opening extract from ramose, prince in exile

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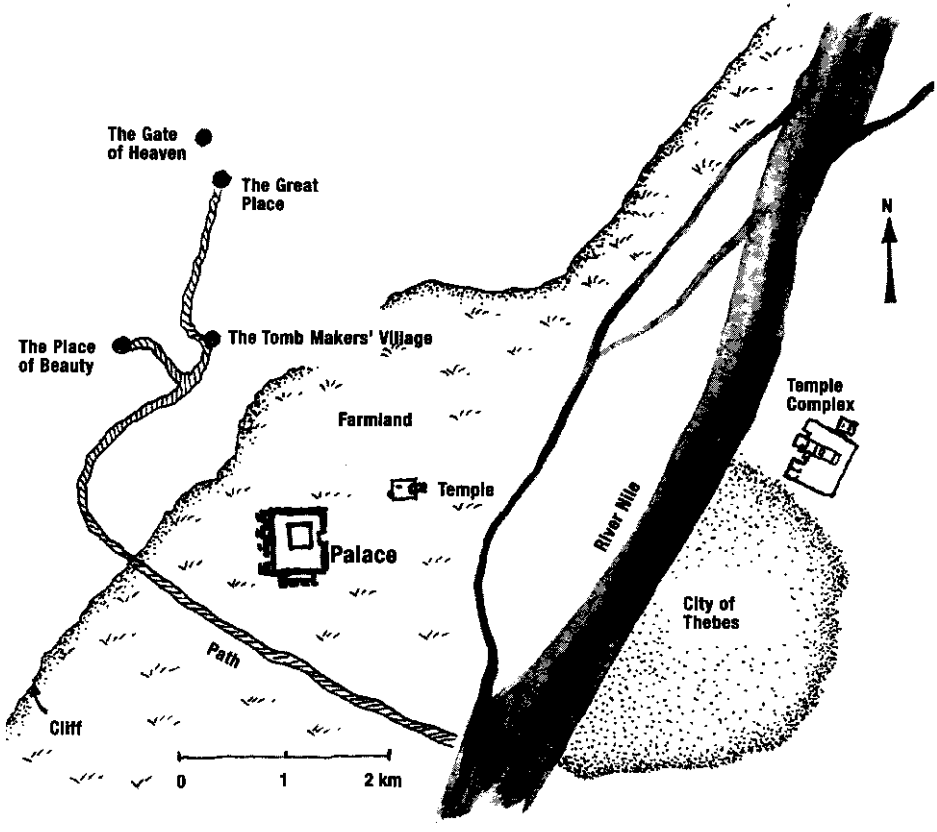
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The Great Place
The Place of Beauty
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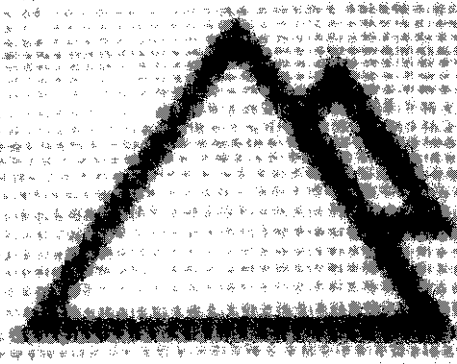

PHARAOH'S HEIR

THE BOY was standing on a dry, rocky hill. He looked around. There wasn't a blade of anything growing. He looked down at himself. Why were his clothes so dusty and why was he wearing such awful reed sandals? Where were his red leather ones with the turned-up toes? He heard a mournful chanting drifting up from below. Snaking along in the valley was a

procession. At the front was a jackal-headed priest. The sun reflected on gold and jewels. A beautiful coffin on an ornate sled was being pulled by six oxen. Six priests followed behind. They all wore brilliant white robes with leopard skins draped over their shoulders.

It was a funeral procession. The boy looked closer. How many loads of funeral goods were there? How many mourners were there?

He had a special interest in this funeral.

It was his own.

Ramose awoke and shivered. He hoped it was a dream, but he was too scared to open his eyes. What if it wasn't? He opened one eye. He could see something green. He opened the other eye. He could see something blue. He sighed with relief. He was in his sleeping chamber. Above him was the bright coloured wall painting of his father hunting a hippopotamus. His father was standing on a papyrus boat about to throw a spear. The river beneath the boat teemed with fish and eels. The unfortunate hippopotamus, unaware of his fate, wallowed in the mud at the water's edge. The reeds growing on the river bank were full of birds and butterflies. On the other wall was a painting of the blue-skinned god Amun.

Ramose had woken up to these paintings all his life and he loved them. He didn't see his father

very often in the flesh, but he had the painting to look at, and Amun, king of the gods, was always there watching over him while he slept.

Through the window Ramose could see the date palms and tamarisk trees in his own private courtyard. He got up from his bed and walked outside. The air was already warm even though it was early. He climbed up the stone stairs to the roof. The white-walled palace buildings spread in front of him.

Ramose breathed in deeply. A familiar smell filled his nostrils, the damp, slightly rotting smell of the fields to the east where all the palace food was grown. Beyond the palace walls, beyond the gardens, was the silver, glittering strip of the Nile. On the other side of the river was the sprawling city of Thebes and, to the north, the temple complex with towering obelisks and colourful pennants fluttering from gold-tipped flagpoles.

Ramose climbed back down again. Two servants were waiting to dress him in a clean white kilt and a tunic—both made of fine linen. They brought him fresh bread, sweet cake filled with dried plums and pomegranate juice for his breakfast. He sat down on an elegant chair with legs that ended in carved lion's feet. He chewed on the bread while the servants put on his sandals.

"Not those," he said kicking away the brown sandals the servant was putting on his feet.

"I want the red leather ones with the turned-up toes."

One of the servants spilt a few drops of juice on the floor.

"You're a clumsy fool," said Ramose crossly. "And this bread is too hard. Tell the baker I like it softer."

Heria came in with Topi, his pet monkey. The animal screeched, ran over and snatched the bread from his mouth. Ramose laughed.

"I dreamt I was watching my own funeral procession, Heria." Ramose's smile faded as he remembered his dream again. "What does that mean?" Heria was the royal children's nanny. She had also been their father's nanny. She was now an old woman with greying hair. Heria knew all about dreams.

"Dreaming of your own death is a good omen," said the old woman fiddling with the small flask-shaped amulet she always wore around her neck. "It means you will have long life." She smiled fondly at the boy.

Ramose was relieved. Heria had once kept him away from the river for a month because he'd dreamt that he was drinking a cup of green water. She'd thought that was a very bad dream that meant he would die from drowning.

"Haven't you finished yet?" Ramose snapped at the servant who was combing his hair. He

pushed the servant away roughly and took Topi in his arms. The monkey wrapped its tail around Ramose's arm like a furry bracelet.

Ramose went out into the corridor. He was in the mood for a game. He entered the western hall. It contained nothing but six enormous stone columns made of red granite brought all the way from Kush. They were so big that three men clasping hands wouldn't have been able to reach around one of them. The columns reached high above him, higher than the palm trees. Their tops were decorated to look like giant papyrus reeds, but painted bright colours: red, blue and yellow. Ramose didn't feel dwarfed by the giant columns. He'd been walking beneath them all his life.

The palace was a lonely place these days. His father was away on a campaign in Kush, or was it Punt? Ramose's father was away on campaigns most of the time and Ramose often forgot exactly where he was. And his brothers. His brothers were gone.

Wadzmose, his elder brother had died in a chariot accident three years ago while he was doing military service in Memphis, the city in the north of Egypt. Amenmose, who had been only a year older than Ramose, had got some sort of stomach sickness after eating stuffed ibex and had died the year before. His mother was only a distant memory. Now there was only him and

his sister, Hatshepsut. Apart from Tuthmosis of course, his snivelling little half-brother and the brat's ugly mother, Mutnofret. They kept to their own part of the palace, thank Amun. Hopefully they'd soon be going to the women's palace at Abu Ghurob for the winter months.

The only people he passed in the hall were servants. They all looked down as they passed him. They weren't allowed to look into his eyes. He liked to turn towards them quickly, so that he could catch them out. If they did look him in the eye, they had to get down on their knees and beg his forgiveness.

He came to his sister's apartments. She was still in her robing room.

"Come and play with me, Penu," he called out to his sister, using the nickname he called her by, which meant "mouse".

"I'm too old for games," she replied from the depths of her rooms. "Go and play with your silly monkey."

Ramose was about to go in and pull her hair, but one of his sister's companions stopped him.

"You can't go into your sister's chamber," she said.

Ramose didn't argue. His sister's companions were sterner than the guards. They weren't servants, but daughters of his father's officials and they treated Hatshepsut as if she was a

delicate vase that would easily break. He left his sister's rooms.

By the time he reached the eastern hall, Ramose would have welcomed any company, anyone to talk to—anyone except Vizier Wersu whom he saw walking towards him. Ramose quickly ducked behind a column. Wersu was the most important man in Egypt after the pharaoh. Ramose didn't like him. He was tall and thin with bony hands that felt like large insects when they touched you. He had a thin-lipped mouth full of small sharp teeth. The vizier reminded Ramose of a crocodile. He usually sat quietly in the background, but he could turn dangerous at the blink of an eye.

"Good morning," said a deep, growling voice. Ramose jumped. Wersu had come up behind him. Ramose sometimes thought the vizier had eyes that could see through stone. "I hope Your Highness had a restful night."

His thin mouth smiled, but his eyes held a different message. They told Ramose that the vizier didn't really wish that he'd had a restful night at all. It was almost as if he knew about his nightmare. Topi growled. He didn't like Wersu either.

"I slept extremely well, Vizier. I'm most refreshed."

Ramose continued down the corridor and out into the garden. He sat by the lotus pool

while Topi ran up the palm trees to get dates. Remembering his dream had made Ramose feel uneasy. Keneben, Ramose's tutor, came into the garden. He was a young man with a pleasant face that was usually smiling.

"It's time for your lessons, Highness," he said bowing to the boy.

Ramose liked his tutor a lot, but that didn't mean that he liked his lessons.

"I'm not doing any lessons today," Ramose said, folding his arms crossly. "I want to go down to the river to fish instead."

"Your lessons are very important, Prince Ramose," said Keneben patiently.

"Why? They're dull."

"Pharaoh's heir must be wise."

Ramose still wasn't used to the idea that he would be pharaoh one day. When he was young it had always been his brothers who had to shoulder that burden. He had been free to play with the other palace boys, the sons of his father's officials. Now that both his brothers were dead, the burden was his.

"I don't need to be able to read and write. I just need to learn to hunt and command an army like my father," Ramose complained. "You know I'll have hundreds of scribes to do all the reading and writing for me."

"It would never do for your scribes to be more

knowledgeable than you, Highness," Keneben replied. "Even the vizier should not be more scholarly than the pharaoh."

Ramose didn't mind about the scribes, but he definitely wanted to be smarter than Wersu. Keneben knew he'd won the argument. He smiled and walked towards the schoolroom. Ramose followed him.