through her body. She declares silently, *I will not cry*. The co-regent of Egypt erects a façade, portraying the image of the bastion of calm by having a cool, collected strength.

Hatshepsut's mood is angry and humorless. She does not engage with polite small talk. Her eyes narrow by focusing on Pharaoh's face. She is his equal and will not be found wanting. Hatshepsut begins with a slow, modulated pattern of speech to address Pharaoh. Hatshepsut annunciates each syllable of every word with pristine clarity. Her body language and the tone of her words clearly communicate what is in her soul.

Hatshepsut begins, "How dare you insult my son and me! If he is a bastard child so goes it with you, Pharaoh, since you share a heritage not dissimilar to Moses. Your mother was one of many of my father's concubines that he lay with. The mother who bore you was a palace harlot, no more than a common whore! I daresay to wonder, how many others have mounted her? I know how you have dallied in the stable where the brood mares are kept! Alas, do not decry my son as a bastard, for you have produced your scion. He is a bastard heir to call your own. Look, the proof is the babe you hold in your arms! You cannot deny the truth, since his origin is a like circumstance of yours!"

Thutmose has heard enough. He barely contains the froth as the spittle flies out of his mouth while Pharaoh speaks. Thutmose answers the challenge with an angry rejoinder of his own.

He fumes, “How dare you insult me? I. AM. PHARAOH!”

Spittle ejects from his mouth as he continues. “The father of your boy is an unnamed commander under a general, *as you so claim*. He is someone who never had the courage to come forth by declaring responsibility for the care of his son. Nor, did he ever approach Father to ask permission to marry you. This nameless commander and you are wholly responsible for the sullyng of your reputation! As for me, my kingdom shall reign for a thousand glorious years; and you, shall die as a pathetic, lonely old crone. Of course, one who is broken and forgotten!”

Pharaoh continues to hold his son as he abruptly spins on his heels. He leaves without further comment.

Hatshepsut mulls over her thoughts: *Out of the mouth of a child comes the harsh, unfettered truth spoken by his father. What else has the child heard his father speak of? A child will repeat what a father spews out in anger.*

The words of her husband and his child still ring in Hatshepsut’s burning ears. Her careful misdirection and concocted piece of fiction from the past has returned as an unwanted carrier pigeon. The bird now sits on a window sill to soil everything beneath it. Hatshepsut is chaste. She chose celibacy in spite of the royal marriage. However, the co-regent is tainted with a befouled brush of an old lie. She is an adulteress, repeated as an utterance of her own making. Her carriage slumps. She shakes her head in resignation while walking towards the courtyard.

Hatshepsut speaks softly. “Moses, please come to me. Disregard the poison of Pharaoh. Know that you are loved by me. This is something he can never take away.”

Moses sits next to his mother and hugs her. “I am sorry Mother. I did not mean to hurt Thutmose. We were just playing a game of soldiers.” Moses drops his head by looking downwards. “I should have been more careful. Brother is smaller than me. I am supposed to protect him.”

“I know you didn’t intend to harm your brother, sweet one. But Pharaoh does not always see things in the same way as other people. Because of this, he sometimes speaks hurtful thoughts. Your brother, he is young and does not know what his father says. Thutmose will imitate his father. He desires to be like his father. Love and forgive your brother, nonetheless.”

“I will do as you ask Mother. I don’t always understand what you speak of, but I know that you will always love me. I will be strong for you. You have taught me well.”

Moses smiles at his mother and embraces her more tightly than before. Hatshepsut wipes away the tears before Moses pulls away from her. As a mother, she does not want her son to watch a single drop roll down her face out of sadness. With reddened, puffy eyes Hatshepsut smiles at Moses. He looks back at her with satisfaction. Moses is able to see the love radiating from his mother.

My mother loves me! The thought is the anchor that binds Moses to Hatshepsut.

“We will move on. Together. But what I want to tell you next is especially important on this day. It had been six years since you were delivered to me by the gods on the banks of the Nile. This is the reason why you now wear a shendyt. On this day, you become a man. So now, I have a gift for you. A gift that was initially given to me but I want you to have it now.”

Hatshepsut calls one of her maidens. The young woman approaches and moves her ear next to Hatshepsut. She whispers words into the young woman’s ear. Moses hears the sounds but is unable to make out the words or glean any meaning. The servant girl briskly leaves the courtyard. Moses is perplexed by the murmuring and the undertone of secrets within the palace walls.

The maiden returns, holding a beautiful ark in her arms. Hatshepsut remains seated, as Moses rises so he may better see the ark. He asks, “Is this the gift for me?”

“Yes. Indeed, it is, my precious little one.”

“Thank you, Mother. I love it so.” He pecks his mother on the cheek as an outward demonstration of his affection for her.

Noting the solemnity of the moment Hatshepsut rises to stand over Moses. She grasps Moses by the shoulders, bends down, and looks deeply into his piercing brown eyes.

“The have gods arranged for you to be sent to me in this ark. You are now old enough for me to give it back to you. The ark is yours to keep from this point forward. Remember this ark always, for it saved and delivered you for a purpose. You are a child of destiny. Although I do not know what your destiny shall be, rest assured your exploits will echo through the corridors of heaven.”

Moses stands to look at Hatshepsut. As a mere child, he is filled with uncertainty by his mother’s speech. He holds the vessel next to his chest. “Mother, I promise I will take good care of my gift. I shall keep it near my heart where it shall always be guarded.”

Moses runs out of the room and through a lace covered doorway. He goes beyond the portico to the aquatic garden. Moses places the boat in the water and pushes it off. The ark speeds across the water and lands in a growth of rushes and lilies. The water splashes. The fishes retreat from the unexpected invader moving across the surface as it collides with the screen of water plants hiding them. With child-like glee, Moses shouts, “Look, it is being held by the rushes on the far side!” Moses jumps into the pool, running and splashing, as he moves to free the ark.

Hatshepsut watches and focuses at the irony of the boy’s play. She wonders: *How much does he really know?*

The arrangement of co-regency ends upon the death of her husband. The premature demise of Thutmose the Second comes within three years of their marriage. Hatshepsut and Thutmose do not give birth to any children of their own. Their marriage was never consummated. The heir to the kingdom is consigned to Thutmose the Third. He, like his father, is the son of a concubine. Moses, and the younger Thutmose are mere children. Neither of whom are wise nor worldly enough to assume the mantle of Pharaoh. Either one of the two children would be culled from the flock and devoured as a lamb by a pack of hungry wolves. Neither would survive if given the burden of responsibility of reigning over a kingdom as complex as Egypt.

Hatshepsut is quite aware of what the lack of a pharaoh would mean for Egypt. She recognizes the potential turmoil and danger brewing for the kingdom without a reigning monarch. The dissidents within the borders will rise up in rebellion; and, the desert barbarians and enemies of Egypt would sense weakness. They would attack her from without the gates.

Hatshepsut is without recourse as she painfully mulls over her final thought. *Neglect and turning one's back on responsibility is as damaging as a foreign assault, or civil disobedience and insurrection to an empire.* She steels herself to the task.

Hatshepsut who is queen, now becomes the sole monarch. She is prepared to assume the role of Pharaoh where she fully commits herself by accepting her given charge. As heir to a trust, Hatshepsut is honor bound to fulfill it. To satisfy the detractors with her bona fides, Hatshepsut assumes the personification of a male; she changes her demeanor and appearance.

Statuary is constructed as a testimony of this fact. Throughout Egypt statues are raised depicting Hatshepsut attired as a male. She wears a *nemes*, the striped headcloth worn by the pharaohs of Egypt. It covers the whole of her crown and the back of the head. The headgear covers the nape of her neck and extends partially down the back. It has lappets,

two large flaps which hang down behind the ears and in front of both shoulders. They fall down to Hatshepsut's chest to cover her breasts. The ensemble is completed with a shendyt, the customary kilt worn by adult males. To further enhance the public perception of masculinity, statues are raised depicting Hatshepsut wearing a beard.

The critics are hushed. Power is consolidated. Hatshepsut reigns as Pharaoh for twenty-one years. Under the sovereignty of Hatshepsut's monarchy, the fullness of Egypt comes to pass. Egypt is at peace. Egypt prospers unlike any period preceding Hatshepsut's dominion over this great empire.

Moses and Thutmose are rivals, both of whom are coming of age. Hatshepsut restrains and curtails the ambitions of Thutmose the Third in the event he should entertain thoughts of eliminating Moses as a competitor to the throne. The ever-vigilant Hatshepsut from her overwatch position protects Moses from harm whether it is near and far from the throne.

Hatshepsut keeps her most private thoughts hidden. *Moses need not know my brother's son would just as soon smite him dead rather than allowing him to live to see the sun rise another day. If Moses knew of the treachery lurking in Thutmose's heart, Moses may act in kind. Should palace intrigue run unabated, the Empire is lost.*

Hatshepsut prays in earnest that Moses is kept safe and the Empire remains whole. She is vaguely aware that the prayers recited are unheard by the gods. Hatshepsut tries to imagine her gods are not deaf and mute. They cannot be. They are gods, carved from the precious-colored stones acquired from across the realm. Amun-Ra, Mut, Osiris, and Anubis are gods who stare back from vacant eyes. Hatshepsut cannot help but notice that the gods she worships are lifeless.

Each remains frozen in the stillness of time. They keep watch with an absence of movement or sound. These gods are not capricious. They are not concerned nor aloof. None display any interest with the

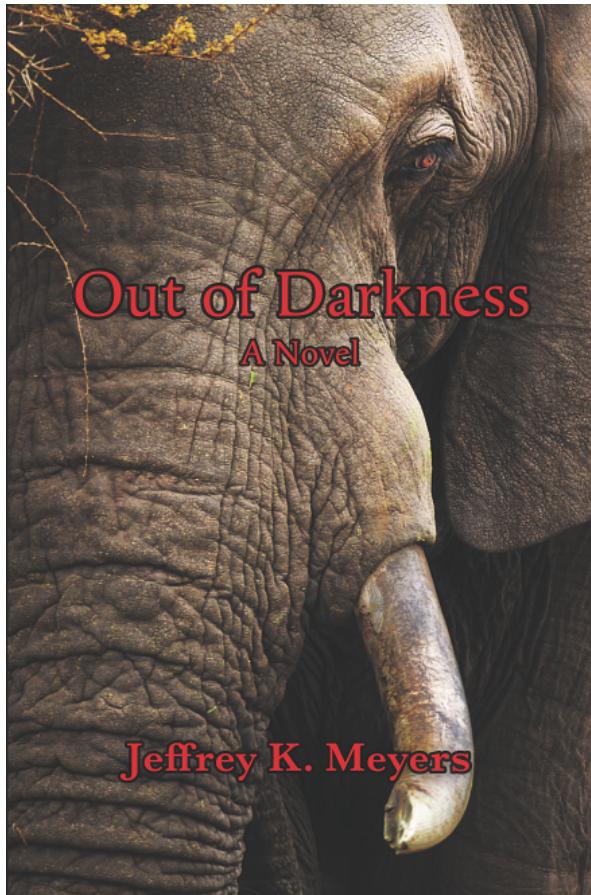
affairs of men or empires. Suddenly, Hatshepsut drops down to her knees with the hope that her prayers are heard and accepted.

Hatshepsut has no desire for attention be drawn to her. So, Hatshepsut quietly cries under her breath, “If I had only prayed with much greater fervency!”

Without any forethought, Hatshepsut extends her body into a full prone. She prostrates herself on the hard stone floor in the presence of the statues that are cold and extinct of life. The queen is overwhelmed. Yet, this time Hatshepsut offers up a singular thought. She voices a prayer to the God spoken of by the Hebrew slaves. The one they call Yahweh.

“I shall submit myself to Your will. LORD, choose how You will use my life. It is all Yours.”

Hatshepsut prays she will witness a sign that her petition is heard. She waits for sign, any sign, from the LORD God Almighty.



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