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opening extract from

Ramose: The Wrath of Ra

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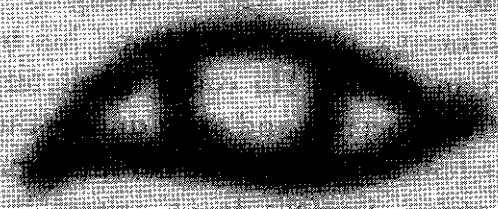
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I



HΘΠΕ

THE SUN was hanging just above the horizon like a red-hot medallion. Golden light reflected on the palace walls turning them from white to pale orange. The gold tips on the flagpoles looked like they were on fire. From the prow of a reed boat, Ramose watched as the sun disappeared behind the desert hills to the west. The sun god, Ra, was starting his dangerous

night journey into the underworld. The Nile was like a river of molten gold flowing around the small craft.

Ramose had seen many sunsets on his travels, but this was the most beautiful. For the first time in two years, Ramose was watching the sun set, not in a foreign place, but behind his home. He breathed in deeply. He could smell fermenting grapes, frankincense and oxen dung—the unmistakable smell of Thebes. The oarsmen guided the boat to shore. Ramose leapt ashore before the boat was tied to the wharf. He was home.

When he'd left Thebes six seasons earlier, Ramose had been happy to get away from the palace with its stiff ceremony and unpleasant politics. He had been hungry to see the world.

In the time that he'd been away, he had learned a great deal. Under his arm was a papyrus scroll on which he had written all the amazing things he had seen. On one side of the scroll, he had a list of foreign customs and a record of inventions that he thought might be useful to Egypt. In his bag, he had a collection of seeds from plants that produced all sorts of strange fruits and grains.

He was eager to tell the vizier all he had learned in foreign lands and he was confident this knowledge would benefit Egypt.

Ramose's heart was thumping in his chest as he hurried towards the palace. He remembered

the last time he'd come home after a long absence. He'd had to sneak in like a thief. His own chamber had been turned into a scribe's office. He'd felt like a stranger in his own home.

He walked up to the palace gate. The timing was perfect. He would be just in time for the evening meal. His mouth watered as he imagined the trays piled with meat and vegetables straight from the palace garden. He could almost taste bread fresh from the oven and sweet honey cakes.

Two guards were standing at the outer gate. They each had long curved daggers in their belts.

"Halt and state your business," said one of the guards.

"I am Prince Ramose," Ramose replied, not without a trace of pride. "I have returned from travels abroad."

He had hardly ever used his title while he'd been away. He'd preferred to travel as an ordinary scribe. After two years of simple living, he was quite looking forward to being treated like a prince again. The guards didn't move.

Ramose held up the medallion that was hanging around his neck. "Look, this was given to me by my brother, the pharaoh," he explained. "Pharaoh is expecting me."

When he was younger, a spoilt prince who had hardly been outside the palace, this sort of incompetence would have infuriated him.

The guards peered at the medallion.

Two cobras arched on either side of it. Between them was the eye of Horus. Above were the hieroglyphs for the official title his brother had bestowed on him. The medallion was made of hundreds of tiny pieces of semi-precious stones—carnelian, turquoise, lapis lazuli—all set in gold. It was a beautiful thing, or at least it had been. Many of the jewels were chipped or had fallen out.

Ramose turned it over to show the guards the inscription. They looked suspiciously at him.

"Can't you read?" asked Ramose, his stomach grumbling at the delay. His patience was fading. He jabbed his finger at the inscription. "It says, Ramose, Fan Bearer at the Right of Pharaoh, blood of his blood, beloved of Amun."

In fact, the back of the medallion was so scratched and worn that the hieroglyphs were difficult to read in the fading light.

"I've got a papyrus too," Ramose said, reaching into the worn leather bag on his shoulder.

The guards both drew their daggers and grabbed Ramose.

"It's only a piece of papyrus. It says that I'm the Superintendent of Foreign Lands. That's where I've been for two years, in foreign lands."

Ramose tried to shake off the tight grip of the guards. "Take me to the vizier."

"No strangers to be let in," said one of the guards. "That's our orders. The palace is under tight security, because of the rebellion to the south."

"I'm not a stranger," Ramose said. "I'm Pharaoh's brother."

The guards marched Ramose from the gate, ignoring his protests.

"Get out of here." They pushed Ramose away. He stumbled on a rock and fell in the dust.

"You'll be sorry for this," shouted Ramose. "Pharaoh will punish you."

The guards went back to their post, laughing. "Imagine coming to the palace gate looking like that and saying you're Pharaoh's brother."

Ramose picked himself up. He wouldn't waste his time arguing with servants. He would get in some other way.

He walked around the palace walls, now a deep red as they reflected the last rays of sunlight. He searched the base of the wall, looking for the hole that he'd used to escape through when he was a child. He couldn't find it. Eventually he found a patch of fresh mud brick. Someone had filled in the hole.

Ramose was getting very annoyed. He hadn't expected people to be out in the street cheering, but he had thought his brother at least would be eagerly awaiting his return.

There was a small gate in the palace wall at the point where it was closest to the river. It was used by the female servants who washed clothes at the river's edge. Ramose tried the gate. It was barred on the inside. He sighed and sat down on a rock at the edge of a field of vegetables. He was running out of ideas.

Soon, Ramose's anger had turned to anxiety. What if his half-brother, the pharaoh, was trying to keep him out of the palace? There had been a time when the palace had been a dangerous place for Ramose. He had been the pharaoh's heir. It was Ramose who should have become the next pharaoh, not Tuthmosis. But Tuthmosis's mother, a lesser queen, had wanted her own son to be pharaoh. She had tried to poison Ramose. Ramose's tutor and nanny had saved him by feigning his death and sending him to live in secret in the Great Place. He had worked as a common scribe at his father's tomb for almost a year. It was there that he had stopped being a spoilt prince and learned the value of humility and friendship.

When his father had died, Ramose returned to take his place as pharaoh. But the gods had chosen a different path for him and Tuthmosis had taken his place on the throne of Egypt with Ramose's blessing. Surely there was no reason for his half-brother to turn against him now?

The gate suddenly opened a crack and a young servant girl slipped out. She didn't notice the dark figure sitting in the purple twilight. She walked quickly to the vegetable patch and knelt down to pick some lettuce. Ramose jumped up and darted in through the gate. He ran in through the courtyard and straight into the kitchens. The cooks were resting as the serving girls prepared the last trays of food to be taken to the western hall. Everyone turned as Ramose rushed into the room.

"Intruder!" shouted one of the cooks. "Call the guards!"

Ramose ran through the kitchens, out into the corridor—straight into the arms of a guard. Other guards grabbed him and he was hauled down the corridor towards the western hall.

They dragged him into the hall. Flickering flames from many torches reflected in the bright coloured paintings on the huge granite columns. The hall was full of people. Servants were serving food to a dozen or more palace officials. Dancers and musicians performed at one end of the hall, though no one was taking any notice of them. On a raised platform in the centre of the hall, a young boy sat on a throne that seemed too big for him. Despite the six anxious servants who were all on their knees offering him meat, bread, fruit and wine, the boy looked lost and lonely.

The buzz of conversation suddenly died. Everyone in the hall turned as the guards forced Ramose to his knees in front of the platform. The musicians stopped playing their lutes. The dancers stopped shaking their tambourines and rattles. A servant dropped a tray. Apricots and plums rolled across the floor.

"What's this fuss?" asked the boy crossly.

"We found an intruder in the palace, Highness," said the guards.

"I'm not an intruder. It's me, Pegget," said Ramose, calling his brother by the nickname he'd used when Tuthmosis was a toddler. Pegget meant frog.

"How dare you address Pharaoh in such an insolent way?" said one of the ministers.

The young boy on the platform stood up and looked closer at Ramose.

"Who is this?"

"Your brother," said Ramose.

"Ramose?" said the young pharaoh. "Is that you?"

"Yes," replied Ramose. "You've grown, Pegget, but I don't think I've changed that much."

Tuthmosis rushed down the steps from the platform and threw himself at his brother.

"I didn't recognise you," he said, squeezing Ramose so hard he could hardly breathe. "You look like a barbarian."



A torch flared and Ramose caught a glimpse of his reflection in a polished bronze shield hanging on the wall. He hadn't realised how strange he looked. He'd grown of course, but his face was thinner. His skin was dark. His hair had grown long, below his shoulders and he had it tied back in a plait. He wasn't wearing a white linen kilt like the other males in the hall. Instead he wore the long, dark robes that men wore in the land of Naharin.

"We weren't expecting you for another month," said Tuthmosis.

"But I wrote to tell you I'd be arriving earlier."

"I have heard nothing from you for weeks." Tuthmosis dragged Ramose up onto the platform. "Bring a chair for my brother," he demanded. "Are you hungry?"

A servant brought an elegant chair for Ramose. He sank onto it with relief.

"I'm starving," said Ramose, taking a handful of bread and meat from a tray. "Is there any gazelle milk? I haven't had any for nearly half a year."

The young pharaoh turned to a servant. He didn't even have to speak. She was already bowing and backing away.

"You must tell me everything about your journey."

"I'm eager to tell you, Pegget," said Ramose through a mouthful of bread. "Just as soon as I've

eaten." He stuffed meat and salad into his mouth. Tuthmosis smiled at his half-brother.

Ramose looked around the room as he ate. He looked from face to face.

"If you're looking for Hatshepsut, she usually eats in her rooms."

Ramose had been looking for his sister. He didn't know whether he was sad or glad that she wasn't there to greet him. He searched the faces of the people again.

"I haven't seen Vizier Wersu either. Where is he?"

"He's been in Kush. He should return any day. There's been a rebellion."

Ramose turned to his brother.

"Is it serious?"

"Oh yes," replied Tuthmosis, his eyes lighting up. "I had to send two battalions of soldiers. There were battles."

"When I was in Kush, there was no unrest."

"The rebels almost took the fortress town of Sai," continued Tuthmosis.

"I haven't heard this," said Ramose. "I've been travelling far to the north of Egypt."

"Hatshepsut said if we didn't nip the bud of rebellion, they'd be attacking the palace before we knew it," replied the boy.

Ramose was surprised. Since when had his sister been a military adviser?

The hall fell silent again. Ramose looked up. A beautiful woman had entered, accompanied by six other women. Ramose glanced at Tuthmosis. The boy's smile disappeared.

The woman wore a flowing gown and exquisite jewellery on her arms and around her neck. On her head was a simple gold crown. Her hair hung like a black curtain on either side of her face. Her face was beautiful but without expression. Ramose shivered as her green-lidded eyes stared at him coldly.

She sat down on a throne-like chair, the same size as the pharaoh's. It had a high back and arms carved in the shape of crouching jackals. She looked away from Ramose and glanced over a platter of meat and vegetables. Her expression didn't change. She assessed the meat with the same cold, uninterested stare and waved it away.

Ramose was determined not to be dismissed like a plate of sliced meat. He stood up and walked over to her.

"Greetings, sister," he said. He didn't bow or kneel before her as everyone else did. "I'm glad you have chosen this evening to join our brother and eat in the hall."

He stood looking down at her, knowing that he had her at a disadvantage, but that she wouldn't stand to meet him. Hatshepsut continued to stare at Ramose with a look of distaste.

"You look like a vagabond, Ramose," said the princess as she accepted a bunch of grapes from one of her women.

"You are beautiful as always, Hatshepsut," Ramose replied, though he managed to make it sound like it was less than a compliment.

"You could have at least bathed before you joined us to eat," she said, raising one perfectly curved eyebrow as she looked at Ramose's dirty feet with disgust.

"I apologise if my appearance offends you. I was anxious to see our brother and find out if he was well."

"He is well, as you see."

Hatshepsut turned her attention to a platter of figs and dates.

"I hear that you have become one of Pharaoh's military advisers," said Ramose.

"I take an interest in Egypt's affairs, that is all. Pharaoh sometimes honours me by listening to my advice."

Tuthmosis was wriggling on his throne.

"Let's talk about the affairs of state some other time," he said, glancing timidly at Hatshepsut. "Ramose hasn't finished his dinner yet."

"I look forward to speaking with you further," said Ramose.

As he turned away from his sister, he felt a jumbled mixture of anger and sadness. She had

once been his dear sister and closest friend, someone who he trusted without question. She had been one of his few allies at the palace in his time of exile. Then she too had turned against him, helping the queen in her plot to keep him from the throne.

Hatshepsut hadn't wanted him dead. At least, he didn't think so. But now he distrusted every look, each word. Everything about her seemed threatening. He had to admit that she was right about one thing though.

"I'm going to bathe," said Ramose. "Our sister finds my smell offensive."

He smiled at Tuthmosis. "With your majesty's permission, I will retire."

"But you haven't told me about all your adventures," said Tuthmosis, looking more like a sulky child than a pharaoh.

Ramose smiled at his brother. "Tomorrow I will be at your service from dawn till midnight."

Tuthmosis waved two servants towards them. "Attend to my brother," he ordered.

"That won't be necessary," Ramose said. He bowed to his brother and left the hall.

It wasn't the homecoming he'd been expecting. He belatedly realised how strange he must have looked to the guards and other inhabitants of the palace. Most of them had never been outside Thebes, let alone visited foreign lands.

He walked down the corridor, turned to the left and then to the right. He stood outside a room. He opened the door. The room was lit by two oil lamps. He walked over to the bed which was covered in smooth linen sheets. He sat down. The mattress was soft. Next to the bed was a beautiful gold-painted chair carved with elegant patterns, with legs that ended in lions' feet. On a low table there was a statue of Ra with a hawk's head. There was also a large chest made of red cedar wood. Each side had a carved ivory panel bordered by strips of ebony and turquoise. The panels showed scenes of a prince riding in a chariot, hunting lions, making an offering to the gods.

Ramose had seen many wonderful things in his travels, but no one matched the Egyptians in artistry. He opened the chest. Inside were neatly folded kilts and tunics, pure white and sweet-smelling.

A doorway led to his bathing room, where he could see large clay pots of water and containers of cleansing oils at the edge of the sunken bath. He looked at the paintings on the walls: one was of his father hunting hippopotamuses, the other of Amun, king of the gods. Ramose smiled to himself. This was his own room. He was home at last.