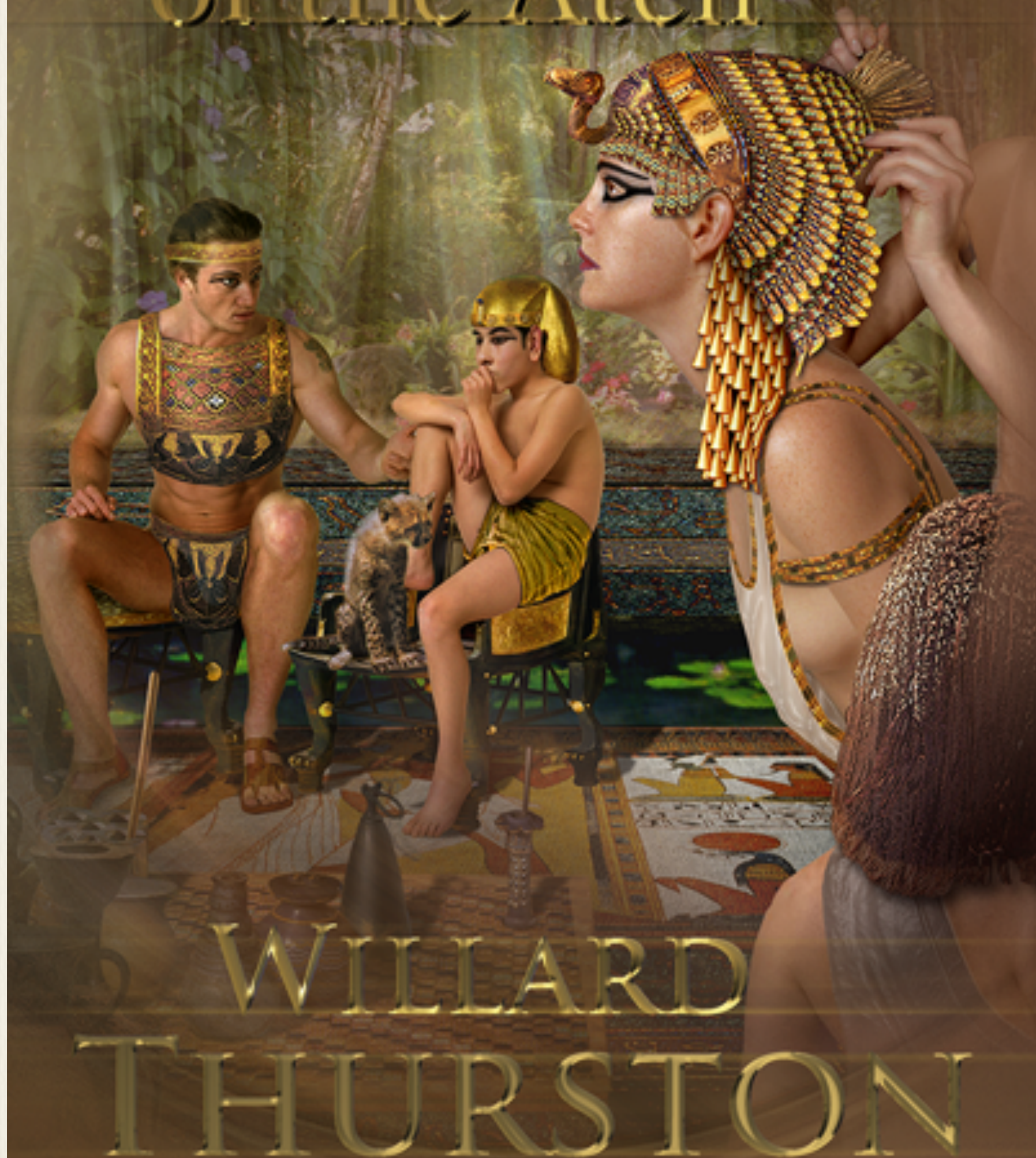


Children of the Aten



WILLARD
THURSTON



Children of the Aten

ONE

The burning hissing sand had stilled for a time and the lagging caravan moved on amidst a cloud of winged ants spangling the sunlight. The camel wranglers nasal neighs keened the air as they rushed about to keep the royal entourage moving. Their livelihood depended on it, thus the haggling with their sometimes ornery camels, in this baked landscape mirage mirrored.

As the aging but ever restless Ay passed the forlorn and nearly deserted Amarna site beneath its famous elevated gap, the mountain riven by Ra's golden rays, the memories were ignited once again, memories seared by the sun itself: the two luminous gods, golden apparitions at the Window of Appearances, sometimes with their alert children, the hushed crowds awed yet grateful for their manifest presence and the visceral celebrations it indexed; the slow moving column of Aten priests reciting cantos after the lector's proclamations, their stately measure matching the labored pace of the distant stone movers; the joshing in a group of primped courtiers that derided the few dour Amun priests as another beneficent feast day loomed in The Great Temple at Per Aten; the scurrying urchins who picked up af-

ter the celebrants, and the scraggly field laborers who paused in their sweat and sore red eyes to dumbly look on. The redolence of incense and hair shiny with ambergris and jasmine in garden terraces later at dusk, framed by gilded columns, dappled ivory dust screens and supple feline furniture, the numinous cats themselves noisy in a dry wadi bed; the relaxed chatter of the new leisured class luxuriating in their newly ratified semi-divinity. And above all, the lingering sense of wonder that such scenes ever transpired, and that one might conspire to remember amidst the ever whispering veils of sand — that such a wondrous and bewitched city existed, to sojourn a canny, heedful Premier Best Wife who framed a chosen self. It was a time. Like no other. A time that kept him from himself. And the daunting present.

If her reflection in a royal lake once shimmered as a late sun nimbus, her memory now lingered as a Pythia, a pale perched presence etched by a voice, a voice about to break, rasp and fade as the embittered nay sayers gathered. The gate mouths and poets would have their say of course, but gossip and metaphor alone cannot re-assemble or erase a goddess — for that you need a magi, a Toth or an Isis — in a willful mood. Her very presence became a harbinger of fond words and letters, special dedications, intricate games, involuted intrigue, sprightly music, arresting art, and bold opportunistic courtiers with exceptionally stylish consorts, ever patient in the unrelenting heat and inflamed sand for a word or gesture. Her element was the slaked green munificence of the Nile, which Akhenaten tried so valiantly to recreate in the pools at Amarna, with their teem-

ing reflections from the luxuriant bird rife gardens, the beauty and fullness of it then nearly eclipsing the late sudden fall...for an insomniac like him.

“We shall continue to the Fayoum oasis?” The Chancellor, who rode in an adjacent caravan, was ‘sharing’ his ennui.

Ay nodded...the ensuing voice of the marshal a shrill predatory cry. Yes, continue, before the memories lapsed. The smell of rotting sun bricks, which the farmers scavenged as fertilizer, would soon sour the sweeter memories.

“You look a little miffed. When you pass this place.”

Again Ay nodded, foiling a dismissive shrug. “The alien smell.”

“The end of things. The rank dust.”

For most, the essential story began with Egypt’s Queen Tiye and the younger Lady Asya who both came from comparatively humble backgrounds — neither of royal lineage — and apparently remained fast easy confidantes. Some curmudgeons even cast them as lovers, as tribades. It was said that Amenhotep III sought out his pretty resourceful but common Best Wife as an early rebuke of the snooty Amun priesthood and welcomed, or at least not cavilled, at her select petite noblesse ladies-in-waiting. Certainly the younger Asya was a strong robust presence and constant companion. But it was their close words and timely stratagems that most officials and courtiers strove to learn and assess, for Tiye was the de facto ruler after old Amenhotep slipped into a tippler’s dotage, the onset of which the same curmudgeons said Tiye adroitly facilitated. Invariably

the two women spoke in animated whispers, politics the corpus they assayed as embalmers. He had overheard many of the words — as Tiye intended he should. Words which always returned and haunted when his entourage, in his extensive travels, would pass and leave the Amarna ruins. The city so swiftly built to honour the ancient sun disc, the Aten. The city and its patron now all but lost to the court chroniclers, but not his ghost-ridden memory. Asya was Tiye's prompter and confidante then. Their close exchanges the pyretic brawling wind sometimes erased, stymieing the many spies. He shut the curtains in his caravan against a resurgent gust and closed his eyes. Such telling words live on, lingering as a tonic and rarified clairvoyance. The late activities of the Prince often served as a preamble to their exchanges.

“It is surprising. This row with his favorite tutor!”

Asaya often spoke as an interlocutor, adding an exclamation mark or two. He remembered both women as striking, if not beautiful, so unlike the many concubines and paranympths at the time, given Tiye's son's predilections then with pubescent teasers. The row in question had to do with the Prince's liaison with a companion the Amun synod, the Amunies Tiye called them, thought highly inappropriate. The Prince's tutor was a devout Amun reader and dedicated instructor in the ways of Kingship; the companion in question an engaging but gamin youngster by the name of Zelea. Her very name in its Glaean-Greek derivation begged the question of whether the woman in question was more nearly a boy, and hence a lame consort for a virile God King. Isis as Hermes simply would not do.

“It appears we must work in stages,” Tiye said in a late rare show of concern. “Show the imp the stronger adept consort, the able heedful ‘God’s Hand’. If anyone can, you should inspire a reassessment. A Hathor not acquiescent nor haughty. But emphatic, resilient, durable, accomplished, and fully personable. Also unambiguous. Do take it as a compliment.”

“May it be so.”

Asya dressed the part in the palace. Lovely pectoral broaches extended to her sternum. Sinuous thick dark hair ambled off her shoulder stays, her strong arms and back surely inspiring a stripling’s envy, the front of her haik or long gown open to the schenti, leaving a trig torso fulsome with aromatic emollients of sandalwood and myrcia. Yet Ay doubted she ever made much of an impression on the young Prince, who shunned most advisements, certainly all insinuations from Tiye’s household, and seemed to prefer boys or at least those prospective consorts who looked like boys. Things might have been worse if Zelea hadn’t come along, a Glaean whose intelligence, heed, linguistic and music skills added a dimension the Prince was not blind to. Attributes the later Nefertiti cultivated with flare. Ay often imagined it fortuitous that Zelea and Nefertiti exhibited the same serene yet focused presence, though Zelea’s poise and equanimity was put to the greater test. Physically they were a match, though the Glaean was perhaps less arresting. At least at a distance. Still, the favored Asya must have presented the lad with an intriguing quandary. The woman who at a respectful distance might be a young daring lad, who could out lead many

chariot runners and throw a javelin with uncanny force and accuracy. To say nothing of whether such a companion might not have eased the Prince's embarrassment before his martial instructors, who must have despaired of their future Warrior King ever really looking like one. Tiye was usually slow but intense in responding to her interlocutor's opening salvos. 'Row' was indeed the *mot juste*. Yet she kept her gaze on the larger problem — the sorry state of the aging King and the sub rosa question of whether he could in fact continue to rule at all.

"The Amun priests are getting bold. They have always been a greedy, suspicious and grudging lot. And now, with this clever *sub judice* arraignment of old Ramose, they intend to supplant some executive powers of the crown — by slyly insinuating he is now a load of dim wits, ungainly aspect and lackadaisical protocol. The insinuation that hatches factions." Ay recalled how the above itinerary tripped off Tiye's lips, as if her dispute with the Amunies was pontifical as well. "That's old Phtmet talking. Well, what's past is past; we'll soon put a stop to the impious bull heads."

A moment of reflection always followed Tiye's strong words, both women in cahoots with the stagy candor.

When Ay reached the narrow plain, the storm had regrouped and swirled every hillock of oceanic sand into a transient spray, the behemoth haze of that desert. The area where his villa had been, with its slate pool mirroring curious birds and finely tended flowers, was now a trench of cindery rocks and smelly decomposing mud brick, much of which the neighbourhood farmers had gleaned for their fields. Yet even against the

hissing seething sand and ornery camels he could see the stark elegant forms and hear the voice of Scheira, the storyteller, who might be telling their story somewhere, as apt and vivid an account as any other. Her sappy invocations he would always remember, for seeing, beholding, apprehending had been the way of the new life, the new worship — to view, praise and enjoy all, lucid and alive as any fakir might reveal, most assuredly at the village level where the proliferating Aten shrines were at first little more than well stocked field canteens, with their visiting musicians, acrobats, readers and spell casters — the promise of things to come! First you seduce then you inveigle and finally command. Many of the sunny animated images were etched into his mind as if by the briskly recruited and fitfully threatened stone masons themselves. Images a later generation so wantonly effaced. The story and stories that no one dare tell now that Her mosaic images in the narrative talatat blocks ignominiously faced downward at the base of many new pylons. Yes, the very one. The one he could not forget and dare not celebrate nor extoll.

In brief: they had needed a goddess, the Aten and the King. The King and the Aten. As he fondly recalled, it was Tiye who fetched and dusted off the old eminent Sun Disc, the Aten, the player god in the wings, her vouchsafed antidote to the Amunies growing power. It was said the old cagy Vizier let her run with it to see how it would fly, pretending ignorance or empathy as the moment required. Yet could this somewhat arcane, exclusive and sterile entity ever really do? The apprehension seemed at the time invincible. Tiye was particularly expressive on this point. “It is a de-

ity that harkens to the earliest shrines, the Sun Disc or Aten, its symbol one of the few that straddles the ages. We thus may resurrect a neglected Northern cult of our own — which rivals the Amun hegemony both atavistically and viscerally -- by the time the country shrines get going. By being regularly open and bountiful -- anathema both to the tight arcane Amunies -- we best them on two major fronts. The way to the hoi polloi is through their bellies, their rutting urges, their love of entertainments, their dreamy visual obsessions and vivid superstitions. I think it's worth a sustained try. We upstage their many gods and idols. The department heads and courtiers will duly take note. A way around the Amunies' stupefying ritual and flinty hauteur — at least of the more flagrant and obtuse varieties.” Both women nodded with knowing if not amused solicitude. Tiye added, “We falter now and they'll have hijacked the treasury but good.” Ay thought again how Tiye's plan was well in hand when the fabled ‘walk-about’ began — her initial campy gambit — her ‘itinerant’ harbinger of the ancient Sun God the Aten! If it seemed preposterous at the time — it worked! A tale he revisited with great nostalgic wonder, conjuring even the words themselves.

The unusual but inestimable harbinger was an outside player who would come into her own in due course as an able if sardonic royal consort. Kiya, another of Tiye's deft players, was a Mitanni Princess who had been offered to Ramose to mollify his neglect of the reigning Mitanni King. Yet even in his cups old Amenhotep was ever mindful of the rancorous Mitanni King and the gift studiously ignored. To his scribe he said

when he dismissed the young Princess, more out of spite than disappointment, “Let it be known we do not gladly suffer wind.” He meant bellyachers and banterers but kept his correspondence to the Mitanni King civil but oblique. The princess herself, smart, perceptive, daring — a younger nimbler Asya, Ay thought — could have been a fine mischief maker but for her timely sojourn in the provinces. Her wide ranging ‘walkabout’ as it came to be known. Which began as a trek to a Tefnut village. Tiye had been percipient. Keen as a wild dog forging at night Ay sometimes thought. She often sat on her chaise with legs tucked as one savouring a private thought, her favourite Nubian wig too large for her diminutive head, her private apartments more a collector’s den than showcase salon. The curiosity was that Kiya had been sent down to a provincial capital after her dismissal from Ramose’s household only to cause a stir there that made the canny Tiye sit up and take notice. The gatekeeper to the household Kiya was to join proved to be a meddling cur who on seeing pert Kiya mumbled, “Be off with you; urchins aren’t welcome here!” Catching sight of a family looking on from a roof porch and a klatch of children from a farm shed, Kiya picked up a wooden ball from a rubbish dump — actually the small round head from a broken statue of a priest (a new family shrine was in the making) — and began to balance and dandle it on her head and feet while performing acrobatic stunts the onlookers had never imagined let alone seen. The household’s steward, an incurable wag and fine tale bearer, could barely stop laughing for the act could not have been better timed: no one in the family or the village had liked the priest,

and when he departed they tore down his statue. As a result, the landowner, an elderly nobleman and wily entrepreneur, installed Kiya as a select entertainer in the community. In a very short time her ample audiences became famed in their own right. Tiye heard of the event from a sympathetic witness. The Mitanni Princess had in effect ‘walked on water’ in a relative rural backwater. One day Kiya substituted a golden leather ball for the priest’s head. Easier to manipulate. It was the ball that fired Tiye’s imagination. The Aten, the sun disc, might not be so arid and arcane after all. Tiye’s plan framed a new conspiratorial ruse. To use Kiya as an unheralded herald of the Aten! The promise of a singular energetic God!

“We must admit that Kiya, the latest consort Ramose has shelved, may indeed be a godsend. Her daring but poised performance with her lively golden ball will handily entertain the district soldiers, labourers and farmers, especially with the food and drink that we’ve augmented her show with. In essence, the first Aten shrines. She is also a competent reader I’m told.”

Asya too was by then alerted. “She will indeed sweeten the beer for the field hands.”

“And get them perched in the new Aten shrines like brooding storks.”

Asya mused, “And if the army will not join in, in substantial numbers?”

“The army is now largely a mercenary force, mainly Shardana, and as such susceptible to a strong pristine force — particularly if popularly supported.”

“So, the provinces establish the momentum. Which shrewd rulers pay attention to. As you’ve said many times.”

“The Mitanni scamp, our ‘bemused’ cat of the Two Ladies, the fated prompter.”

“I am still amazed she went along with the idea. Even elaborating it.”

“The master of the household she was sent to is an old friend and an Aten votary. I think she will soon get caught up in the flood and swim like a croc, as Ay says. The imp is paying attention for a change — a good sign. She can be rebuked later, of course, for her ‘willful’ impertinence. To temper the Amunies. Who will be a while apprehending our windfall.”

Asya smiled. “Might she not interest the Prince? This versatile imp? Play that board game as well?”

“She is not a doll fancier. Not to put too fine a point on it.” Tiye was about to say more but changed her mind. The Prince spent a lot of time these days dressing up the prettier ribs in the royal harem. “She can be easily resettled at an appropriate time. Now, beginning in the North, as planned, she will follow the area inundations. The new shrines will open in sequence to them. Which are predicted both by the seers and the farmers to be abundant this year. The Aten will ride the flood.”

“Particularly if that new wrangler can get her to beguile the one cobra in the vivarium. I’ve just heard about it. A nice adjunct to her act that. A live Uraeus ‘in cahoots’ with the golden ball! You’ve been busy.”

Both women cradled a smile. Said Tiye, “A fine serpent-charmer.”

Such a buoyant initial assessment it was, Ay thought now as then, so full of promise, indeed the vision of a new golden age...which lasted nearly seventeen years! Ushered in by a ‘callipygian Artemis’ as one of his retainers quipped. The stray erstwhile instigator! Could one reckon the calamity that followed so promptly after...at that stage? As the caravan stalled once again, Ay frowned. The recent past for him was always a pond caper. So yes, get the ducklings in a row. The story, his story, perhaps even the essential story, really opened not with the Amun teaser Kiya but the aforementioned Zelea. Yes, the genteel Glaean aristo the young Prince became obsessed with — after a very prickly introduction. Kiya’s obverse and Nefertiti’s precursor he now thought of her, as had many others. The player who came late to the game and nearly upstaged all during her time in it. The sad, smart, stoic, understated beauty who likely inspired the Prince to seek out a double among the eligible or feasible consorts. Not that his predilections were any solace to his mother. At least initially. Yes, young Zelea and her snooty maid-companion Thera -- the pair only a few select insiders must now remember — cued, indeed embodied the crisis. It was with Zelea’s tale then, that he really must begin -- to draw the first incisive glyphs of that animated period. Dear Isis, how could he have slighted that mindful presence? How one forgets the nuances in a time of reprisal. If she had been sold elsewhere the new log bearings might never have been so well greased. Yes, she got things rolling. Got the Prince to expand his gaze, only to find an obsession that became a certitude: a golden

godhead that centred on himself. Trust to Providence a Greek and you've got a revelation or a riot on your hands!

Thus, with those two slaves — Zelea and her servant Thera — in just such a caravan as he now haunted, the final count down began, a caravan to Memphis -- Zelea, a trig, smart but unlucky Glaean aristocrat, and Thera her comely, watchful womanly servant and sometime noisome mentor — at least in private. Their elegant, serene and tranquil past must have been a sad memory after the fall of their island kingdom of Glaea -- another rapt consequential story. If Zelea ever paused to dream of becoming a chic Egyptian consort, even a Great King's Premier Best Wife, a Mistress of Upper and Lower Egypt, after an old but toffy Greek myth, her trek in the poky caravan over a sometimes rocky sand cinder desert must have been a teething anti-climax. Even the burnished dawns daunted in that vast muted wilderness. Their early plight was eventually harem gossip. Thera was an artfully shy tale bearer. "A mummified place," she had dryly remarked, clutching her face mask to relieve the ever present ingress of fine searing sand. Mostly they were kept apart, in their screened camel litters, but managed to converse when the drivers rested at a caravanserai. Although he rarely overheard the two, his intimation of their exchanges was ever a consolation. How he strove to posit their discourse -- one elusive key to the beginning. The ever wary Thera served as the in-house censor and prompter. He could imagine them exchanging words in their camel cubby.

"Your silence is a tomb. A reliquary."

“I was trying to sleep.”

“Almost deafening.”

“They do make some effort to keep us comfortable.”

“There have been rumors.”

Zelea would have sighed, even as she recognized that Thera was absorbed in her own fixed anxiety. “And upstage your telling of them?”

“What will happen to us?” The voice came sometimes from a vault.

“Well, you’re the seer -- nothing too exacting I expect. I’ll likely end up as a domestic. Translating, writing a few letters. Playing the lyre or lute, perhaps. As such I’ll need a servant. Remember, the one wrangler you have the ear of, doubted we’d be separated.”

“Ha. Such a shameless liar.”

“Well, it’s better here than the pirate treated us; so let’s enjoy small mercies.”

“What happened yesterday? When we stopped.” Thera often changed conversations mid stream. It was an incident Zelea had hoped to keep to herself. “Not much.” Briefly Thera glanced across at her mistress who listed near the rug curtain. With some finality she said, “Two heads are better than one.”

Zelea belatedly snickered. This would take some finesse. “The one broker pretended I was a tree nymph, a hamadryad. He’d heard some stories. Wanted to compare notes.”

Again Thera immersed herself in a finely diffident silence.

Zelea however kept up the reassuring gambit. “He was a genial raconteur. Knew some rare early myths and a little about Glaea.”

“I heard he was a spotter for some randy royal.”

“He did say something. Probably just a front.”

Thera dourly smiled. She imagined the worse — a royal spotter here would be lording it. Zelea always patronized her as though realism was a worthy challenge. Yet the thought of what might have transpired was foiled by the sudden arrival of the snooty newcomer.

They had been with the caravan several days when the the grave Medju arrived, a Nubian envoy and his charge, a lean aloof creature by name of Kiya who seemed immune to the newly diffident slavers and their urgency to exhibit her. Alert Thera soon sorted out the rumours, telling her lady in discreet asides as they languished in the tedium the next night in the tessellated brokers’ tent, a frequent if not daily trial, with its alien smells of sooty mats, dusty feathers and fabrics, ripe figs, heady balms and spices, glinting gaudy jewelry and cheap funerary furniture.

“Smelly old Shiraz, the head camel wrangler, a great whiner, says she’s a Mitanni blue blood abducted with an envoy — likely the Nubian — bearing gifts to the old Egyptian King, which may explain why they flaunt her — having both a pledged Princess and Nubian pooh-bah must give a trader the trots.” In assaying the vulnerabilities, particularly of others, Thera often revealed a hyena-like cunning.

“She seems quite unperturbed by it all.”

“Well she’s a hoyden isn’t she.”

“A very chic hoyden.”

“They keep her tethered because she’s also a wanderer. Though where one would go in this place.”

“She may know the terrain, the district.”

They regarded the lithe prize at the brighter end of the tent, her left foot tied to a stake. They had taken most of her clothes yet she seemed uniformly bronzed.

Said Thera, “She must have a map the size of the sky then.”

“I doubt they’ll be around for long. I bet they’re gone by tomorrow.”

“Some bet. What’s keeping the misers?”

“A face keeps appearing at the far curtain, who fancies red hair I’m certain.”

The quip Zelea couldn’t resist; Thera’s Persian red hair seemed as faceted in oil lamp light as a gem.

“Do tell me.”

“He may just be shy.”

“Oh don’t start in.”

Yet it was a white knuckle phase for Queen Tiye, as Ay now recalled. He had overheard the topical, ongoing conversation between the Queen and Asya. The recollected words were keen and lucid as the pluming hoopoes on the shade shrine lake. Tiye ever seemed bemused while the topical character of her words invariably alerted the listener to the here and now. A tactic of all erudite mentors.

“No, the marshal of the caravan can be trusted. And stolid Medju, the Nubian I mentioned, is a reliable opportunist. He would remain a corrupt small town policeman but for this opportunity — though we made sure he is cognizant only of the coming ‘walkabout’. His discovery of the new shrines will keep him attentive and expectant. All you need with his type. He’s very superstitious and finely credulous. Awed no doubt yet fearful of his charge.” As if to confront the comment she added, “I picked him myself.”

Asya smiled. “He would fill a modest sized burial vault that man. A giant really. One scribe thought him a lamia or dybbuk.”

A comment Zelea would have smiled at, gleaning grist for her memory journal. Including the capricious weather. Like the protracted sirocco that impeded the progress of the caravan and discouraged the coming of brokers for the fabrics, spices, perfumes, concubines and slaves the Bedouins hawked. A cohort of unusually ill-tempered camels added to the gritty ennui in a cramped tent. When the weather turned clement and a wadi appeared, the marshal was keen to find a spot where some slaves might wash and be plainly observed. Several, including Zelea, Thera, the newcomer and a couple of lithe manacled Parthian warriors, were briskly led to the water’s edge. Select district brokers looked on with practiced nonchalance, one settling close by for a lucid look at Zelea’s fetching maid, whose baited modesty continued to amuse as she hesitated to enter the water. She said to Zelea, who sat on a moored dhow, her feet dangling in the water, “That’s right, smile.”

“Likely the safest place in the land. Right here, right now.”

“He’s gloating, the swell.”

“He’s pleased as a nit free ape.”

“Is it clean, the water?”

“And warm.”

“So.”

Zelea regarded her pretty servant as she lingered on the shore, arms firmly folded in front. “It’s a good cover. For now.”

“I still think we’re better off if we smell a bit.”

“How would a baboon like that know?”

But the truce ended when restive Kiya struck out for an offshore dhow, her skill as a swimmer a test for the wary marshal. Zelea sat and watched with guarded amusement as two of the attendants struggled to pull the boat with their prize onto the shore. She and Kiya ended sitting opposite one another, Kiya also coming to dangle her feet in the clement waters. She smiled at Zelea and smirked at the brokers who looked on with such grave studiousness.

Said Zelea, “I take it you’re not here for long.”

“So it seems.”

“Are we far from Memphis?”

“Another day or two, if no delay.”

“You’ve been there then.”

Kiya smiled. “You will end up in the royal servant quarters at Karnak no doubt. The food is pretty good. The Prince is very young, shy but full

of hops, and the old King out of it. Best Wife Tiye is always alert to special talents. Your Egyptian is good. I understand you can read and write, are musical and speak some island dialects.”

Zelea smiled. Thera had done a lot of talking. “My father travelled a lot.”

“A navarch?”

“A mason. A builder.”

“He took you along.”

Belatedly Zelea nodded after a faint nostalgic grimace.

“Must have been bracing. And fun.”

“Sometimes.”

To Zelea’s surprise the newcomer became engagingly earnest. “The Memphis bazaar has its protocol, but Tiye’s agents pre-empt all lists. You two should make out okay.”

“You’re not from these parts.”

“Like you, this place is the here and now. You’re from Keftiu.”

“Glaea. Very near.”

“The craftsmen there are exceptional I’ve heard.”

“Some, yes.” More and more she was taken with the newcomer’s knowledge and exceptional lean beauty.

“The captain here, as you know, is from Thebes and travels regularly to Keftiu. He’s not a swine, just ill tempered. Keep your chin up.” The comment seemed ironic as the marshal seized the Princess by the arm and marched her to the nearest tent. Some shouting prefaced a sharp slap and

ensuing silence. Thera later learned the slap had been delivered by the newcomer to a prospective buyer. The curious denouement was the expulsion of the buyer.

The next day attentive Thera would tell Zelea how a Nubian General named Medju and his charge, a Mitanni Princess named Kiya, had been found by a wadi just East of the Cyrenaica Plateau when their mercenary escort found more lucrative employment. The Bedouin slavers who discovered them were at first pleased with their take but soon changed their mind. More trouble than they were worth was the topical scuttlebutt. For instance, the abusive buyer was not indulged — not requited nor recompensed — for the insult he received. Somehow the news of a Mitanni royal got out, and no Bedouin broker was apparently willing to accept the risk: the Mitanni King, Tushratta, was renowned for his thin skin, many spies and hellish reprisals. What Thera did not know was that the eventual abandonment of the two by the Bedouins was part of an adroit plan that originated in the royal court at Memphis whereby the resourceful Kiya was sent on her salient mission to the provinces without alerting the Amunies.

Said Zelea when the couple disappeared, “I told you she wasn’t here for long.”

“I still can’t help wondering where they’ve gotten to.”

“Maybe we’ll see them again.”

“Fat chance.”

“We’re in the land of Maat and the glorious afterlife.”

“You’re going off.”

“Our paths may yet intersect.”

“That’s a laugh.”

“I wonder.”

Thera knew that Zelea rarely speculated without cause. She also knew that the capricious area storms and a cautious slave handler, more so after the late revelation, might delay the caravan getting to the trading bazaar in Memphis. A day or two could take a week. But meeting the Mitanni royal had opened up a vista, one less onerous than she had anticipated. Her mistress’s instincts might afford a night’s sleep.

TWO

While they rested by the farm weir, Kiya and Medju reflected on the coming walkabout, where they would be observed visiting the first of the new Aten shrines in the lower farm districts around Swenett, just South of the first cataract, areas the Amunies rarely visited — the venues for Kiya’s impromptu acts. Kiya splashed her feet in the still, livid waters. Medju stood behind, looking down at his wily charge. As much to himself he said, “So...a day and a half you said. Due North-East.”

“I stayed there a year ago with a sect of Tefnut followers.”

“And you still think walking is best?”

“We’re supposed to be noticed.”

“It’s hilly in parts.”

“You make a career of being lazy.”

Medju seemed not to have heard. “The shadow captain said it’d be easier to protect us if we rode.”

“A pal of yours?”

He glanced again at her unusually light hair and wide shoulders. “Are the Mitanni’s all as daring and stubborn?”

“Let’s not let *her* forget it.”

He pursed his lips. “We’re to travel light on this first leg, to suggest we’re fugitives. But we’ll need at least four or five water skins. An extra camel would help.”

“The pack animal is you. For this leg.”

Looking at her while she cooled her feet in the weir, her wrap a simple Greek chlamys, he was just a little disappointed that she turned out to be so sinewy. The domestic schenti the slavers had used to foil her status revealed a nimble goat herd. A lean presence that came as a reprieve. Such a field wife would be a scold and a hard bed. His ambition to rise in the Egyptian court would not be tested after all. His oath to keep his charge free of harm would be honoured in full. A ‘peregrination’ Tiye’s captain, who would shadow them with his team, called the walkabout near Swenett. Medju stiffened his lip and dwelt on the gifts of the honor roll. He only hoped Kiya would not later rebuke him for the slight she endured at the hands of the slavers, which he had protested but not resisted, fearing they might be separated. A danger Tiye anticipated and duly warned her protégé: “She was told of course — yet seemed apathetic. She would not be harmed, but they would make her a commoner, fearing a regional Mi-

tanni Kek, or should I say Erinnyes; she has a fondness for things Greek.” It was not a compliment.

As they walked to the ‘Land of Eos’, as Kiya called it, Medju mulled over recent events — beginning with his late appointment as an Envoy to the Mitanni King, whose whining distemper was legendary, his letters of complaint to old Ramose a subject of mirth rather than concern, as they perhaps should have been. Schooling the Mitanni royals proved as problematic, and Medju was charged to escort yet one more aloof Princess to the clutch of the wily old Pharaoh, about the time Queen Tiye’s agents came with a daring plan which would pay handsome dividends for him and, in turn, so he anticipated, perplex the growing power of the Amun priesthood -- the ‘Amunies’ Tiye called them. A sullen vindictive group he never much cared for.

The pretty tomboy walked in front now, playing with a Hyksos javelin she found, surrendering herself to the clement air of the early day, as instructed, a sky clad acolyte to Eos, goddess of the dawn, her near nude body below lightly jewelled ears a play of acrobatic economy. In the clear early light of day he again scoffed to find her so tall, wide-shouldered and lean, a near freak in fact, her bum a young Greek catamite would be amorous of. Not even close to his ideal. Yet the more he looked, the deft fluid animation defied this dismissal of her. A protracted suspicion that he had missed something kept nipping at his heels. For one thing she seemed immune to embarrassment. Whereas he had berated himself for not arguing with the slavers over her status as a domestic. The fact that she took her

designated role so calmly first amused then intrigued her stolid guardian. As the sun cleared the horizon, she would stop to play her recorder and ‘set her mind’, as she put it. At each of these stops, near a farm encampment, a clutch of onlookers collected at a disbelieving distance. He was not a music lover but assumed some in the audience must be. Often she would rehearse her act with the golden leather ball, a slyly captivating symbol of the Aten itself. Intimating a vital joyous God. Which would sometimes be replaced by the fat round wooden head of an Amun priest. The rumours were soon galvanic. A better cast player for Queen Tiye’s gambit he could scarcely imagine as the number of stealthy observers grew in size, fascination and latterly garrulousness. By then their shadowy cohort of soldiers openly followed, their javelins jauntily fastened to their back packs.

A vigilant Tiye savoured the late news, often as she stood by the masseuse giving Asya a back and neck rub in the shaded antechamber to her bedroom, which was curtained with papyrus tubs. On one such occasion Ay had glimpsed the two and reconsidered the rumour of their liaison — the irony for him the fact that the mother seemed to like the ardent, well-knit Asya in equal measure to her son’s penchant for the childlike Zelea! Tiye, he recalled, was dressed then in one of the new chic haik-style gowns and spoke in a hushed tone of bemused if not cordial familiarity.

“They’re already near the greenbelt marshes, and their followers ever more curious and emboldened. When they reach the first of the Tefnut villages, the throngs will emerge, particularly with the opening of the smaller shrines -- with their ample food and drink — all in sunny open courtyards,

where our pretty reader and acrobat will perform. In the prologue poem she esteems the cobra, the Uraeus, with words the Chancellor wrote himself -- from an early paean to the Aten. The acrobatic moves with the gold ball follows the opening of the shrine. It seems almost inevitable, does it not?"

"I'm told she's now a golden brown — her skin the color of the Aten itself!"

Tiye smiled, as did Ay. "The saffron dye helps of course. She appeals to all ages. A sport to the young, a welcome benevolent harbinger to the mature. Observable, wondrous yet apprehensible to all, so the warrant officer writes -- one of the reformed skeptics I may add. Many of the local children, ever curious of strangers, 'spread the word like a husk fire' he writes. A veritable goddess who charms and entertains and feeds. The expressive converts grow. A good start.

"Any word from the Amun citadels?"

Briefly Tiye looked down at the fluted back and touched the luxurious dark locks. "They still think she's a forlorn kook, which some crazed witness will snuff out. The presumption of precious priests. I don't yet know if they've associated the golden ball she uses in her act with the Sun Disc itself. Dismay is a novelty with them. Incredulity in the smug takes a while."

"It is a risk though, the allusion some might make."

"She'll be long gone by the time the shrines are fully active. Or the other 'game ball' recognized."

“The head of that old wood statue? The one of a district scribe? My word. I thought you were joking.”

“Yes. And no. Tales of their dead should immeasurably add to the Amunie quandary and disbelief. And to the general entertainment. The man *was* a curmudgeon.” Tiye aped a plaintiff’s shrug. Both women smiled. The masseuse then worked on the lower back and haunches. Standing near but looking off, Tiye continued to absently stroke the luscious dark locks.

Asya smiled. “Medju is behaving himself, I trust.”

“A perfect escort. So the WO writes, with fine contempt no doubt.”

“So, a triumph in the making.”

“The end of the beginning. She looks a little like you, you know.”

Asya sighed. “Some years ago, maybe. Actually, I think she looks a little like we all did, or wanted to — eons ago.”

Tiye noted the resignation. A rather wry self-assessment she thought. Given the tenor of the age. At one time Asya’s family suffered a loss of income due to a soured shipping venture, which spurred talk of selling one or more of the children into servitude. Concomitantly, Tiye recalled, the Mitanni King, Kiya’s father, was rumored to be heavily in debt, and complained bitterly about his treatment at the Memphis Court — gifts promised remained undelivered and inter-province consultations and agreements, some short-lived, his Envoy learned of after the fact. Tiye had been instrumental in cautioning against good money going after bad, and Ramose followed her advice. In due course, the young Kiya was sent as a

bribe, but was received much as an indentured artisan might have been — duly taken in but relegated to serve in one of the induction halls, to help prepare Sed festival entertainments and the like. Eventually she was sent to the country squire's estate.

Said a self-amused Tiye, “How unfortunate that Kiya should have such little sympathy for her family.”

Again Asya smiled. “Fated Kiya,”

As Kiya's troupe approached the range of cliffs that sheltered the Tefnut community, the desert fell away to a sand tree draw where Eos, the Sun Goddess, rose in her forgiving aspect and acolytes might abide the ‘fragrant healing breath’. Catching sight of Kiya in the early day, seeking the goddess's own genius snakes, seeming the while immune to all peril, amazed Medju. She was either mad or a demigod he decided, secretly hoping he would never discover her mad. He had glimpsed such votaries before, but not beyond their humble shrines. She'd been well instructed he thought — when and where to flaunt the Sun Disc's open benefice with surprise repasts of fish, corn and beer after the agile entertainments that heralded the coming, the instatement of the new sovereign rite Tiye so ardently championed.

About this time his amazement nearly got the better of him, foiled the caution he so firmly cultivated. Looking at her one morning as she bent forward to reconnoitre a sharp rocky expanse with many crevasses for the wondrous snakes, he was struck again by her taut burnished self, a carnal

apparition sent to try him, her chariot runner's legs, lithe arms and neck, and in parenthesis — the small breasts that pointed like chariot spicula from the lax neck of her short tunica. His very observance — part of his indentured sentinel care — had become an obsession. Perfectly formed bosses that an ordinance smithy would spend hours crafting -- as if she might disarm an enemy or beguile a python with such weapons. His very eyes seemed inflamed by the idea. Thoughts alone he stoutly mused may not be proscribed.

Her blithe reader's flare before the new shrines and ever growing crowds, presaged her golden ball which emerged like a shimmering bubble on a stream, her undulating form seamless as a water break itself. At least for the young lads who were her mesmerized if not devoted followers. She was too much of a hoyden to appeal to real men, he surmised, his own late fixation a furtive niggling taunt. But for the rustic striplings who could be relied upon to turn up — the hardy area soldiers and laborers of the future state — she was a protean animator, what the Greeks might call a daemon. Not really of this earth but near enough.

Thus, seeing her bent over the rocky expanse in search of her familiars, as he thought of the snakes, he said with some caution, "There are many kinds of snakes in these parts."

She was quick to respond. "Mostly non-poisonous though."

"But not all."

"If you don't threaten them, they come round."

Such words came to him as from a medium.

“You can tell when they ‘nod off’, then?”

“Oh yes. The mice here are as thick as crane flies. They’re all fat as Tiye’s ducks. The rumors are correct. They are fed by the gods.”

Even more confused, he sat down and mopped his brow. Mice plentiful. Mice. Here. He tried to console himself by noting again that her shoulders were too wide, her thighs those of a Tarsus despatch runner. Not really a woman at all, but for the neat fold of her sex with its replete inner lips, one detail in his too vivid recollection of her exhibition by the slavers he was also slow accommodating. Did she live then in a state of constant excitement? Immune to danger, boredom, fate itself? How easily she accommodated their summary inspection of her. Closing her eyes as if enjoying a droll daydream. Unlike the unrelenting invigilation he endured. He bit his tongue. Why was he always slow in noticing things? Like the slackness -- sometimes -- of her schenti, which afforded front row heads glimpses of her groin and labia. Not especially outre at court -- but here, where such beauty was almost mythical, the spectacle was mesmerizing for the field hands and common laborers. Once, before a gang of pyramid stone haulers, she demurely fiddled with a side clasp. When juggling the ball in an inverted back-arched position -- balanced on her hands and forearms -- the schenti fell about her upper waist to howls of approval. Seeing her so re-ignited his dismay. In that setting, where he was responsible for her safety, the daring took his breath away, to say nothing of the wonder of her haunches and pubes, then as smooth and fluted as a camel

skin purse. The beer flowed like a Nile cataract after the performance while pledges to the shrine teemed as congregating geese.

“Was that wise?” he said later, trying not to sound vexed.

“One of the fasteners broke.”

He was never sure if her expression betokened amusement, boredom, stoicism, or a dry but heedful geniality. He racked his brain trying to remember the Vizier’s fussy assessment. Indeed, her numinous nonchalance seemed to defy assessment. Yet she was kind and considerate when he least expected it. She never questioned his charge of her safety, or its efficacy — as she might well have -- while seeming unaware of his guilt-laden concern. He was stumped — most days. The new shrines they visited were alive with chatter and mostly good humor. Natural smiles he rarely saw on his own, ever. Must be a daemon after all he mused, trying to subvert the growing agitation in his heart. Not of this turmoiled earth, but near enough.

The following week Tiye and Asya compared notes with as much inquisitiveness, Tiye citing the ineluctable detail. Each lounged on multi-cushioned chaises close to a warming evening brazier. Asya drew a second blanket from the salver atop the wood scuttle. The clear cold evening was festooned with a star studded sky. Tiye began by seeming to talk to herself.

“She would have been a trial had she stayed here. Clever and so restive.

Luckily, the Amunies always slighted her. The ‘Mitanni troll’ they called her.”

“Does the Mitanni King know of the diversion?”

At first Tiye seemed not to have heard the question. Sudden abstractions were a frequent occurrence these days Asya reminded herself. Much to deal with on all fronts — so Tiye had said earlier, in so many words. Asya smiled. The remains of a snack of salt perch and ripe pears sat on a low table between the two women who relaxed after the fire stokers departed. Two cats nibbled about the leftovers near one of Asya’s spare elegant sandals — a lone reminder of the warm radiant day. With a nod to a secret thought Tiye returned to her friend.

“He’s miffed, the Mitanni king, over Amenhotep’s refusal to send the gold statues he wanted. He thinks, writes of little else. The slight has had its effect. The slow poison distracts, misleads, debilitates.” Curious about Tiye’s bemusement, and its genesis, Asya yielded to her own concern.

“I still wonder if this Aten precursor should not have been less, well, spare, finespun? I’m thinking of the problem of the mother and babe the Aten must eventually be associated with. If the sturdy triad godhead is to be, well — sustained — as you’ve often said. Sending her away solves the problem of her presence here but maybe not the ferment in her wake. The expectation she’s initiated.” She added, surprised and somewhat chagrined by her own candour, “Something you’ve resolved I’m sure.”

Tiye smiled, adding, “A toss up. The blithe, open aspect of the new ritual — to ignite the interest — was best exploited by an entertainer. The Heavens know she’s supple as they come — in mind and form. But we must find a suitable womanly Aten consort, as you say. And soon. The

timing may be fortuitous. My lazy son was intimidated by her athleticism, her ‘palaestra vim’ as the Vizier put it.”

“Perhaps a blessing.”

Tiye was a moment concurring. “Yes. This fetish my son has with young camel skimmers has to be nixed...the new godhead must prove god-like in the end. Smiting our enemies with one hand, dismaying the diletantes and carpers with the other. While enjoined to a credible Isis. An *unambiguous* Isis. Lithe Kiya has her place and time. ‘Engaging the multitude,’ Ay says. The endgame is in hand.”

“In the meantime -- on with the show.”

Thus it was that Kiya, via a smiling Providence, found ready audiences for her agile performances in the Eos community, part of her expanding, nimble, beguiling sun ritual, which even incorporated wit in her blithe use of the old wooden scribe’s head as one of her props — an erstwhile game ball that would transform into the golden Aten, the very symbol of a balanced happy existence between the pink of Eos and purple of Nut, where the meals and drinks seemed inexhaustible. Increasingly Medju sensed the inevitability of it all, as if Kiya was indeed a harbinger for this original, numinous yet apparently happily accommodating God. How adroit of Queen Tiye to find a player who might snare the young Horuses of the world. Who might be as taut as the circular besagew on a shield, or as thrusting as a snipe — while never dropping the precious whirling orbs! Lucid and reliable as the rising sun itself! The accompanying Aten priests’

readings of hymns seemed then fleet as the wind. Soon the front row comment might be indexed, and indeed was by one of Tiye's area witnesses.

She must use a glue or something. To balance it so. Or maybe the words of the priests have some power.

How then does she flip it into the air? When they're not speaking.

She's got a string. Well something.

Come on: she rarely uses her hands.

You're saying this Aten thing works jujū?

The shrine is full of vegetables and fruits, which she also sometimes juggles. Maybe they've been touched by the Aten as well.

That's a kicker.

Even meat sometimes, if you're early.

A pause.

Meat! When?

Early in the week for sure. Beer too if you come before noon.

You're kidding. You don't need a pass? A special topper, bead roll?

No, you just honor the Sun Disc and its mostess blessing. Follow the mumbo jumbo of the priest or priestess. Nothing to it. At least for now.

Too bloody good to last.

From the sunny hippo himself.

Tiye too conversed with Asya then almost as a huckster. In the distance a new shrine to the Aten shimmered in the noon hour heat. They lolled on the terrace to the Summer Pool. A family of new ducks flapped about the margin. The young fan boys were dismissed when a temperate breeze wafted in.

“No, Medjus’s too busy scheduling the feast wagons. He’s a stolid old campaigner. And very ambitious. The crowds alone must peak his wonder — and cupidity. If he was diffident before, he can’t be now.”

“And the captain of the escort troops?”

“An able commoner with equally grand visions for himself.”

Both women smiled and took a moment to savour the prospects.

“It seems ordained -- as you’ve intimated. A splendid start. The crowds seem eager to take it all in. Canny Tiye. Able Kiya.”

“She appeals especially to youngsters and town gossips. The innately rambunctious. Some of the poetry derives from nursery fables.”

“Why gossips?”

“The beer and fruit that follow in her wake keep the clenched hands ready and the ‘carpies’ confused. The praise and rejoicing graffiti many have seen on the Aten shrine Benben stones. All beseech the Aten for Its favour. Yes, talebearers and scribblers abound in her wake. Until now, the labourers in and about Behdet hadn’t had a decent meal for months.”

Asya smiled, shaking her head. “And by rallying the provinces you’ve addled the Amunies. How simply sad.”

“They still think she’s just mad. At least that’s what they say — in public. Some must be rubbing their eyes I daresay.”

“The growing crowds they must hear of.”

“Well, sooner or later their synod will catch on. My estimate is ‘later’, and by then it’ll be playing catch up.”

Still, one aspect of the undertaking had long concerned Asya. Now, when it seemed there was no turning back, the subject easily resurfaced.

“The King is still so very tired?” she asked in an apathetic voice looking off but not focusing on the new shrine.

Tiy’s answer was swift and assured. “Tired. Yes. The wine is delectable this year.”

Both women managed to keep a straight face. The matter had at last been broached: the King was often in his cups and happily unconcerned with Amun worrywarts and nose grinds. Said a focused Tiye, “‘Antsy diletantes’ is the phrase used by his Amun councillor.” Again a short convivial pause. Which Tiye was the first to extricate herself from, finding the the King’s notoriety all too prosaic.

“As for slow gourmand Medju -- what can one say? His discovery of the open accessible Aten shrine — laden with oiled barley and beer for all, plus occasional cuts of foreleg and baskets of fruit plus, sometimes, a pretty priestess offering drafts of watered wine — the largess has taken his breath away. So writes my observant captain. Let’s hope the Amun sore-heads gag on their squibs. ‘Dilettantes’. Do indulge me a moment here. The shrines’ munificence will affirm the successes of the King, which the wily Amun priesthood has ever tried to upstage -- even as it suavely exploited the land’s unprecedented riches, stability and sovereignty — by feigning their own centrality to them.”

Tiye paused as if to happily savor the momentum before continuing.

“The Amunies’ rare and often brief displays of untenured generosity sustain no expectation. Awe, anxiety and dread are their handmaids. Moreover, while serving to summon and reflect aspects of Eos Herself, the Aten could restore its deficient female aspect while becoming the focus of worship throughout the Kingdom. Kiya serves as the spirit, the energy, the pleasing candor, the herald of the many benefices, her frequently up-raised arms the life power of the incarnate Ka. Think of it. She presages the harmony of a golden era: the promise of the Aten. End of the line.”

The élan of the moment was electric. Silence itself a benefice.

The Vizier though, an Amun legate, had become concerned, and importuned many ears in his rounds. No one, if memory served, had seen him so fitful and self-conscious. The venal Chancellor was button holed near a waiting legation — then wary and on edge — and listened at first mainly under duress. He had just come from a singularly botched mummification of one of his elders. A beam fell and smashed the head. Still, he too was surprised if not embarrassed by the irritable tone of the Vizier.

“The cat and her baboons have not yet entered Karnak, but they are definitely headed our way. I think it’s time we took action — poisoned some of the offerings, instigated some incidents of rapacious greed — which is all it is. Yes, I think so.”

The Chancellor, of course, was partial to his ample estate and not about to test let alone rile the palace. Yet he did not want to appear sullen or uncivil before

the agitated Vizier.

“Yes, the word does get about. Still, some priests doubt there is much to the fad and we surely don’t want to be seen as anxious. Some mindful interventions will better temper the mood, don’t you think?”

“The ‘mood’? Are we then concerned with the ‘mood’ of layabouts, shirkers, malingerers?”

The Chancellor’s patience was causing him indigestion. “It should be a prudent tack. At this, well, discursive time.”

“Prudent. Um. Why not just abduct and abandon them in the desert -- the cat and Medju at least?”

“Well, given her entourage now we’d need the army for that. And we should remember that the army, well the Shardana, in that vicinity are rather keen on the show. For now.”

“You don’t say.”

“One of the topical curiosities.”

“Ha.”

Later that day the Amun synod members considered the dilemma in a protracted silence. The dim assembly chamber was relieved by some goutts of light that vivified lazy dust mites. One or another member desisted even as he began to speak. Finally the Vizier had had enough. “We take a vote. Those concerned, those not.”

Yet the concerned majority remained diffident about how to proceed. Tiye, of course, could barely conceal her delight. A newly happy insomniac she looked out her loggia at a full silver moon, the distant Nile a dark

jeweled leeway. Asya noticed the still figure on the terrace and joined her. Without turning to her attentive companion Tiye said aloud, “She has broadened the pageant and now performs on the other side of the river.”

Asya barely suppressed a yawn. “It’s not a little early to crow?”

Tiye smiled. “Not in private, my falcon. The Vizier himself was obviously dismayed by what the Chancellor mentioned in passing, and neither of those two welcome a protracted fight, which they’ll have to engage in now if they are to resist the momentum. The shrines are sprouting like papyrus clumps — healthy robust plants in the margins of the desert. Moreover, it appears the harvest this year will be especially bountiful. Medju, a fine example of the lucky parvenu, is amazed. Smitten even.”

“In the new act Kiya now uses...is he aware that the Uraeus cobra is de-fanged and trismic — lockjaw induced? I understand it is a special art. Keeping it focused yet unlikely to strike.”

“It was one daring do she was not a natural at. Sat there at the first rehearsal like a torpid frog. Quite expressionless. The usual aloof stare. But you could tell she wasn’t happy with the prospect. ‘Again,’ she simply said when the wranglers held the mouth open. The one let it bite his hand and sustained barely a bruise — even as he assured the flinty cat that being trismic the snake would follow a moving object -- her hands for instance — but not likely strike.

“She insisted on a ‘there and then’ proof didn’t she.”

“To everyone’s surprise. And amusement — yes, I saw the faint smile — when it was over. She moved off and came back thrice. Each time the snake performed like a rote primed student.”

“She has spunk.”

“Ha. A purse-proud minx. Such condescension the gods rarely muster.”

Both women shared a close smile. The stories were becoming prodigious.

On finding Kiya in a dim bazaar performing as a snake beguiler to a coterie of mesmerized watchers, the wary Medju too belatedly and haplessly grinned. This talent he had not anticipated, given her early tutoring. Then, the mere presence of the snake had given her the jitters, or so he recalled. With her it was hard to tell. Now -- he could barely believe it — her movements so deft and assured, the snake, a robust cobra tracking her every gesture. In vain he looked to see a wrangler in the near audience. Had her reputation as a savvy entertainer and peerless teaser bent her wits? Yet the snake appeared entirely in her thrall. What a peerless encore to charm a restless populace into seeing the Aten, the Sun Disc, as a seasoned and masterful god head. The more he saw the more inevitable it seemed, this harbinger of an immortal presence. Even the cobra, numinous or not, seemed captivated! At first he suspected somewhere a wire device or something that kept the head aloft, yet could find no evidence of one. Thus, he concluded, she must indeed be capable of casting a fine impervious spell. From the class of semi-divines the Greeks were so fond yet

wary of. Indeed, she seemed oblivious to the surrounding wonder and adulation, her sinuous form itself a benefice from this ancient yet little known God. The earnest acolytes of the shrine informed the audience they were not to try this at home without prolonged study with an Aten tutor. And even then they should not be too hopeful. Only the truly dedicated might enjoy the Aten's special favor. Medju, stiffly taking in the hardy injunction, was nearly convinced the snake was somehow disabled but would not give odds on the probability. He was then too enchanted with the beguiler herself, and sensed some sort of spell casting in that arena too. As the weeks past his lust for her had a mind of its own. Now she seemed the only 'woman' he noticed — and worried he too might be susceptible to the 'Greek' curse. Even the district's Cyprian hetaerae lapsed in his memory.

The principals of the Amun synod were by then no longer amused by the caravan's theatrical acclaim. The popular word-of-mouth was becoming noisome. Sorcery and chicanery were ever potent nuisances in the wrong hands. They sat about a great table, heads in hand, their bald domes half moons in the coned ceiling light. Again the conversation was slow starting. Some guttering tapers had to be replaced, barely lightening the general gloom — as the words took flight.

Said Psammet, "It is no more a lurid side show but a consequent mischief. Already there is a drop in sacrificial pledges to the neighbouring Amun temples. Indeed, she transfers all her numerous gifts to the nearest

Aten shrine — which end up in the hands of the least deserving rabble. And now there are two of the nutters — one to follow in her wake apparently — from the Queen's own household! Yes, the rumour seems to be true. The great whore Asya has a team of her own in preparation. Tiye's own special 'handmaid'. Meaning the palace itself is now an open benefactor."

Said Horem with a chuckle, "'Hand', that's good." And was disappointed no one enjoyed his joke as much as himself.

Said Psammet, "Our furtive clever 'Premier Best Wife'."

Said Menhet, "There seems to be enough for all who come to the new shrines -- meaning a direct connection to the palace stores. The number of wagons seen is exceptional, to say the least. And with a bountiful harvest on the horizon!"

Said Horem, with a snuffle, "I cannot imagine Amenhotep agreeing to any of this, surely."

Said Psammet, "Amenhotep, bless his name, is so drunk most days that he can barely place his seal. Our warnings have gone unnoticed in this climate."

Said Psammet, "He listens to Tiye too often these days."

Said Horem with a self-incriminating flourish, "Has it come to that...so it is true."

Said Menhet, "A fact best kept to ourselves Horem. We mustn't forget that slip stream Tiye is the one who chooses to connive with this outrage. And see to it the wanton procurers come to no harm. Try to

imagine one of the Prince's brazen dancers performing in such a motley crowd with such impunity!"

Said Psammet, "The assessment of her servers is that her sentinels are in the main drawn from Amenhotep's old charioteers."

Said Menhet, "The ones he abandoned when the late truce was signed."

Said Psammet, "Which means they would be in cahoots with the palace patrons of the Shardana, if not the commanders themselves."

Said Irigad, "From your frequent silences, I assume we are agreed. The time of the indulgence, the humouring is over."

The drone of assent seemed to come from a single stranded beast.

Thus, after several weeks of sensational and unprecedented performances, the show was as suddenly prorogued. For everyone's safety. At least for a time. The Amun plans were ascending in the air like storm thermals. The late acts of vandalism — the craven, desperate thuggery Tiye and her faction anticipated — would eventually be thwarted, the perpetrators suborned or punished, but not before the vengeful travesty became widely known. An optimistic Tiye was convinced that most of the new shrines were then sufficiently viable to stand on their own, be much harder to impair than a troupe of blithe entertainers, whose absence would be sorely noted — the lack baring a thuggish, unwarranted, embarrassing Amun transgression! Medju in turn was finally commanded to formally return his charge, the daring Mitanni Princess, a pledged consolation gift to the

waning King at his Memphis court. When told of the change, Kiya's shrug masked or beggared disappointment. What indeed did she know? Medju always felt he looked on from the sidelines. And so, arriving in the blush of dawn, when Eos opens her eyes, Kiya was bundled off to await the Chancellor behind a garden patio sun curtain, her solicitude amidst the deferential whispering replete in its fastness, further inspiring the hovering servant gossips.

Did you notice how the cats rucked when she arrived?

She can actually suckle a Cobra they say.

I heard it was a Black Racer.

Well, she is a wonder. I mean that's pretty obvious.

A jewel in the old swine's snout.

Snout's about it.

I hadn't realized how nifty she was. Really.

Well, for an old stew swapper like you, it shows.

Laugh all you like. She's not a tart. And she isn't going to be easy to settle up with.

That's for sure.

Well, this isn't Tefnut country. Some things here you just don't do.

She'll get flogged before the day's out I bet.

Oh that's nonsense.

Maybe not.

By then all eyes were on the newcomer.

Tiye too was grateful, if somewhat less mesmerized than the conciliatory, mindful Asya. Both women exchanged pleasantries about Kiya's

fresh popularity as Tiye narrowed her focus for a more prudent assessment. A howler monkey could be heard in the distance.

“I’m still not sure if it’s pride or craft she’s capable of sustaining so.”

“They say she’s just easily bored.”

“Well, that’s an act any willful child learns, especially a precious Mitanni scamp like her.”

“I think you may be a wee bit hard. Nothing much escapes her.”

“I do think she and that Glaean Pintail compliment one another nicely. What’s her name — Zelea? A Greek Hestia, a wise hearth spirit, in another life. Resource reveals its time and place. The obverse of Kiya.”

“I detect in your humour — a plan for an instrumental reprise or encore. Of dynamic Kiya.”

“After she’s been formally rebuked for her ‘waywardness’, of course. We don’t want to give the Amunies any openings at this time.”

Reflectively Asya added, “We nearly did act together. Would have, in time.”

“Well, you balked in the end didn’t you. Came to your senses. Felt the show was getting out of hand. Our pre-planned at option. Fortuitous timing.” Tiye fastened a dry moue on her friend. “A fine excuse that will not daunt the new communicants. Yet flummox the Amunies.”

Asya smiled. Her ‘refusal’ to join Kiya in the provinces had been concocted before her proclaimed departure -- to shield the palace from vindictive carping. Her empathy for Kiya grew apace.

“So: an Execration Rite for your Mitanni ‘adventuress’, then what? More restive antics? To flatter both the commonality and new converts?”

“I’ve been thinking.”

Asya fondly regarded her innately regal companion.

“Yes. That gymnasium in Naucratis has earned a notoriety that may serve us well in the interim.”

Asya was surprised then smartly amused. “Oh dear. What can you be thinking? That baboon show in Naucratis? How to keep her busy, fetching and away from the court?”

“Do listen. It is not the howler you may think.”

Both women smiled when the howler monkey stopped.

“Indeed. Consider: appearing in the athletic palaestra, as some eccentric creatures do, even a few Alexandrian ladies I hear, will alert and humour our many court dilettantes and gate mouths, who tend to slight the Amunie carpers and fusspots when a sensational issue arises. What better time for such a jape.”

Asya plumped a cushion to stay her amusement.

Tiye happily, suavely continued. “Yes, most agreeable. The Amunies’ discomfort with a new pert entertainment from the Mitanni scamp will further addle the synod. I think so. They cannot suborn a richly entertained throng — the fanciers and dilettantes at court — whom an engaging Kiya, conspicuous in a showy palaestra will incite! The stolid Synod will almost surely waste more time surmising what new ‘adventure’ is in the works.”

The silence that followed had a keen conspiratorial edge. Both women savoured a private smile, Asya's, despite her incipient awe, broader than ever.

"With a skipping rope and ring banner she can keep the visitors here alert, the watchers, courtiers and eager parvenus here diverted — and the Amunies worming their snoops."

Both women fought down incipient laughter. Though, to an outsider they might have been discussing an ugly tunica broach, not the sensational appearance of a pledged Egyptian peeress at a Spartan inspired gymnasium!

"It will also keep her away from the capital and the antics of my son. I think her dislike of life in the woman's quarter will render the placement a net benefit all round. But that's to come. First, we must see that the 'prankster' is suitably rebuked. Take away the Amunies' fly whisk."

"That will be a coup."

"She was well briefed on hieratic codes before she left."

"And assured that they will be more observed in the breach than the observance?"

"She is aware, like all royal agents and emissaries, of the weight of the observance. We must begin by getting her to dress appropriately — no more of this Mitanni swagger and preciosity. As fussy as a Greek chlamydon robe that thing she had on when she arrived."

The rebuke was unfeigned. As Tiye intimated, more than once to discreet palace audiences, the act of being presented to a court still beholden

to the ancient Amun curia required decorum and patience. In due course, the Amun proctor spelled it out to the bemused Mitanni Princess with a dour smugness while Medju, fitted out as a royal seneschal, mugged a smile. Kiya gamely looked away. Medju well knew that expression — the bemusement of a supernatural being he mused.

Said the proctor, “Mitanni dress, ahem, is not de rigueur here, nor long hair, and you must stand to as a true youngster in the bead girdle and braided scalp knot, although an older haik may be apt, under the circumstances.” Medju looked away with a nostalgic amusement the proctor took note of before continuing. “You will of course be assigned a servant who is versed in court fashion and Amun protocol, and Medju may continue as a provo guardian, at least for now.” As much to reassert his presence, he added, to himself, “Have we missed anything?”

Said Medju with matter-of-fact ease, “Only Tiye’s Northern sororal pectoral.” The pectoral had been pledged to the Mitanni princess for assisting the Aten. It would serve to ameliorate the execration rite. Another of Tiye’s finesses.

The proctor winced. “Oh yes, one of those. Well, there you are. A resurrected family heirloom.” ‘Heirloom’ was pronounced with noticeable distaste.

Medju curtly nodded. “One, yes.”

Before swiftly leaving the proctor declared, “I dare say Best Wife Tiye will be in touch. With whomever.” He almost bumped into the Chancellor who stood behind in the shadows of the peristyle as he left.

To herself Kiya recalled how her irascible father railed at the miserly Egyptian King and his Amunies — which she was recruited to subvert. Hathor's sharp observance as the 'Eye of Ra', she mused.

Medju wanted to say something patronizing but could not find a suitable catch phrase. As if by Providence, the marchioness arrived moments later bearing the pectoral.

Said Medju, relieved that the bearer was not from Tiye's inner circle, "The pectoral identifies Tiye's sorority — a veritable aegis for the wearer."

Said the stiff marchioness, "Tiye as Best Wife must reproach a wayward alien. Regardless." She cast a sober look upon Kiya. "Such 'appearances' can be deceiving."

Medju frowned, looked away.

Kiya narrowed her focus. "She puts a foot on your head, right. The old execration standard."

Said Menju, "In your case, a mere formality."

Said the marchioness, "A much-honoured formality."

Said Kiya, "Some formalities can be a long ride."

Medju nodded, thoughtfully he imagined. The marchioness archly scowled.

Said the seemingly placid but ever observant Kiya, who Medju swore had eyes in the back of her head, "Why is the Chancellor here?"

Immediately Medju said, "To confirm the presentation of the pectoral; you are now a peeress of The Great House."

The marchioness woodenly smiled in assent, saying, “A slight of protocol permitted in extremis, as defined by royal decree,” then curtsied and departed in a head-up gait. The Chancellor bowed as she passed, but still hung back the better to assess the scene. So it seemed.

Said Kiya, glancing behind, “He looks like an Ibis.”

Medju smiled. “A long beak, yes.”

“So, he’s taken his cut?”

Medju apologetically smiled at the nearby Chancellor who still held back, leaving Kiya and Medju sequestered.

“He ‘hangs out’ does he?”

Medju was sweating and whispered, “He’s verified the giving and acceptance of the pectoral. The designated witness.”

Said Kiya, “Not a formality, I presume.”

Again Medju bit his tongue. “All in due course.”

Kiya dandled the pectoral with droll wonder.

A day later she and Medju were summoned to the Queen’s court of chancery, where the disciplining of a potential consort might be enacted. For a time they stood in the lofty antechamber, a peristyle strafed with glancing sunlight, Medju in full military regalia, Kiya in the short tunica worn by newly inducted foreign soldiers awaiting confirmation of rank. To test the protection afforded by the pectoral, attic Kiya snatched a scribe’s wig and elaborate vestment apron, securing it about her hips, as it might have been worn by a harem dancer, then dusted the bald head of a dwarf priest with a puka, aping the stance of a tireless fanner. In conse-

quence she and an astonished Medju were whisked off by the ushers to an old echoing nave off the audience hall, where chary whispers sounded like scarping rats, and a shaft of sunlight highlighted the slender offender, blinding her and Medju to the royal entourage within. As suddenly, and without fanfare, Kiya was escorted by two royal guards in the command of a chatelaine to a chamber off the sun incised peristyle. The fast silence from the room prompted Medju to think of a deserted desert wadi. His confusion however seemed his alone, a growing discomfiture he made every effort to hide. After an aggrieved interval, his charge was returned sporting one of her droll yawns, minus the pectoral, apron, wig and tunica, all replaced by a coarse schenti, possibly at Tiye's instructions he imagined, hoped. He had witnessed some felons brought before such a tribunal lathered in in brine, the skin the more painfully scored when flogged — a recollection that taunted, even rebuked him now. Ritual feasted on complexity he thought. Two Amunie priests looked on from the peristyle with creedal glowers and sulky words.

Such a pretty noisome picture.

I wonder what the stolid Nubian makes of it.

The civilized don't dwell on the obtuse. What does caution is the recognition of Tiye's imperfect sense of humor — creating such a 'creature' in the first place. Who would mock a vestment apron like that.

A reliable appeal to the new idlers.

The stolid, the ugly, the cowardly, the disingenuous.

Your point?

Well, how else will you know — except by a varied, arduous, demanding even harsh life that serves up rewards and punishments without favour. According to custom and protocol. Only then will you know who you can trust. How the dumb grazing stock stand out.

She is a player. This Kiya.

Pah. Like Medju, another animal. Instinct. Nothing else.

When he glanced at his charge Medju thought briefly of a cheetah about to strike, then a lean Spartan athlete. It was all he could do to keep his eyes on the inner chamber and not the newly factual, well-bronzed form. For all his pretended captious manner, he did glumly note that she was also lightly oiled — suggestive of brine — and her earlocks docked, as an Egyptian youngster would have been, completing the cleansing of her Mitanni identity. “The pectoral will be returned of course,” he whispered.

Kiya evinced then a feral boredom as she adopted a contrapposto stance. “To a necropolis, maybe.”

But when he glanced at her Medju noticed a tear in her eye. At once the urgency returned. “ — As the jewel upon which their strategy turns — you, you will wear many pectorals.” It was one of the lines Tiye’s steward had given him to invoke assurance — which came to him now as a benefice. Still, something was amiss, given her sullen reaction. He was never happy with such pronouncements. Fancy words ever were a trial. And to think how long it took him to memorize it! Said Kiya, as she glanced at the sullen guards, “But now nothing but cat gut sun. Any other changes you’ve kept to yourself?”

Stolidly Medju fielded a response. “Just remember. The proctor brings you in. You receive six strokes by the Benben stone. Light strokes. Then you kneel before the queen. She signals the herald. He lists your misdeeds. Then you repeat them.” What made these simple words ominous was the presence of a single line of bent bound war captives who would be truly execrated later that afternoon — beaten, cursed and finally gaudily executed. Already, many in the line showed signs of ataxia, dementia. Bound as they were some gasped like chafing shoal fish. The guards who had bundled Kiya off to the inner chamber with the chatelaine came from the same cohort who now herded these doomed creatures, some of whom were Nubians Medju grimly realized. It was a circumstance he had not anticipated. And assumed it another of Tiye’s showcase performances, which he was not to impede -- a panoply darkened by a brilliant slant of sunlight that lit the dais where his select reprobate would receive the six strokes. The merest smite. The two priests looked on with intense dislike.

Tiye’s opprobrium ‘angle’. Flattering the Amunie quibblers.

A bit of Greek flummery in the Egyptian court. I wonder.

Such a smug goat herd Tiye can be.

Not a mark be upon her I hear -- the Mitanni brat.

We’ll see about that.

Tiye is a player.

Up to a point.

What marks Kiya might later display would be cosmetically applied. Medju assumed one of Tiye’s servants had filled in the details, that the

scene was a necessary show piece, no injury would result, and that Kiya was to keep this knowledge to herself or else. The beady Amun carpers and faultfinders had to see this trouble maker demeaned and rebuked. The one caveat being that the offender would be presented for judgement as a delinquent peer not a felon, a duty the guards had hastily and perfunctorily accomplished.

Said a sardonic Kiya as they gazed on the tribunal's insignia Benben stone, "Well, they won't need a prompter." She added, in a surprisingly heedful tone, "Tell me again what the thing represents."

"A most sacred object to the Amun priesthood...a model of the corner stone for all new shrines. This one supports Anubis, the god of the dead...before Osiris. The invincible marker. Of all fortune." Such words he had learned in his primary schooling -- from an epode, a chant Kiya smoothly took up: "He of the funeral wrappings...who haunts the tombs at the desert's edge.' And you don't suggest I take a hike?"

Medju had long since reckoned with a wit that accompanied the self absorption. A very long hike they had taken together.

Again Medju racked his memory. "The customs of man, and the sons of man may be stroked but not bent..as they say." Another of the steward's maxims, that seemed this time less onerous.

"So after I say the incants, we leave together right?"

"When the night biers are taken to the cemetery -- the formal procession for all mourners and plaintiffs -- you will take a cape and join the retinue. I'll follow. With the sextons."

“A crow rank cemetery. You might have done better than that.”

Medju was getting warm. His talent with officialese was slight and his memory mazy. “The synod urged the in...instatement of your plaintiff status for the winged night. Which is not unusual, under the circumstances. But their power ends with the citation. Tiye determines the way of punishment, which in your case will be -- again he was blessed with a single word — a velleity. The steward’s word.” Very pleased was he to remember ‘velleity’.

“Which means, again?” She looked up at Medju with wan amusement.

“Ah. It means. well, the burker...is a shirker.” Medju proudly smiled. The words tripped off his tongue this time as from a fluent scribe.

“It means ‘the least form of volition’. I asked a scribe. Tiye’s used the word before — when she doesn’t want a corpse on her hands.”

“Ah.”

“All that for me.” She looked off with an enduring resignation. “Caning still stings a bit, I’m told.”

Medju could not believe this wily Mitani player had never been caned. He said, “This burker’s a boozier; once you’re there he’ll be like nothing.”

“Such nothing. For a dippy peep show.” She suddenly signed off glancing at the line of aggrieved captives. “The wait is a huge bummer.”

“The Amun way.”

As much to herself, she sonorously intoned the gist of the opening retribution preamble. “‘Execration and exculpation; balancing the arrant mind against the feather of probity.’ All for a feather.”

To thus oblige the wary Amun synod, the ‘wayward foreigner’, this putative impious consort, was at last brought forth as a consequent delinquent to the court of record, led to the Benben stone, pressed to kneel before it as the cantor recited the apologia, which Kiya repeated in what Medju thought a surprisingly thin voice. The burker then stepped forward and administered the punishment which to a tense vigilant Medju looked real enough. The cantor then led a languid Kiya to the main dais where Queen Tiye concluded the smiting ritual by stepping briefly on the head then the nearest hand, thus cueing the awaiting cantor and graven procurators that the punishment was accomplished, while those bent captives awaiting execution and worse shuffled by in the rear, their heinous exploits resonantly detailed by a second cantor as they left.

In brief, it was apparent from the settling of the Queen’s equally raised and outstretched hands, as Kiya knelt before her, that the mind of this plaintiff had been purged and was now in balance with the feather of probity. If the head priest’s hands stayed at a lower level, it was also apparent that he too belatedly arrived at a tolerable balance -- tit for tat in an ongoing court match.

The synod heads were vocally unimpressed in the assembly later that day. The most eminent, a member of the Royal Privy Council, Psammet

spoke first, without his usual forbearance, leaving his colleagues uninhibited in their own objections. “As we thought. The cat is a pet.”

Said Menhet, “Short lived I dare say.”

Said Horem, “Perhaps not with Medju’s constabulary at her beck and call.” Said Psammet, “The burker barely touched her. The rite itself was never more slighted.”

Said Menhet, “But should we be surprised. I did warn you all about Tiye. She’s taken over. Even the Vizier she condescends to like a Greek school master.”

Said Psammet, “Her half-brother Ay is now the new commander of the Hippodrome, and the two are thick as thieves.”

Said Horem, “She is playing a long hand though...she may yet falter.”

Said Psammet, “That’s most sanguine, Horem.”

Said Horem, “Well, she did see the creature reprimanded. Her own select pintail.”

Said Menhet, “You are the proverbial wryneck, Horem.”

Said Irigad, “Tiye is impetuous. And prone to fits of doubt.”

Said Horem, “That’s what I’m saying.”

Said Psammet, “What’s next is the nub. Tiye cannot let matters rest at this stage. We can connive at vandalizing some of the new shrines, but we must find a strategy independent of the palace thrusts. It is now evident that Ay must be countered. His displacement our immediate goal. To check Tiye’s influence. No more bower birds.”

Said Horem, “I thank Amun-Ra for my ‘bower’. Wryneck indeed.”

At about this time, in an older palace temple, where she had been secretly summoned after a quiet night in Asya's guesthouse, Kiya was instructed by a chorus of busy whisperers, the near but invisible voices imbued with a mission. The darkness of the vault was deepened by a light well near the entrance pylon that blinded one to the distant inner shrine. Kiya's canny sense of reality was teased by the slurry of echoing voices, a faint smile parting her lips. A stealthy, disguised Asya listened near by with quaint good humor: touting for the court required a special fulsome language. As instructed, Kiya listened in silence. At least for a time.

Carry on as before, only nearer the capital.

Delight in the Sun Disc, the Aten, the Golden God Head.

A bold proud harbinger be, the incarnate spirit of the One Unique Sovereign God. The many eyes of the world, of the seeded flesh, be upon you to await the special harvest.

Delight the patient stoic many; alarm the smug lazy few. Galvanize the protean spirits, addle the mulish Amunies.

Quietly to herself Kiya said, "Only that."

Manifest is transcendent beauty and certainty. The Book of the Living.

At the Spartan gymnasium in Naucratis, perform in the palaestra. The Ethereal Sky be your Mirror. Ring skip, run as a chariot runner, thrust a javelin, hurl a bright round discus...startle and beguile the eye of witness. Fulgent be as a swift Anuket, daughter of Khnum and Satis, the diviners of the Nile.

A royal bequest is in the offing; a garden orchard from the Aten. Medju has pledged his life and those of his constables on your behalf. In addition, Tiye affords you a palace benefice ring, which you will find in the base niche of the first pylon behind you.

Trust in the new freedom, the new wealth, the new openness.

*Reflect yourself in the radiant gilt of the Disc. Of the Omnipresent, Omniscient
Aten. Be golden and alive!*

Be beloved and long lived forever.

“I kid you not....” Kiya’s final soft but not inaudible rejoinder. Which produced a curtain fall, a protracted silence that was deafening, resulting in a spate of whispering from the crypt and some impetuous clearing of throats before the last refrains were repeated: *Trust in...be beloved...live forever. Reveal yourself to the Aten!*

If Kiya was amused by the echoes the shrine’s interior voices generated, she nonetheless took the instructions to heart, for this singular mischief, as she imagined it, was what her restive father might have welcomed, in that his able daughter was recruited to crimp an ancient Egyptian theocracy — its hierology her growing dislike of skewed her usual equanimity. The thought brought a rare smile to her unblemished poker face. Naucratis! A likely consort consorting with a gaggle of hairy Greeks! Her. Ha! Who could have imagined? She glanced at Asya as she left, faintly nodding as if to a retinue.

Tiye too was pleased with the progress of her scheme, and more convinced than ever that the Fates (given their Greek provenance) were in tune to her plan. Asya listened carefully, occasionally cautious, but with prompt agreement. They sat in a shade shrine composed yet elated. The servants had been dismissed. Only her eunuch steward remained. Asya, who had just come from her bath, reclined with her head in Tiye’s lap

lulled by the stroking of her raven locks while Tiye continued thinking aloud with fluent ease.

“As is her wont, she had little to say in response to the new directives. The thought of not hanging about the King’s chambers, as Isis will bear me out, is a fine incentive. I think she’s pleased as a conjurer.”

Said Asya, “She kept a straight face. And no yawns. Yet she may need some coaching.”

“Very little I imagine. But who better than yourself.”

Asya wryly smiled. “Memories. It *was* a long, long time ago. A time I thought you might have forgotten.”

“Not at all. You did perform there. At least twice I recall. With considerable aplomb I’m told.”

Asya closed her eyes. “It was the crowd I fell in with, the swank dare you come up against during a Sed festival. Which I believe Amenhotep had a hand in instigating.”

“He always was taken with a pretty upstart...well, performing there will kindle that community’s gate mouths, and they are the finest tattlers there are. Greeks can never shut up and love a good story more than beer. Or is it wine?”

“And from there straight into the Upper Provinces again -- as far as the First Cataract! So you’ve said. An encore, a ‘curtain call’ -- now that the Amun spoilers have adjourned, their indentured raiders finding themselves so very unpopular after trashing some shrines. A backlash they hadn’t expected. And in due course the showoff cat returning to the scene of the

genesis. Running on hot mud bricks.”

“A kind of ‘second coming’, as so many desert cranks are so fond of exclaiming. Well, as far as Ombos say. Thereabouts.”

“That’s a lot of sun.”

“She can have one of my own masseuses. And enough emollients to bathe in.”

“I still have trouble believing it — that she’s taken it up with such aplomb.”

“She is much liked. As are most adept performers. A talent we must keep attuned to.”

“As feral cat fanciers.”

Tiye shrugged with precious resignation. “The primacy of the Aten is the goal. The ‘end game’ as Ay calls it.”

Both woman basked in a warm silence. An observer might indeed have thought them meditating or at prayer, the shared silence a benediction.

THREE

On an outcrop near Naucratis, a sorry baker’s bun rising above the estuary, Kiya, the buff Aten Eos, was again briefed and quietly, mindfully indulged by the ever anxious and newly keen Medju. Again, she seemed to have eyes in the back of her head, and a keen sense of the unsung ironies. She knelt on a rock overlooking the harbor in the garb of a Phoenician trader. The sea ebbed with molten sunlight.

“You must be happy, flitting back and forth like a wry neck. I thought I was to be Second or Third Best Wife.”

With some sadness Medju replied, “The King’s interested mainly in unwatered wine these days, and some days not even that.”

“He sleeps a lot I know. Next time you can, tell him I understand and Third Best Wife is okay.”

“One day you may be a Premier Best Wife to the Prince Regent himself.”

“The ho hum schenti thief. The one who’s always pawing the Glaean aristo. I’m told he’s really a girl.”

“No no. Fine joke. But Tiye must draw him off until the first decrees for the Aten rites are up — until the Aten has —

“ — Most favoured status.”

“The Prince still likes his Amun tutor.”

“You did tell her I won’t be the only rib in the palaestra. And if he takes to me, the boy Prince, I want an annulment of the Mitanni pledge to the old winder witnessed by a synod elder.”

“I did, and you won’t -- and the line of wives is honored mainly in the main.”

“Whatever that means.”

Medju again bit his tongue. He couldn’t remember the wording nor all of what he had just said. Getting on with the job at hand was hard enough. Being responsible for the safety of the troupe in this teeming motley community begged the question. Strangely though, regarding her

now in this ripe getup, he decided he had never been happier. He imagined her a jewel in an Ethiopie's ear!

To inure her to the palaestra — the 'gaudy gambit' the Shardana escort said -- he retained four athletic dancers, including at the last minute the renowned Asya, who had taken her task (Tiye's belated mindful request) to heart. He used his villa's offertory yard as a comparable exercise area, the earth there baked into the fine loam the palaestra was known for. On matters of code and attire — the palaestra was a showcase for mainly unattired performers -- he was assured his charge was well and fully briefed, and decided to let the troupe set their own codes and comity. He would have trouble enough keeping his errant eye and lame ear focused on snoops, spies, informers and intruders. He had never been to a gymnasium and dryly disparaged the stories while fondly conjuring and surmising them. In the play of language the Greeks were always embellishing things despite their claim to lucidity.

Matters in the yard were proceeding well he thought until, to everyone's surprise, the otherwise gamesome Kiya held back, striking an uncharacteristic reflective posture, as if she were distracted by a supernumerary matter. The others looked to Medju, who said with some impatience, "Just think of the palaestra as, as -- another plain in the Tefnut hills."

After an anti-climatic pause Kiya said, "A cyclops, by the name of Semyan, a pankratic lout, has been a pest. Some time ago in Mitanni. He's in Naucratis now. I've just learned."

Medju was again amazed at the intelligence Kiya seemed to garner.

Said Asya, “The rules prohibit heckling and molestation.”

Said Kiya, “It’s more than that...there’s a wager.”

Said Medju looking at the others, “But if the rules are strictly enforced, and they are.”

Said Asya, with a conciliatory note, “There’s always a joker or two.”

Said Kiya, “I learned he recently tripped a runner and broke his leg.”

Said Asya, “And he’s still admitted?”

Said Kiya, “He’s a champion. And I guess an Amun shill and enforcer.”

Said Asya, “What’s this wager?”

After a further pause Kiya tersely continued. “A juggling match, some time ago in the agora, cost him some money.”

Medju was a time taking this in. “He lost?”

“He swore out a subpoena and registered it with the stoa marshal. Claimed the match was rigged. He won by a narrow crony vote. A fine or a beating. And he waved the fine.”

“How the devil do you rig a juggling match?”

Said an irate Asya, “You bribe or threaten the referees,” then resumed in a thoughtful, prosaic tone, “Well, if he’s about, it’s safer in the gym than out. Let them see you in the exercise annex and you’re home free. No one accosts an athlete in or near the palaestra. The attacker would be ostracized. For a Greek that’s bad. The masseurs, by the way, are great, or were, especially the aunts -- the real Bes figures. We’ll find you one of the veterans.”

Still Kiya balked. The others exchanged dismissive glances. With some deliberation she distinctly said, “I want the palace to vouchsafe the fine. The marshal favored the fine. And had proposed a quittance.”

Medju hesitated, then nodded. “Done.”

“There’s more.” The others waited in a protracted suspenseful silence. “I want to wear something. That can’t be pulled off. The stuff some wear is kind of flimsy.”

Medju looked at the others. “I thought the point was...?”

Asya smiled. “He will hardly accost you inside the stadium.”

“It’s his toadies I’m concerned about.” She looked at Asya. “A point I don’t want to harp on, but they do stuff for him. Two of them. Well so, enough said.” For an instant she fielded a rare scowl then added, her composure reinstalled, “It can be brief — the royal head bangers want a show, I know — but *on* — not an invitation.”

After a selfless shrug, Asya got up and fetched a hemp fashioned two piece from her carryall. “The bottom’s too small for me now — but stays on. And on. A bit scratchy maybe.”

The others laughed. The two garments had a penitential look. After a brief but intent inspection Kiya tried them on. When the ties were set, Asya gave the edges several tugs. The attire remained in place. The wearer seemed more or less satisfied. Then pulled the stays even tighter and performed a set of moves to test the fluidity. The faint smile everyone awaited was slow in coming but celebrated on its arrival. Medju was sorely relieved and newly magnanimous. “On with the show.”

Asya joined in. “You’ll bowl ‘em over, love.”

And so, on a warm bright morning, a tallish sinewy sylph stood in the peristyle of the Naucratis palaestra which had adopted the odd convention of a Greek gang known as Spartans. If the Egyptians were occasionally amused by the antics of their impetuous aliens, the cult of the naked or near-naked athlete handily entertained. Particularly when the occasional local adventuress or inland girl joined in. Recent scuttlebutt celebrated two such performers, both naked as Bulti fish. A typical droll remark drew on a toffy injunction from the Greek temple. “I dare say the urge to ‘Know Oneself’ is all the rage.” The curiosity for an onlooker was the sudden swift act of the sylph to wet her attire in a shaded corner of the dromos before entering the palaestra. One knowing Kiya would have guessed the dare a special challenge and the water a way to tighten her apparel — intimating, perhaps a gamy but consequent plan. Her last few tugs actually revealed more skin but cased the essentials.

As anticipated, the pankratic boxer Semyan was soon a stolid teaser. Slyly snarling her ring skipping — pretending an accident — and spitting out insults within earshot — “Hey, little shaver!” As further anticipated, his stature in the gymnasium precluded effective sanction from the marshals, though he was perfunctorily warned. The fact that Kiya more or less managed to ignore him heightened her stature among some committed trainees, and further keened his pique. She couldn’t resist one erstwhile remark to a close bystander: “It’s not so bad...standing up wind.”

This resulted in a near riot, with Semyan's colleagues restraining him before the marshals. The contretemps only served to muddle 'what happened next' and enhance the many tellings later that day. For instance, if the Amun synod was agog on hearing of the development, it was also intrigued. The prospect seemed beguilingly favorable.

Said Psammet, "Being a fine testy moron, this Semyan may yet prove to be an asset."

Said Menhet, "A broken leg would slow the cat down a bit."

Said Irigad, "Or worse."

Said Psammet, "Two limbs, if Asya is now a player."

Said Horem, "The antics of that woman continue to amaze. She has long since taken up the habit of a lady-in-waiting. While now, again, a vulgar show off and mischief maker — it makes no sense."

Said Psammet, "Horem, you could stumble over a Benben stone."

Said Irigad, "What we mean, Horem, is that by recruiting a ne'er-do-well aristo in this charade, Tiye is courting a wide hopeful constituency for the Aten — all the growing parvenus and dilettantes who have multiplied like rats in a ruin. Whose shortcomings need no chronicler. Yes?"

Needless to say, Tiye herself listened with baited breath about the initial appearances in Naucratis from Asya, her in situ reconnoiterer and agent, when the stint ended. The subject of Semyan was still topical if rarified, and Tiye needed a primary witness to sort things out. Asya handily took up the matter when they were snugly alone in a gentian laced mineral bath. "I take it Kiya's 'change of heart' was crafted for the occasion."

“Well, ‘change’ is perhaps an exaggeration. She was bemused by the thought I think -- of confronting the nitwit again. To chalk up a reckoning. As you know now, she ran away from the Mitanni court a year ago, ending up in Naucratis. Barely escaping a gaggle of Semyan’s carousers there made her reconsider the comparatively tranquil life back home — a retreat I suspect that’s always rankled her. She’s not one to slight a ‘for real’ dare. As she would say. By the way, I think that wager was not set in an agora, as she said, but a symposium — one of those pompous drinking marathons the Greeks are known for.”

“You think so.”

“What do they call them — hetaerae. The ladies who get to go.”

“‘Wine sweetening the tongues of the philosophers,’ my sainted brother says about such fêtes. But she would hardly fit in there.”

“Well think of the crowd she patronizes here.”

“Yes, some, many Greeks. Ha. Well so. The King’s household is not vetted as it once was. Too large and no time. No matter. But once inside the palaestra, she performed like a trooper.”

“She is good. And a sight when oiled up. Could even compete in their official games were she to train regularly. But there’s more.”

“Indeed. And I must hear it again!”

The smiles remained genteel.

Asya continued with fond detachment: “Believing that Semyan still planned to beat and rape her, she decided to out dare him in public by challenging him to a wrestling fall for three silver staters.”

“Ha. So it is true. Unbelievable.”

“Yes, I know — but again, the apparent folly is merely apparent.”

“Yes. The sweet appeal of it all.”

“Momentarily tongue tied, of course, Semyan managed to declare that he was going ‘to score double’ with the ‘boss lad’. I think he actually meant triple, but I digress. Seconds were promptly drawn from a throng of ready volunteers.” Said Tiye, “I do know the ending, yes, Ay told me, but please continue. He is always deplorably short on details.”

“Well, what Semyan hadn’t anticipated — nor had we — was the leverage the floor of the stone pankratium afforded, unlike the dusty loamy earth of the palaestra -- you know how supple she can be, and she is surprisingly strong for her size -- nor that his lust might disqualify him, for strict competition forbids open lascivious encounters, ‘ribs’ included. Well, in a protracted clinch he belatedly froze. Kiya had crooked a leg about him trying to trip him backwards, nearly succeeding, and deftly roused the poor rook. He froze just as the ring of three silver coins sounded on the stoned lined mosaic behind, and the bully’s second let out a guffaw and a fart at the same time!”

“It only gets better with each telling.”

“He was loath to let her go of course, being in the state he was, which she wasn’t accommodating of course — couldn’t in that hemp thing I gave her — and eventually broke free, leaving him standing there like a leering herm. The laughter was loud and protracted, to say the least. I don’t think he’ll ever live it down. But what amazed was the agility and

traction she got when grappling with him. Which only added to the nearly supernatural aura that surrounds her now. Though I suspect someone may have put an embrocation on his soles the night before. He gets drunk most evenings apparently.”

“A well nigh perfect performance, but for the nosy ‘chapter’. Our Royal Street Urchin. My sunny boy. Looking on like a footling scribe I daresay.”

“Ah the Prince. There, yes, quietly looking on. His body guards stone faced. He was taken with Kiya, less her canny resolve perhaps.”

“As we fear. Being the essential lad she is. But tell me again about the Bes. The revelations can blind.”

“Well, as promised, we sought the services of an aunt for Kiya, that ugly Bes figure called Min -- the best masseur in the house. He — he’s really more of a she, what the Greeks call a hermaphrodite -- teaches necropolis attendants how to relax crypt companions before they’re entombed — it is an art. Well, Kiya either is immune to blandishment -- little phases her -- or she decided an enticement would further nettle proud Semyan and gave over to the sorcerer’s craft. Even allowing herself to be pleased as only this virtuoso can. If she noticed a glint of gold nearby as the Prince stole in to watch, I can’t say.”

“But he took it all in.”

“Many women go to the spa on the QT, for it is often their one treat of the day, or week. And sometimes take their kids.”

“Tell me.”

“But I’m sure it’s just a phase — many boys go through an ambiguous stage.”

“So, another ‘returned’ swallow to contend with. Another ‘transfigured soul’.”

“Usually very limited though, these spring infatuations.”

“He’s not yet set aside the Glaean. So I’m told.”

“Well no. Kiya is not a sympathetic partner — to anyone.”

“Good for Kiya.”

“Moreover, she is much liked, this Glaean, this aristo Zelea. And may even interest the Prince in more esoteric adventures — chronicles, for example. Yes. She is a fine urbane raconteur, with a fund of information about the Great Green Sea.”

“I’m listening. Though the stories seem ineffable. ”

“Well, chatter about her past, as you must know, is pretty thick — many stories of festivals, symposia, bull acrobats, pirates, booty, storms, celestial interventions...shrines with baffling mazes and subterranean channels. The Glaean harbor alone must be a wonder. Her father was a mason, her late husband a navarch.”

“It is. The harbor. Which we now make good use of.”

“She is also a poet with a fine memory — in at least three language forms. Plays the lute with much grace. And has an understated boyish charm to burnish the above. Things the Prince delights in. As we know. With Kiya so insular and aloof he is busy with Zelea as ever. A consola-

tion more prized in the reckoning. His new eidolon -- to give her her Glaean due.”

Tiye sighed. “Prince dressup. Not to put too fine a point on it. The fact he has from an early age fancied dolls lingers as stale wine.”

“Usually costumes he’s fashioned himself. Often Greek or Glaean. Often of military dress. The ones I’ve seen pretty swish.”

Tiye snorted. “He shows no interest in her exceedingly pretty maid. One of the favored snubs I dare say. Despite my son’s predilections this Zelea is not an exhibitionist. Treasures her privacy in fact. Which adds to her dilemma. The comely maid being of little help with all the attention.”

“A well-endowed Hathor, the servant. Perhaps in time. Zelea is protective of her servant, and vice versa. They grew up together. Old fast friends it seems. Curious. Very pretty, the servant. Best looker in the women’s house some say.”

“Maybe that’s why he dresses her mistress as a navarch or charioteer.”

Asya smiled. “He does have a wily conceit, and the designs have charm as well as character. Yes they do. That new Shardana general — the one who babies his horse — had a cuirass fashioned after one of the Prince’s creations — not knowing its provenance of course. Speaks volumes that. She’s embarrassed by all the fuss, I suspect, to say nothing of the other stuff.”

Tiye snorted. “The vicarious stuff. Now a Bes watcher — my son. ‘Ithiphalic,’ my toffy medicaster calls it. A deity with a permanently erect penis. This Glaean or Greek god Dionysus must have been as much a

looker as custodian of all things moist and ruttish. Lather and wine. To put it succinctly. As if one needed an elite god for such matters. Well, my son is a keen ‘observer’. Maybe that’s the problem. So aligned with his incantations, drawings, scrolls and charts, and so irregular elsewhere. A King a votary masseur. To a Glaean concubine! Words you want to bury.”

“Zelea has piqued his curiosity in several subjects though. It’s fairly obvious.”

“Only the better to tease her later I dare say. He’s good at disarming folk, my son. Such fine wheedling entreaties.”

Both women silently dealt with impious smiles. With some obduracy Tiye added, “I *am* up on the current tittletat.”

“The words of envy. She has led an orderly and settled life. Until now, of course. It’s the equanimity and understated beauty that beguiles. Some lyric moments watching them. He now takes over from the Bes. With rhapsodic poetry in a fine lyric voice -- some of it quite good. Few women can slight that. He blindfolds her and offers her a gold pendant if she can tell when he begins. She’s often drunk of course. Not that it shows.”

“Another bastard babe on the way I daresay.”

Asya shrugged. “Can’t be far off. I sometimes think she’s surprised by her own complicity.”

“More likely finesse. She is no fool.”

“But it is a woman he is happy with. No one seeing her will confuse her with a boy. We can surely take some satisfaction in that. Tuthmosis’ wish to do a sculpture of her -- in his new natural vein -- has enhanced her presence. Using her folded arms and hands in his late sculpture of the Ka symbol few know about. Indeed, as you know, he wants to use her hands — which are truly elegant — in the Ankh sign that end the light streams from the Aten. I won’t dwell on having her chest waxed and cast in bronze. Perfect cambers both -- an interesting observation given the mold he eventually incorporated, with some alterations, into that officer’s breastplate. Which the Shardana captain unknowingly took up with satisfaction, even pride. Ha!”

“Yes. A deliciously sly act. Taking to heart the Greek aegis for symmetry no doubt.”

Asya laughed. “That’s a wheezer. Actually, they had to do the moulding twice for she started laughing at one point. We all did. You missed some fun. She is a sight. Perfect light skin as well.” With a pert smile Asya added, “There’s a rumor the Prince had her hands done as well and fitted their folded contour into a headrest.”

Tiye was less sanguine. “I’ve seen it. The Prince my son enamoured of, infatuated with, a sly, canny, artful child. With graceful ‘hands’.”

“You’re being a little hard. Though at one time I too thought she was mainly compensation.” Tiye nodded, recollecting a misplaced thought of her own, but remaining silent as Asya continued: “A ready-formed Hebe, this Zelea — the cup bearer for the Greek gods, if my recollection serves

— in any case a plum consolation for the way Kiya ignored him.” She winked at Tiye. “The one girdle the Prince made for Kiya being so full of Ankh signs — which she promptly gave to Thera, Zelea’s servant. Who was speechless I’m told.”

“An ingenuous brat my son. Impertinence dressed up as commiseration. The royal tout of complaint and entreaty.”

“That’s a mouthful.” Asya suppressed a grin. “Anyway, Zelea remains the sought out companion. And briefly debuted the Ankh girdle at a Min festival. She’s mindful but not a prude. Yet fancies her harpy servant I think, despite the curtain lectures she gets. The fondness one sometimes displays for a lovely ill-tempered pet I guess.”

“Ha. Debut. He had her wear it to salve his amour propre before the court if nothing else. Flatter his independence. His observance of things. His way to cull sympathy and fine tune affectation. He can be a very clever pander. Though I think there’s more to it than meets the eye. She’s no pushover. And has a head scribe’s knowledge of current affairs, along with a poet’s heed of her island’s past -- at least its heroes and daemons. I get daily reports now. And what a past it is. Happily my lad, despite his obduracy and luxuriousness, can be a keen listener and gets caught up in a good tale. Well may she thrive — with her panoply of sobering heraldic tales!”

“A panoply the Prince has taken a fancy to. Gamy pert Kiya she is not.”

“Well, sun disc Kiya has at least impressed on him the power of the independent Aten. Maybe some of that aura has rubbed off .”

“I’m sure it has. It is one of the late discoveries surely. The power of a transcendent deity. That golden gown Sedu designed for Kiya — for the special Sed festival verses — Zelea inherited that too. He’s memorized swatches of ancient poetry relating to the Aten. And has an excellent voice, as I’ve said — all of which will inspire and set an example for a court reader. Making him alert to the diverse uses of power.”

“No more slaps then.”

Asya easily smiled and rearranged the cushion on her settee. “I’ve only heard about that event second hand. A threadbare telling at that. The start of all the ‘fun and games’ my own salty servant says. ”

Having been largely upstaged by her companion’s narrative, Tiye was only too happy to become a select informer herself — of storybook deeds teaming with spicy details.

“It is one raw tale I do know of. Tuthmosis, bless him, being the fanatic he is, told my dear son that all sculpture is to be reverentially touched and stroked — reverentially. Not simply looked at. The first time he saw her he pawed her in front of her guards and received a resounding slap for his ‘reverence’. Two in fact. The guards would have killed her on the spot had he not intervened — that a godhead Prince would tolerate such an affront. The Amunies were furious at the Prince’s ‘folly’ as they called it, at her apparent immunity, and harbour a great envious hatred of her. As much awe I think. There are several prophecies about a Greek becoming

a celebrated Best Wife. Believe it or not he went to Ay for advice — not wanting it of course, only a studious time out. No one had ever struck him before. He spent, according to his steward, a full day planning a comeuppance. Absorbed with the details. Infatuated I suspect. He hadn't pearled her then. Just swimming in the river. As the gossips say."

Following Tiye's lead Asya fell silent, asking finally. "What did he do? I never did learn. Is it off limits?"

Tiye belatedly smiled, as much to herself for proceeding. "Well, it is a chirpy interlude shall we say. Best told by a beady beaky bird."

Asya smiled with delight. "Dear old Charmian? Yes!"

"He can be relied on to titivate the details."

Asya quietly remarked, as if pretending to avoid being overheard, "It sounds rather scrumptious."

With a faint nod Tiye's distant steward promptly left to fetch the prodigious Eunuch who presented himself with a fluent fustian bow to Queen Tiye and her select companion. "At your service Most Blessed Regal Sovereign and Most Revered Lady of the Two Lands."

"Keep the snuffles to a minimum poop." To Asya she added, "Penelope, who is mentioned in the story, is that nauseating Greek housewife. Odysseus' trull. The story gets repeated each generation." A faint nod instructed Charmian to resume.

"To continue then, with a scintilla of detail — yes, it was a most salubrious opening, the Prince keen to instruct his charge in the ancient art of 'weaving', and its attendant crafts of lacing, braiding, plaiting, as well as

stroking, petting and fondling. A great deal to assimilate in a single afternoon.”

“We trust you won’t take as long, sirrah.”

“Indeed, Majesty. It was the patient stretching of the subject out on a weaving frame that took some maneuvering. She does have fine words for special occasions. The shearing of her young pubes proceeded apace thereafter, though oddly there was little enough to remove, given your typical Greek raven’s nest. Then, at his inimitable leisure, the Prince entered her and enacted a display of reverential threading and spindling to a canticle by his court musicians. All variations on his sculptural ‘wefting’ -- for which he was initially, summarily slapped.”

“Please keep the metaphors to a minimum, sirrah.”

“Manifestly did one and all expect him to pearl her straight away, being the decisive, ferocious and invincible Warrior Godhead he is. Needless to say our stolid mortal expectations were finely fulfilled. Then, the gods having their own ways of doing things, he became transfixed, bemused, handsomely reflective, thoughtfully judicious, spending ample time with the intricacies of her basic fabric threads -- in short her natural rich wavy hair! May I say her droll incredulity or stoic impatience -- she indubitably anticipated something flagrant and wanted him to get on with it, in keeping with his untrammelled wonder — may one in all candor presume to use such a word. He left her fastidiously alert -- to aptly assess the mood -- but incontrovertibly hale. One may indulge a paralyzing suspicion that he was satisfied by the encounter -- sensing his vast omniscient powers, the ne-

romantic awe he inspires. She resembled nothing more than an adrift dhow after.”

“There are only so many hours in the day, poop.”

“Indeed there are majesty. Thus I may say that he actually repeated the performance later that day. Or intended to. She had taken on some unwatered spirits by then of course. Quite pie-eyed. Called him a spate of vivid favourite foreign names and, despite her protracted misgivings and a tongue-tied groan or two, could not deny him the spectacle of an ineluctable second coming he won’t soon forget. He is good at that sort of thing. Hands that would soothe Isis herself. Ahem.” Charmian paused to honour an unexpected royal frown. “Forsooth, I cannot deny nor chance to slight it — she’s a light sprayer you see. It took him a moment or two to realize she wasn’t spitting at him. Nevertheless, the applause from the court attendants was most vivifying.”

Asya burst out laughing. “Good god.”

“You didn’t know?”

“It must have been very late.”

“An hour or two before dawn, Your Inestimable Highness. She was half asleep. At first. Our godhead is a fine watcher, keen observer, sensitive to the least turning in the cosmos. The yaw and list of the universal Uraeus before a master. As you say, she is pretty in a boyish way. But not a hoyden. Gracile rather. With lovely auburn hair and that curiosity of some northerners -- blue eyes. The hair not styled of course yet fine and naturally wavy. Which most captivated him then. Yes. We all anticipated

something droll — a wryneck, a frisky colt having its nose and forehead scratched. He spent some time fiddling with it — the hair — visualizing how it might look. Yes. Exactly. The gods themselves must have taken note.”

“Her hair style?” Asya barely contained her laughter.

Tiye became apathetic.”Even Gossips over look things -- when let down. Do continue poop!”

“Well, if she was addled when he began, she was plainly miffed by this attention. Indeed, she may have been a time dourly anticipating more jollity. Fine ladies, we all know, will tolerate a great deal, but fiddling with their hair style — in whatever mode or arena — even a Shardana captain would quake before the storm. More than one busky servant has been beheaded over the years. Yet it soon became obvious that he wanted to style not trim or cut it. I know. It’s a tale for altars and hearths is it not? Even she, the stoic wonder, sat there in a kind of Pythia stupor, a scream awaiting an opening. You know how those mediums get. Then he left off, as suddenly as he began, and told her to return to the loom, weave an aegis, and be patient like Penelope. He would return like Odysseus -- and unlike Odysseus. By then the speechless aspect of the hour was favoring us all.”

“That’s enough poop.” With a slight wave of her wrist the tale bearer was briskly escorted from the royal audience.

Asya managed a sober comment. “The gossips will have a saturnalia soon enough.”

Tiye paused to settle an inner debate. “It is something a mother sometimes wonders about. When and why exactly her lad takes an interest — beyond the usual apish bravura and loutish thrusting. The fact that he seemed amazed, astonished even at the shape of her chest. That is cause for pause. A Greek bent I dare say. Prompting him to call for a cubit stick and round measure. She was concerned for a time I’m sure. It’s the first time he’s openly indulged such an interest -- however unwittingly it was enacted. Eventuating the cuirass cast from her trig torso. Perfect round cambers apparently. And now has his armorer fashioning a variety of hoplite designs based on the discoid symmetry. One of which he so calmly presented to that Shardana captain who’s undertaken his army training. The flattered captain was of course ignorant of its origin.” She shook her head in disbelief. “But besides this curious crochet — how can a thin wistful waif fascinate a young much indulged brat with a harem of willing luxurious beauties? Frankly, it baffles me.”

“Lookit, doesn’t every lad test the limits? All the smutty ring tail daring do? Putting everybody off their soup.”

“Well, let’s hope it inspires more than his love of tasset skirts.”

“I’m sure it will. She has many talents and despite all is exceedingly patient. Her embarrassment is really part show I think.”

“It may be now. ”

Asya smiled, believing she was indeed a confidante — even as the thought of the labored confrontation inspired a laugh. Poor Zelea.

Said Tiye with a sober regard of her companion, “Naturally, Kiya escaped all this.”

Asya was a little surprised by the look, venturing, “Well, you don’t bother with bribes from a Mitanni scold.” Belatedly cautioned by her own candour she added, “Yes?”

“I’m flattered you might think so. Rather, I suspect he’s just worried such a player could cap his haughtiness. And smartly connive with his many detractors. Kiya has no real patience or lenience, only determination. An ingrained and I think fearless opportunist. She could hardly be otherwise, given her background and circumstance. He would have had to ‘kill’ her.”

“She does have nerve. Our awesome Mitanni Princess.”

“Ardent and strong. Throwing smelly old Semyan like that. Then idling that notorious Bes creature. A player you recruit early on. A crocodile goddess, an Ammit or Estriedia, my gourmet son has left entirely to me. Anubis’s equal who wanted more!”

Again both women held back protracted self-conscious laughter.

Said Asya with a reassuring nod to herself, “Not surprisingly, the Aten is the natural medium to rally his affections.” Her expressed conviction served as a kind of goad. “The Aten’s openness and good auspices also divine great ‘generativity’ do they not? A new brilliant thread so to speak. A new reckoning, a new epos. Zelea has the storyteller’s calm and eye for nuance — unlike Kiya. The one a canny provocateur, the other a mindful

observer, both muses of the chronicler, which the Aten will illuminate. Affections do mould the future. I seem to be talking a lot today.”

Tiye shrewdly smiled. “It is an absorbing game. But he’s not across the river yet. Let’s hope this Glaean Penelope lives up to her reputation.”

As if on cue, the young Prince’s wary fondness for the conscripted Princess, the blithe, animated Kiya, became fused with his growing awareness of the overt worship of the new Sun Disc, the Aten, which his mother so firmly resurrected, a devotion he might use to extend his own sway in the court — a late discovery when he learned how Kiya told Medju that Second or Third Best Wife was okay. His awe of the wily accomplished Aten acrobat framed his desire for the more thoughtful, genteel Glaean. If he had been captivated by Kiya as a snake beguiler and peerless acrobat, the sight of her being adroitly soothed by the adept in the busy Naucratic spa turned him into a devotee of the craft! The power of the Bes figure was mesmerizing — the very hedonistic method he had taken up and belatedly exercised with the heedful Glaean, whose softness parodied the leanness of the Mitanni scold! Despite the Glaean’s initial dismay, he knew he had given her pleasure. That first interlude in the loggia was as seismic as the spectacle in the stadium spa. A creature he was especially fond of had come alive in his embrace, her privy self a perfect live jewel and slowly inundating Nile. The infrequently relieved boredom of his existence was newly aswhirl with prospects he had barely imagined. Irenic Zelea, a near

obverse of the aloof Aten beguiler, would become his eidolon, his fail safe Muse. With a little wine she wanly succumbed to his blandishments — his wish to embrace the soul of a Daemon, as he put it. If she was amused at this characterization, she could not cavil at her own transfiguration that second night. Even so, the creature seemed somehow inured to his elaborate attentions, as if she had been replaced that first night by a mere mortal. She would half close her eyes and offer him a bowl of over-ripe fruit, her breath the match of its attars. A strongly perfumed slight he elected to ignore. He might have had her whipped, but would never resort to such a measure. In the end, his patience and persistence foiled all residual dislike. He was to learn with the mindful, ever musing Zelea, the craft of deliberation. That second night he went to her she met him in an inebriated state, her smile that of designated tomb companion. He had with him some costume designs for his court acrobats, readers and musicians and wanted her assessment of them. Some he wanted her to try on. She seemed cautioned and surprised at first, called him a silly old aunt as he laid out his wares, which incorporated several Minoan motifs. If her initial expression was finely droll, her sudden silence before the Minos knots in some tended to waylay misgiving. She picked up a couple of the offerings, putting them down with a care that further vitiated her wariness. He had lived long enough to know that some intervals were more arresting than others and said nothing as she took in the samples. His next move was to pick up one of the Menit pectorals and place it about her neck. The act afforded the opportunity to look down the front of her tunic and revel again in the

quiet young doves, so Greek in their perfect sufficiency, the inspiration — fantastic as it must seem — of his hypnotic daydreams, both the notion of economy, the law of parsimony, and its elegant deific import in the single, free, cogent, unencumbered Aten! The perfect cosmic sphere! The beauty of pure lucid symmetry it represented. The caress that followed was not thwarted and soon he was fitting a chic girdle to her fine attic form. The late afternoon sun shone then immediately behind and limned her entire being in a golden aura, as a nimbus must appear he imagined, the space between her finespun thighs a fine scintillation. A pretty leafed purse he thought of it, fresh and soft as a fledgling. The key to idling the restive lapwing. As never before he reveled in the fluency, the symmetry of it all, the unexpected seamless harmony, ever including those glyptic lips that had so charmed him before, so plainly seen from the front, not tucked away like some of the harem cows, distinct concise as a wedjet eye, a parody of the papyrus clumps of the harem layabouts. As he continued that night, dressing her in several variations of the same girdle, softly caressing her the while, reciting some of the Glaean lyrics he had mastered, he witnessed an unexpected relaxation and accommodation no longer ironic. After deciding on a new costume from his collection, he turned to find her comfortably lying on the room's lone cushioned settee. What happened next perhaps surprised her as much as any event that afternoon, so he imaged from her belatedly amused but not ungrateful response. She had perhaps half expected even wanted a mauling, and took in his rummaging about the drawers of an openwork chest with a wizened eye, imagining, he

suspected, some impertinent device or other, only to seem, when he emerged, somewhat perplexed. Plainly, she had not expected a proficient massage, which he provided with a skill he had spent much time practicing, the emollients intimating the alluvial inundation by the proficient Bes. The Nile at its most fecund. His rich fantasy of the past week materialized that late afternoon: the possession of a trig, unambiguously female form that responded with a promptness to further peek his desire. At the outset she called him a spate of fond if unflattering names, so he surmised from their foreign intonation. But the words soon faded, unneeded, unwanted. Demurely, silently she anticipated and accommodated his fluent passes. She even kissed him. Tenderly. At one stage telling him a brief but intricate story about a Glaean sculptor before lapsing into a silence punctuated by faint novel inhalations and the protracted spasms that closed on his embrace, his triumphant entry. A numinous enthrallment, for a time a single breathing avatar. The celebrated Bes figure had surely been no more masterly or evocative. Twice he brought about the sudden closed stasis of her form that euphoric afternoon, and left her in a fetal position, her breathing nearly inaudible but regular, the soft resilience of her explicit self a fine paradoxical memory, her pretty dimpled bum far lovelier than any Greek boy's he happily concluded. An intelligent composed being had shared his enthrallment and enlightenment. A star was fixed in the firmament. The ineluctable Aten.

It was only later in his rooms that he realized a new happiness had descended. He had loved with the craft of a God. The wonder of it all must

not be sullied, broken. Whereas the stark act itself — of the stalwarts at court — was sheer buffoonery for him now: two noodles awry in a poor bean soup. No one really in charge, directing, commanding, consummating the action, as he had done. As the Aten would do! What lowlife he had had to sojourn. Messy, ugly, witless, bruising. Silly. Indeed, he was omnivorously content. The memory of this resilient kore an ongoing consummation. Her face a mosaic of timeless grace. In profile a live Akrotiri grace. As purely sublime and unencumbered as the Aten itself!

The fact his love object was herself wondrously amazed took her breath away. No man, nor even the notorious female Thyiads she had met with on Glaea, imparted such unexpected and rarefied enjoyment. Though the imputation that something was ineluctably odd remained. Exclusive club membership, as she had learned from the Thyiads, was not immutable.

Two intrepid veteran peepers were themselves alerted by the trysts, their words precious enough to address an altar or fireside. Or symposium!

To be capable of such voluptuous coupling. Rather envied her.

The ‘musing’ event.

The sirenic fix.

Sirenic? So we’re essentially talking about Kiya -- this callipygian contortionist of the Aten gambit. But in another guise.

Well Kiya’s proxy. The companionable being.

The mutable Zelea.

The Prince's vision incarnate. The other is the mirage.

The delirium of flesh, the pretty rondel that ends in nakedness and heavy silence.

Nature's adopted sun.

The undiminished Aten.

She is a work of art, no?

A finely understated artifact.

If dynamic Kiya became little more than a symbol — as Tiye and company believed — the mindful Glaean aristo became the animus in the golden sun for the Prince. The sensuous, free, resonant embrace of her stilled the dull ache, the whinging within himself. What heights he might with this live harbinger spring to, with this gift from the Aten to *His* Successor. One of his mother's early gifts, a carving of Horem-akhet, the lion-headed god Horus, as the deity of the appearing sun, became the focus of his inspiration — especially when garnished with the many head pieces he would one day wear, the royal afnet or nemes that closely resembled the leonine mane, becoming favorites — two lions back to back he imagined, 'yesterday and tomorrow' from the venerable Book of That Which Is. In the weeks that followed he presented her with many costumes, regal and military, including his version of the cobra head dress, his current masterpiece he thought — the net result being a lecture from his mother's imposing Shardana sentinel on appropriate court dress and roles for servants and non-royal companions. Naturally he listened with a suitably grave countenance. Other costumes followed including a sphinx-like outfit she,

in one of her now frequently bemused states, adopted and modelled with the élan and certitude of a cat. A second lecture was again indulged with his customary forbearance. He was entertaining and alerting a lot of people then.

If the Sphinx had for a time been but a latent curiosity, it now loomed fresh in his mind as the heraldic, heroic Pharaoh rising, searing, flattening his enemies. From his tutor he learned that at the cosmic level the god Aker was an ancient lion deity who protected the gates of the horizon through which the sun came and went each day. The two lion aspects of the god were represented back to back, bearing the Aten, the solar disc, between them. “And doesn’t the god Shy, the god of the air, support my headrest, from which I rise each day?” “Well yes, that’s so,” said the tutor, alerted if not quite amused by this comparison. That he had figuratively slept the night before in Zelea’s cradled hands — Tuthmosis’ sculpturing them as a headrest — did not impede this showy, vaunted dedication before the respected tutor.

Tiye, being a chronic assessor, was duly aware of late events and gravely wary of their import. Asya again served to frame the dilemma. They had just returned from their morning ablutions and sat on the cheetah settees in Tiye’s bedroom anti-chamber dabbing at their faces and arms with warmed linen towels. “But surely his interest is a benefice. Particularly now.”

“He’s smitten I fear with her, not the Hathor embodiment he needs. And she is finely rallied, her usually placid face often dimpled with amusement.”

“So as what — a lesser wife, later on perhaps...yes, I see, the timing is a little off.”

“Later on -- what can you mean later on? It’s now obvious — the apparent infatuation of the Prince before a Glaean hoyden, who is about as unsuitable a Kingly consort as they come. Imagine -- two effete dolled up pintails? The Amunies must be laughing like hyenas. His late distracted ways have put us all in a kind of limbo. And she knows it I’m sure.”

“Well she must also know the dangers. Can his tutor not better advise him?”

“He plays his tutor as well as Zelea plays her lute.”

Asya resisted laughing. “He does recognize talent.”

“Indeed. Talent. Misappropriated, misused. My husband’s son, bless him, a clever ‘boy’, which I do not convoke lightly, whose late fond habits could foil all our efforts. Has his infatuation has sapped his wits. Please speak freely.”

Instinctively Asya knew that such words demanded a reasoned response and said with deliberate care: “It surely cannot be all that detrimental. The radiant arms he’s had relief sculpted in some pylons — veritable sun streaks ending in Ankh signs, the essential breath of life. A great telling design. Which she is partly responsible for.”

Grimly Tiye stated, “He’s not without talent, in the imaginative arts. As you say.”

Asya cautiously averred. “But for the ‘other things’.”

“My initial decision to let him carry on — another poke in the synod’s ribs — was perhaps rash I think now. He’s always had a Greek’s infatuation with form and argument. I’ve never really complained...you were a lithe embrace, in your own time. But time is not on our side.”

“They imagined that it was all sanctioned.”

“I should have paid more attention.”

Asya paused, thinking she had missed some cues, then said with finality, “I was never a favourite, you know.”

But Tiye seemed not to have heard. “Such a fool. Our sainted King. Ramose can see the diplomatic horizon, but misses crucial detail at home. Regrettably, the hoi polloi like to see their uppers scrabbling. The Glaean, thank you, has a sense of decorum. And shuns the entertainment and dance troupes. At least in public. It will be a trial putting her aside. But she is not the Hathor my son needs. And may not eschew!”

“So. The ‘suspended mask’, so to speak — to quote your new steward. The being, the person sent away.”

Tiye’s smile was brief. “We have a new sturdy constituency and mustn’t squander it. We must rekindle the scenes of the ‘first’ enlightenment. The virtuosic show. As it once was.”

With considerable aplomb Asya intoned, “Back to the provinces. Kiya’s domain.”

“Where the seeds may need some encouragement, some tending after the Amunie destruction. Quite witless as it turned out.”

“Meaning — a new priesthood.” Asya brightened. “Ay’s field, yes?”

“The recruiting, yes. There are realists and opportunists too among the Amunies. Some are surely noting the growing popularity of the Aten. And now with their black eye they will rethink their prospects.”

After a brief pause Asya easily said, “I’ll stay shall I?”

“For a time. Yes.”

By then Tiye was adding more wine to Asya’s cordial, watching her friend’s warm expression, trying to decide how patronizing it was. She then summoned a favorite domestic who began to work on her nails while a second servant knelt to preen and kneed her feet. “They are performers,” she said with dry amusement, “Kiya and her friends. Not directors.”

In short order a trio of servants emerged from an alcove behind the fan bearers and prepared to clean and condition Asya’s mellifluous hair. Eyes closed, she luxuriated as the emollients chased her forehead and neck and was more than a little pleased that afternoon to find her dearest champion -- a skilled finagler and tactician--so shrewdly cognizant of recent events. One you pay homage to. Glancing again at the smiling bronzed form Tiye said with her sustained amusement, “I’ve got a further plan.”

Asya turned her head and smiled. “For this Glaean Penelope? The problem Muse?” She remained silent and expectant wiggling her toes, knowing Tiye must see.

“All in due course my lovely runner.”

Promptly Asya said, “Patience and I get along just fine.”

With a chaste earnestness Asya knew was rare, Tiye added, softly “I give thanks every day for it.”

Momentarily unsure how to respond, Asya sensed a hiatus, but only momentarily. Seconds later Tiye, with galvanic ease took up the braiding of her companion’s hair, remarking, “It’s the old Vizier who’s a sucker for some tender care.”

Cue in hand, Asaya handsomely closed her eyes. “I’m listening.” Fondly she imagined the Prince doing much the same with his Glaean pin-tail. The mother’s son.

“Curious how enemies become tools and vice versa.”

As anticipated the old Vizier requested a private audience with Tiye, who wisely assured him the Prince should hear his counsel (and treasure each of his unaccommodating words). At the lecture Tiye listened with well-practiced deference to the captious Amunie while the Prince sulked in the background. The audience chamber, both floor and walls, was alive with new bright-hued motifs.

Said the Vizier, keeping his eyes unfocused, “It is altogether too inapt for the tone of the curia. A toffy Greek I understand. It is particularly onerous now that we receive tribute and envoys from many diverse lands. We must appear unwavering. A Greek Princeps Consort simply won’t do. Our sovereign status will be questioned. We stand to lose the consensus that seeds our splendid influence and reaps the bountiful tribute. I advise

that this Glaean tart be sent away without delay or kept under house surveillance until the perpetrators who egg and coach her can be identified and dealt with.”

Said Tiye, after a treasured pause, “The King may be disappointed of course. She is popular. Yet I must concur. Also, you will be pleased to learn the Mitanni brat is no longer at court. One less fly in the ointment.”

Said the Vizier, “My lady, with all due respect, the King has insisted for some time now on treating all Mitanni meddling, exhortations, bribes and complaints with benign neglect. The Mitanni brat is not the problem.”

“I will remind him then.”

“Sooner is best. And the lady Asya, one of her minders I believe, should also be barred from court functions for a time. She’s obviously been slighting her auspices. It is in everyone’s best interest.”

Said the Prince, who continued hovering in the background, barely visible behind a lotus planter, “That’s all so...dumb, so Boeotian.”

Said the Vizier, “Master Prince, you will thank me and your mother one day. And that day is sooner than you may realize.” After clearing his throat he added, “The Glaean upstart, who must know all about Boeotians, *must* be dismissed. Sent off. Her...her untoward influence needs no detailing.”

Said Tiye with an engaging promptness, “Indeed. We have other matters for her to attend to — which will remove her from court. Once and

for all.” She finished with a conspiratorial snuffle which her son glowered at. He could not believe his ears.

The Vizier was sufficiently satisfied to adjourn further comment, and with an arthritic grimace bowed and took his leave, exaggerating his illustrious limp.

The Prince looked away. He was old enough to know his mother to be a cagy and relentless player, given to a vision for the country that transcended any single liaison she might cultivate — including his own. If he was still surprised whom she seduced and suborned, her ‘appeasement’ of the Vizier was on form. *I will remind him then.* Ha. Such craft, he knew, was best abetted by being neither much seen or heard. Indeed, stealth, spying and a studied silence appeared to abet understanding. His early tutor said as much. Even now he regretted his faint outburst in his mother’s presence. As a result he noted the Vizier was in part mollified by the admonition he was obliged to deliver. But he could not part with Zelea. At the back of his avid imagination was the building of an entirely new sanctuary and open offertory — even a new capital city! Away from all this rank intrigue and musty scurrying. The instatement of Aten clarity and warmth! And joy! As for losing Zelea, he must pretend earnestness and stolidity with dear mom. *That soon? But I’m learning so much about the Great Green Sea -- and our bustling trading nations....* He assumed she was sufficiently aware of Zelea’s talent to find her a place in her own household that would be less conspicuous. They would have to meet by stealth. For a time.

The synod heard of the meeting and the Vizier's formal requisition with wary satisfaction. A single shaft of sunlight from a ceiling light well enclosed dancing motes of dust.

Said Menhet: "I suspect there was more discussion than the Vizier let on. Tiye usually doesn't listen as placidly as he maintained."

Said Psammet: "Well, we know now the Mitanni is back in the provinces."

Said Horem: "Tiye's no fool -- she uses words very carefully."

Said Menhet: "You spotted that, did you Horem?"

Said Irigad: "Just how close were the two -- Kiya and the lady Asya?"

Said Mehnet: "She may follow Kiya into the situate lands. So I hear. A curiosity surely, given the preferments Tiye's arranged for the woman and her family. A curiosity indeed."

Said Psammet: "We'd better keep a competent tracker on her movement as well."

Said Horem: "Off to the country -- the rustic strumpets. So let them go. End of story."

Said Menhet: "Horem, your foresight would flummox a fortune teller."

Said a satisfied Horem: "What's obvious is obvious."

The others tried mainly to smile.

Said Psammet: "Perhaps a large Shardana escort has been secretly instructed and handsomely paid to do just that — have them disappear. For a time."

Said Horem after a shrug: "There you are."

Said Menhet: “Horem, the Shardana have been serving Ay for some time. The rustic strumpets ‘disappear’ only when Tiye or Ay think its prudent. Agreed, yes?”

Horem wanly shrugs.

Menhet continues: “As for that Glaean tart, I think we’d better get a better assessment. She’s smart, very Glaean-Greek and a worrying influence. Especially with the Prince. I’m not talking about his fondness for her. But her knowledge and assessment of events, which she incorporates in many of her stories. The auspices for the Aten supremacy, for one.”

The synod members groan in disapproval.

Said Psammet: “What auspices?”

“Stories of the one uniting godhead. Early stuff, which she’s resurrected, or rather Tiye’s fed her. The first aspect of Ra the Prince has cottoned to, especially in the Story of Sinhue, the Divine Body merging with it’s Maker. It’s a favourite, apparently.

The ensuing snuffles were no less dismissive.

Said Horem: “That is surely not going to happen — this Aten revival.”

Menhet pursed his lips.

Tiya and Asya, the while, were at work on a traditional stage presentation that would follow Kiya’s spirited ingress, the emphasis being on venerable myth and legend, the underpinning for the Aten. A revival of the durable stories of antiquity. Many of which italicized the Aten! Without neglecting the flair Kiya exalted in.

A review of the new program, as much to judge and edit as reassure, was undertaken just after Kiya's departure. Tiye and Ay conducted a rehearsal in Tiye's private apartments — a fresh diurnal scene, featuring timeless deities and spirit forces -- that would soon tour the new shrines, adding a dimension to Kiya's feisty prologue. The new program had come together over many morning klatches and prolonged late-night discussions. If more respectful of traditional pantheon rites it retained the sensuous fluent pageantry that Kiya and her troupe exploited with the lyric readings and ready repasts, all reflected in the auric globes. Now late glooming sunlight filtered through weighted linen screens which were being doubled to minimize the sharp slivers of sunlight. In the wings, several dwarfs, a lutist and drummer mutely awaited their cue. Both women greeted one another with companionable smiles.

When satisfied the troupe was sequestered — the guards in place and all non performers removed from the chamber — Tiye greeted the incoming players who had been hidden in a subbasement storeroom. When assembled she declaimed, "You have been practicing. Assiduously even." She happily smiled upon a dwarf dressed as a Bes figure in a luxurious leopard skin -- one of the first players to be finished by the makeup artists. Fondly taking in the lithe Asya, whose costume proceeded apace -- tiny white stars painted onto her Argos brown skin — she proclaimed: "So. We begin with Nut, the sky goddess who assumes the pet arch, the ceiling of the heaven as it encloses and reaches down to the horizon, while the mortals, our troupe of mighty lovebirds, pass underneath, the King player

upholding the arch -- after the traditional rendering. Please keep to the provisional script.” A slight wave of her fly whisk signaled the commencement.

Stark, strong and tall, Asya took up a staged stance facing the queen. The lutist began a simple aria based on a commemorative chant. Tiye nodded. “Very stately, yes. And slow -- they will catch on soon enough.”

After a slow upright half turn, Asya bent forward, touching rigid stiff fingers to the floor, walking forward a cubit on her hands while keeping her legs straight and rising on her toes. In this arched pose of Nut the framework for the skit was established.

Asya fondly watched as the troupe of dwarfs, decked out as farmers, traders and artisans, passed beneath her arching sky form. The last and smallest player, a perfectly formed youngster, dressed as a royal Prince — Tiye’s transformational player — paused in profile to simultaneously raise his hands to the renewing night. Several dwarfs placed small statues of Shu, the air god, and Geb, the god of the earth, on either side of the Prince. After a brief frozen tableau, the dwarfs left and returned with a polished bronze shield, a divine bark which reflected beneath Nut the light of an incoming ray of sun (from a drawn curtain) allowing Nut to rise and fade into the shadows as the Prince was borne into the glowing rays of sunlight.

By now the lute and drummer were playing boldly and the dwarfs, Shu and Geb, rotated the faceted shield as Asya disappears. A group of new

players, musicians, dancers and acrobats arrive on the scene and prepare for the special ‘Dance of Sunlight’ -- a show with streamers and coloured balls, the largest a golden yellow. A few of the costumes, however, had a dowdy look, some unwashed, some with seams still to be closed. Tiye was miffed and joined Asya in the wings who sadly noted, “Some of the seamstresses went to the wrong room. The topical excuse.” Promptly Tiye stated, “Well, you did pry the troupe away from the Prince -- an accomplishment in itself I daresay.” Then, looking at the resplendent Asya she added, “I do plan to slip an unambiguous feminine candidate or two into the women’s house — in hopes my dear son might design some costumes for them. He’s not too fastidious when it comes to ‘dress up’.”

Asya smiled, more easily this time. “The ampler the better. I was struck off the honor role long ago as you know. A ‘shrew’ the Prince told the in-house marshal.”

“That’s rich. The second peeress who won’t indulge his every whim.” She looked again at the full strong form. “And can throw a javelin like a veteran — which I still think you might do at the very end, in the direction of the temple at Karnak.”

Asya smiled. “A daring act.”

“The new consensus may favor such an act.”

The silence renewed as the triumphant Queen paused to overlook the still motley performers and the newly busy seamstresses, then again at the poised, strong presence before her, so proximate to the dynamism of the dance to follow. For a protracted moment the creature froze against the

prized stare, as if relief rendered in a talatat block. It was the form of a matchless Greek, Tiye mused, steadfast in its own regard, resignation, and satisfaction. “God’s hand, the Aten’s hand,” Tiye said without demur. She needed able chariot runner Asya for this revival, and kissed the sleek ebony hair, noting a spare smile, while continuing to savor the elegant form, now all parochial arms and legs as it sat down and sought to affirm its composure. Briefly there was mutual laughter. And an intake of air as Tiye swaddled her prize in a cloak, cradling her head as she did so, just as a servant brought in the gold link girdle with its small Ankh signs ending the needle strands that would represent light rays from the Aten, a motif Tuthmosis had redesigned following the Prince’s lead, elaborating the network lace.

Said Tiye, “It’s now suitable for an acrobatic show. Kiya conceded as much. After several fittings. You make a fine pair.”

At last Asya asked, almost as an afterthought amid the queen’s attentions. “When will we follow Kiya into the situate lands?”

Suavely Tiye continued with her monologue. “Ay has worked out a timetable. Or is firming one up. Incidentally, don’t appear preoccupied around the

Prince, or Ay’s chambers for that matter. I don’t want this troupe’s leaving to be anticipated, to ‘beg the question’.”

Asya took a short breath. “A challenge.”

Tiye caressed the ebony tresses. The mutual smiles were savoured in silence. Absently Asya said, “Kiya, I understand, was pleased. In her way, of course.”

“A natural adventurer — a falcon in another life.”

“You’re fond of her.” There was no apparent anticipation in her voice.

Tiye was a while answering and seemed to shift her focus. “A strange bird. Not Mitanni at all I suspect, rather a prize snatched from a northern clime. The eyes of an egret. The morals to match. Sending her here as a potential Best Wife, a public Hathor, shows just how obtuse that Mitanni King has become.”

“Her coming was providential though — this rare bird to fluster the Amun pecking order.”

Said Tiye, “A regular Greek Hermes — innate thief and poser.”

“Who did become a smoothie though, later on, a trusted herald even. Hades had him summon the dying because of his gentle manner.”

Tiye mused, “You have the solicitude a Greek only dreams of. And the beauty of an Artemis.” With ceremonial slowness she caressed the neck and shoulder. The patina of henna accented the sleek form.

Asya closed her eyes and mused: “Apollos’s sister. Armed with bow and arrow. Great hunter. Of stags.”

Again they looked at the girdle and smiled. With a dismissive gesture Tiye added, “Yes. The tolerable version. We all have our molesters and provocateurs. He is his father’s son. Later on — hum — we must wait and see. He will tire of the Glaean sooner or later, but her stories will

surely linger, and these he has taken to heart — some akin to ones of our own, which I believe he is beginning to realize. What court does not prize a seemly teacher and smart quizzical storyteller.”

Again both women smiled, one handsomely, one whimsically as they eyed the tiny sparkling Ankh charms of the girdle beside the tightly braided Nubian wig, which a servant had just brought in on an ebony trivet table. Designed to serve as an ornate cornice to the dancer’s loins, the girdle had been devised by the Prince himself. The current variant — Tuthmosis’ revision — was ampler and sturdier.

Tiye took her leave as Aysa’s servants began to knead bees wax into the stiff braided wig, and the theatre dressers prepared the makeup for the players with whom Asya would consequently meld — her departure with the troupe the coup de grâce Tiye felt. Her presence in the new troupe would enhance the performance and reassure the provincial novitiates. She would have the program performed in several venues and her friend richly rewarded after the tour. It had been a doubly trying time for Asya. One of her select servant’s friends, a wet nurse, had been implicated in the death — apparently by poison — of a Canaanite lector, one of the first alien residents to embrace the Aten. At the time the King was too irascible to be engaged or intercede, and Tiye could not then interfere with an Amun enquiry which she feared would slight the death of the ‘apostate’ lector but not the perpetrator -- the exact sorry outcome, as it turned out. Glancing down the long corridor to the audience room, she could see Asya standing in profile, arms akimbo as the dressers reassessed their Nut crea-

tion. The director too savoured the meticulous handiwork. A light layer of myrrh burnished the bright white stars. A treat for any audience. For a brief moment Tiye indulged a rare moment of unfeigned loss. She knew Asya was doubly wounded by recent developments. She would take satisfaction in the fact her boon companion was so handsomely explicit, in or out of a costume, and gallant enough not to carp or cavil.

It was Tiye's majordomo, Ay, captain of the King's horse and guard who had scheduled the departure of the new touring company in a quiet outside passageway off the hippodrome the morning after the rushed dress rehearsal. Kiya had quietly returned to Memphis to learn and harmonize the details of the new plan, and looked attentively over Ay's shoulder at the itinerary. Asya lolled on a mat nearby with a wine skin, faintly drunk, a few of the stars and henna smudges still clinging to her skin, thus easily sustaining the appearance of careless nonchalance the Queen recommended to reassure the Amunie soreheads. Her departure would alarm the Amunie synod who feared a new round of performances would confirm the ascendancy of the Aten — a recognition that must draw out the Amunie backsliders and recreants, invariably the younger members whose careers lay before them and who sought opportunity: the hoped for fortuity. Asya was not thrilled about the arduous undertaking, though convinced of its tactical worth. Ay, who loved intrigue more than beer, was in a particularly chipper mood as he read out the itinerary.

“Kiya off immediately tomorrow, Asya and company a week later. First to the Upper malingerers at Thebes, thence the pipe dreamers at Aby-

dos. Both sides of the river to Ombos and back. The area trainees there drawn by lot. Including a few fugitives from the Amun ogres. ” He looked again at Asya with narrowed eyes.

Said Asya, with a stubborn smile, “A lot of sun.”

Said Kiya, “For how long?”

“Ostensibly, about a month. To upstage the stalkers. Ostensibly.”

Said a matter-of-fact Kiya, “Until the old King croaks, he means.”

Ay, amused, squinted at Kiya. “A diviner as well.”

Said Asya, with some impatience, “We’ll learn how dedicated our servants are.”

“They will be in line for many favors.”

“The pledged hope.

Ay was enjoying this. “The Aten has many hands.”

“Not a lot of conniving palms...” Confronting her irascible mood Asya added, “Sorry. My servant picked an inferior wine.”

Said a conciliatory Kiya, “He’s reserved the Theban caravanserai.”

“And a boatload of lineaments I hope.”

“That too,” said Kiya, after a further check. “Sixty camels. A dozen caravan litters. Equally divided.” On a closer check she added, “A Naucratis masseuse each.”

“And the smelly Nubian constabulary.” Asya left off a moue.

“Some Shardana as well,” said a buoyant Kiya.

“It’s still a lot of sun.” As much to herself she added, “God, I’ll look like a Nubian goat chaser when it’s over.”

Said Ay, “All good things come eventually to a sanctuary.”

“The unassailed dream.”

Both Ay and Kiya looked at Asya, surprised by the flash of pique. Though it was known that away from Tiye she could be a grouch, her coming role as the eminent scapegrace -- the misleading outcast for the Amunies — the ongoing trial.

Resumed Ay, “You will both grow very old, have scores of transcendent admirers and rich patrons, and laugh at vespers ‘till you’re giddy.”

Once again Kiya averred. “You don’t have a lot of sand screens down.”

After a studious inspection Ay nodded. “Yes, we can add a second allotment there.”

“A third wouldn’t hurt.”

“I feel parched already.”

That evening a dour and belatedly alerted synod mulled the prospects, speaking as ever, in turn, as if given over the the diktat of a prayer wheel.

Said Psammet, “The manifest is plain enough. A lengthy tour, with a cohort of fledglings, including the baboons from the Gezeh temple.”

Said Horem, “What do you mean — baboons? Amun acolytes? I don’t believe it.”

Said Menhet, “About thirty in all. But with the disappearances throughout the delta, who knows.”

Said Horem, “Deserters? Oh come now!”

Said Psammet, “I think we take the apostates, the ‘runagades’, at face value from now on.”

This comment mulled the exchange.

Said Psammet, “I think we need more bees in the bazaar.”

Said Horem, “Why just the bazaar?”

The few smiles were short lived.

Said Psammet, “Something’s afoot, more literally than we perceive. This sly dismissal of Tiye’s favorite will take some assessing. It is either the result of a craven snit — the woman can be a shrew — or a sublime bit of cunning. I tend to suspect the latter.”

This comment sobered the mood and convened a nodding consensus.

Meanwhile, the Glaean aristocrat Zelea, who had been with the Prince that day, mulled over that raw unexpected engagement. He had been accosted by his newly censored Greek choreographer — Tiye had put her foot down, demanded an end to ‘nugatory trifling’ as she called it -- and compensated himself with an avid tryst, an engrossment she thought had abated and evolved. The encounter entailed the wearing of a new and intricate gold work costume — a gift he said — that literally figured in a board game he devised. If she was amused, even charmed by the intricacy of the fretwork, the game itself proved derisively rigged -- the game pieces were caricatures of Theban funerary figures. Losing involved losing sections of the elegant costume. She imagined a lusty interlude afterward but was miffed when he insulted her with one of the funerary figures.

He was obviously at his wit's end that day -- knowing Tiye's plans might remove Zelea from his household -- and seemed chagrined by his own misadventure. She left in a rare snit and now lay in a drugged languor, still somewhat disoriented by the swiftness and inanity of the engagement, only to recall and belabor her rancid fortunes in the slavers' caravan. The one camel wrangler — whose rude half-learning made him the more sinister -- had smugly insulted her with as much audacity, feigning curiosity about her 'well-being' as he assaulted her -- 'Such a fine example this Hygeia of the Greeks' — an onslaught she had kept from Thera. Now the disillusion roiled, her adventure with the Prince once again deformed -- 'disfigured'! To acquit the disagreeable thought she summoned memories of their arrival at Memphis in an early dawn, fingers of light stealing through distant mountains. A light sleeper she peeked from her litter curtain to see a vast temple surfacing from the dark ocean of the night, its marble facings gleaming like mother of pearl, the surrounding palms phantoms in their plots of river mud. She had all but pinched herself to confirm the stellar vision, and wondered at the rituals that must occupy such grand hallways. Soon they were told to prepare for 'a most rare occasion,' meaning, she now knew, a trade center with a busy bazaar. From the way the camel teams were being settled she felt they'd come to the destination the Fates allotted them — the 'smallest hands of Amun' was the raffish name for those minions who attended the princely courtiers. Yet, despite her anxiety, she was less anxious about her own fortune than Thera's. Being fluent in several scripts, and able to write, speak, even compose poetry in at least

two, as well as play the harp lyre and pan pipes, she would be an asset to a substantial household — as had ensued, if not quite as she envisaged. Whereas Thera, despite her brave demeanor, was a domestic born and bred, and knew little of the world beyond their sturdy, genteel, pacific home on the island of Glaea in the Great Green Sea, the memory of which now released some pent up tears. Moreover, Thera was exceedingly pretty, yet strictly reticent about the fact, a long-standing protective antic that did not serve her well here. Being fond of her devoted servant, Zelea felt sick to her stomach, and dreaded the unfolding of that historic day. The slavers had, by and large, harbored and sustained them as the precious commodities they were, but delighted in teasing Thera, finding in her shy demeanor a great pithy pastime. No one must violate her on pain of a thrashing or worse, a trial that ended as a mordant game: who might tease her the longest and still walk away. Thence was Thera introduced to the misapprehension of her own self, such as the carefully noted flushes that compromised all dismay in the eyes of her hecklers. She returned from these encounters scared, shaken but physically unharmed. Conversely, Zelea was slighted as just another skinny Greek, no fit companion for a real man, and touted as an artist with exceptional amanuensis skills. Having been briefly married her status as a virgin was debated but found to be problematic. “Shameless” the lone wrangler who affronted her told the captain adding in earshot, “We’re not in boyo Greece here.” If the early captains and traders had listed her as a menial, a couple of assayers did not. The testing of her language skills -- initially as much taunt as con-

firmation — confounded all of them. They simply could not believe their phenomenal luck. And must have revised their original designs.

The élite bazaar was set in an old fortress, in the courtyard of which weary Zelea and anxious Thera were exhibited with punctilious formality, dressed in long linen tunicas which the brokers might part for an intimate look. Given the dissemination of Zelea's reputable achievements, the Glaean aristo was able to keep her servant to herself and attend prearranged interviews. Still, Thera managed to best most of the candidates in looks — and even intelligence when Zelea invoked some of their favorite puzzles -- usually when the bidding lapsed. Their long pastime of riddle hoarding paid off. They would appear to be engaged in small talk when the prospect of being overheard was likely.

“The hardy pirates get the lion share of gold when?”

“When the loot is divided among groups of three, four and five pirates — the co-rival numinous numbers.”

Notwithstanding Thera's faint snigger when Zelea placed such a puzzle, for Thera believed the ploy ineffective, broker after broker stood by in a fixed quiet, each spare nod a dry affirmation of the special and unfledged promise of the two. The ransom Zelea might possibly fetch was discussed but found to be irrelevant, given the state of her homeland. The Egyptian Viceroy who eventually took over the island with a cohort of Shardna was said to be acquainted with her and even patronized soirees at her villa. But he had been subsequently cashiered by the old King and taken off the island. So that option also lapsed.

Then one broker recollected how the young Prince was unhappy with his restive sun nymph Kiya, and suggested that Zelea, though softer and paler, bore a traceable likeness and, given her background, might be every bit as serviceable. This prospect was sufficiently expedient to summon an agent from the Office of the Mazkir or ‘remembrancer’ to confirm the likeness and the suitability of alerting the Prince to this new and widely talented prize. The agent believed the prospective match credible enough to elect a try, and promptly returned to the palace. In consequence of which Zelea, who demanded her servant not be separated from her, was set aside with a dazed Thera in a storage cellar to await their summons. During the wait, Zelea did her best to minimize their jeopardy.

“There is a real possibility we may be received at court. So buck up.”

Thera was finely diffident. “You may be.”

“Well, if I am, I’ll have some say in the details of my station there. You must remember that the Egyptians once happily traded with us — and somewhere there is a former Viceroy with many friends who took a fancy to our social circle. It could be worse.”

In Zelea’s abstracted mind frame, following her tryst that day with the Prince, the early episodes of her life in Egypt registered with exceptional lucidity. About the time of Kiya’s perfunctorily arranged execration rite, which had been touted to the main audience of the court as a curt dismissal — the prankster sent packing back to Mitanni — the young Prince was only too alert to the presence of credible surrogates. Hence, being steered to the old bazaar by one of the Mazkir’s agents, he discovered

there the newly come Zelea, a gracile fugitive, Greek aristo, linguist, scribe, lyric poet and musician, and her pretty pensive maid Thera. But he was miffed by the close idiosyncratic exchanges between the two, Zelea later learned, as if they shared a regard or conceit he was exempt from, and had them separated, an act that allowed him to study the young aristo in a fast silence, with a prodigal's rapt fascination! If he had been well briefed on her erudite prowess, it was, at least initially, her boyish figure that seemed an unalloyed gift from the gods. So Zelea now postulated to herself — long after the fact. With considerable unease she recalled that first encounter, straining now to find clues to the fated dénouement. She had broached the subject of illusion later with him but without much heed or thanks. The initial confrontation was anything but promising. Indeed, it was the one time she sensed calamity, as she had with the wrangler. She could still envisage him staring at her, that open animal look that defied conscription, the animus of a carnivore. A raptor. After all, she did not consider herself a beauty and was very thin, finding the food in the caravan unpalatable. Yet she knew that others had admired her for her boyish look and élan, a seemingly perpetual curse in some quarters. At the time she imagined that aspect was what he saw -- a live fair sylph. From the Greek pantheon of brazen, recreant daemons the Egyptians smiled at. Or near enough. Five or six sexes in the festive tally. "Not a boy, no -- a Siren more like. On a promising day. With a stare to match," one of the minders had said. Siren indeed -- who had rarely left the calm and civility of her villa in her native homeland. The Prince's one Greek tutor she

learned had a respect and love of myth. An Electra, or some such, he suggested. Thin, quiet, mournful, but a refuge. She had the Prince's later words -- many of them engaging sentiments -- to go on. But those gems came to light later on. It was only when he had his lead scribe read some of his 'poetical tomes' that she even knew such sentiments had been coined. Listening to the stately graven lad, when he chose to read these pieces himself, was like listening to an oracle, only the candid familiarities slighting its stature. She had by then surmised his likely regard of Thera and perception of her: *The womanly redhead servant I can pretend with in public to mollify my flinty mother and the rest; with the other one must refine the art of the shade King...such even, alert features, dusted to perfection, parian smooth, eyes lucid as the sky, nose an inchoate Anubis', a tiny gourd. The profile a ringer of the famous Akrotiri mosaic...* Words he had his scribe permanently set down. The more he looked the more the comparison must have pleased, for she too dourly had smiled at the equation of the two images.

Yet his regard of her on that first encounter was brazen. He pushed her for looking at him, teased her hair, prompting her to pull away and kick one of his minders, resulting in a vindictive presentation of her to his steward as a humble domestic, her tunica stays released to 'uncurtain' her form — his characterization. In like manner had the wrangler insulted her, her innate prized propriety the recognized vulnerability. Before the Prince only the manhandling was left off. Which she awaited with a large draught of stoicism. The longer she stood there in that shaded colonnade the more she wanted to tell him to get the hell on with it, whatever the hell

it was. Never before had she had actually stood so humbly and manifestly before so curious and alien an audience, which seemed to grow in size as she waited. Two attendants eventually removed her tunica altogether. One short priest actually took her hand as if to guide her through the throng. She was hardly that interesting, so she imagined, yet the numbers grew, several shouldering their way forward for a better look. Then, when the Prince, who had been as alert as any, began fiddling with her short trimmed hair her confusion and anger erupted. What in god's name! His eccentric tastes she was then oblivious of. That was when she struck him — creating a momentary lull of supernatural astonishment! No such inferior or alien had struck a Pharaoh before -- certainly not before in this court. Only his implacable intervention -- perhaps the lone time he actually physically restrained a guard — stayed the security bravos. Later one of his minders remarked that only by beating a woman might he fuss with her hair. Hair was a matter for a stylist and no one else, not even a Prince, the intrepid mentor ventured. A truism the Prince would soon diversify, of course, but at the time her reaction sent him back to the side corridor where he studied her with a wry if not amused intensity -- all the while keeping his minders at bay — an ongoing assessment she later learned that incorporated his Greek interest in economy and symmetry, the 'nothing in excess' notion he had glommed on to — which would evolve in his arch manner into the worship of the singular unencumbered Aten. An irony she would wryly savour later. At the time she was sufficiently nettled to call her own gods a spate of foreign and unflattering names. The

armed guards he held off with masterly care looked on with a sullen and resentful calm as if disgusted with both of them. To imagine her very presence a minor miracle to his singular aesthetic creed was then inconceivable. Later his commentary to his scribe would confirm what she thought an aberration, in words implicitly carnal but laced with a lyricism she wouldn't have dreamt of. It was inspired, if that's the word, when she was taken to a sunny space off a loggia, stretched out on the weaving frame and shaved, an operation he watched with fine avuncular care before entering her. (Like many upper class Egyptians, he had a mania about cleanliness.) But only when she was fixed to the frame did she reckon with being spread out on a loom. A loom -- a weaving frame! The Prince, needless to say, was not thinking of Penelope when he began. Or words to frame a fleece! Or was he?

A perfect frontal carapace, a Heb embrace, the dual camber of a besagew — the roundness of which — her breasts — he traced with both hands as he 'pearled her', her arms then stretched above her head. With a further moue (as she thought of it) he continued: *A voice to soothe a genie* -- his sense of irony, for she had regaled him with a spate of unflattering foreign words — *Hair an urchin would sport* — *Ears an Ethiopie would despair of* — too small for festive ornament — *Eyes a ring-tailed tom would pay court to, ever wide and alert, above a neck of middling parian marble* — which her veins vivified when she was angry. Then he must have got impatient: *A navel touched by a droplet of light wine, dimpled cheeks apoise, resilient as a water break* — which he seamed with smooth hands. *The lineaments of a Hermes. The merest vellum.* If she had

anticipated something flagrant if not hideous to follow, she was not entirely sure this bizarre exhibition of her an improvement, the audience then thick. Had she not said to herself, still anticipating a mauling, ‘Remember, korey, he will be King one day. A King, by any another name...?’ Still, it was the lyric commentary to his chamberlain about her singular presence that worried her at the time for he carried a small icon of the god Min with him, which likely had been used to chasten reluctant underlings. She could remember the words almost verbatim. The ravisher advising the poet. The anxiety had never really let up. *How she will look gilded in the finest balsam, limbs squared to the Rejoice mosaic, newly ‘boyed’ like now but for two rib eye squibs, a risen wave, framing a Wedjat Eye, tiny lids beaded in myrrh and myrcia, her secret glans a gadfly bite, the rarest White Thorn.* Throughout the assessment his stamina was such that she could not slight her own excitement. Still, she was determined: “Dearest Athena he won’t, shan’t kill me here. Not in front of Thera. Dearest Athena!” Thera, who had been embarrassed by her own display, sat then in a corner quietly reciting her own protective incantations. But the Prince, the devoted antagonist, she now believed, was all along intrinsically, astutely an observer. A voyeur and teaser, not a brute. He had voiced several asides, some intended for a nearby subaltern, some perhaps for himself. Naturally she was all ears. *How graven the rise and fall of living flesh, the pulse at the neck the veiled tense of life, an abstracted face the purest of cameos. The perfected symmetra.* And all this while he brought about a second upheaval -- cat spray someone said the first

time — his organ large as a young bull's, his stamina a parody of his frail frame.

The words alone astonished her — that lascivious detail might be so nearly Parnassian as well. With each fond remark she sensed a reprieve. The nearest guard was less sanguine. “Can’t take his eyes off the geek; our coming King — a smart ass faygeleh.” A second guard was even more dismissive at a distance. “He sticks the real Hathor broad in the deep shadows and stares at the cadaver like a vulture. And what a goofy looking thing he’s turning into. The royal artists are going to revive their one-fits-all caste.”

Athena she believed was listening, had been listening. As much a voyeur and ‘sculptor’ then this young Prince. How ironic. Thera appeared to be in a relatively safe limbo, a promptly discarded toy. Far too banal perhaps, too plainly feminine. The rare benefice. A master who thus looks, savours the detailing, and couples to aid the imagination. Where the nights are longest. He would not have such an eidolon -- his intimation of one -- vilified or injured. Well, what could she have done -- prolong the lurid spectacle by resisting? Enough said. Though an incipient smile lingered. As she slowly lapsed into sleep, her dilemma with the Prince’s habits was being articulated in another venue. A conversation she would have taken some comfort in. Then and now.

“The idyls of a regent Prince are many, and disarmingly served,” Ay told the Shardana captain instructed to beef up the Prince’s military train-

ing. They spoke on the terrace overlooking the royal garden lake, the occasional peacock caw punctuating the discourse.

“Before we can get his nose to the grindstone we’ve got to get it out of the seraglio. Well, his infatuation with one of its least expected beguilers. And that’s a challenge. You are listening I presume.”

“With some reluctance.”

“Good. We understand one another. He’s in a bit of a quandary now his Greek companion has been noticed and reassessed by the Queen — upping the lady’s natural ‘genteelness’ shall we say. As you may know, Greek ladies generally don’t get out much.”

The captain finally sat down and effected a virtuosic display of boredom.

“Yes quite. Anyway, a recent visit to the seraglio my lead informer tells me was a surprise. It was known that the Greek aristo was a skilled linguist but not generally a ready apropos raconteur — one of her defenses he thought. Nor was it common knowledge that she was also a student of the past and a maven on metaphysics, as the Greeks put it. To say little about her other talents, musical and so on. In short not a trull or harri-dan, despite some, ah, Princely workouts — squibs and kite flying, I believe they’re called. The same lady appeals to the Queen for reasons only the Aten might explain and It’s not saying a lot these days. Yes, yes, I’m getting there.”

The captain stoically nodded.

“It’s best I think if I, we, understand what has happened — the loss of a playmate, well something. One’s eidolon -- to use the bandied about word — is formidable to the extent you miss out on the details. Yes? Good. When you see the extent of the problem we can plan. Only then. Which means, for now, we keep him on the martial treadmill.”

“I thought that was long since self-evident.”

“For an escape artist like him the challenge remains considerable.”

“Tell me.”

“Incrementally we apply the screws. Which means the odd lapse. Think of it as a kind of bivouac.”

“Ha ha.”

“Excellent.”

“So. Flogging a dead camel are we?”

“Long winded, I know. But you get the gist.”

“Words.”

The words Ay wanted to describe the Prince being essentially vindictive, he resorted to the kind of meandering that to his close aids and subalterns implied as much. What masks he wore these days. No less peculiar than the Prince’s dance troupe he mused to himself. Which his Greek choreographer had not endeared to the palace, now that the straightforward unaffected Aten was being taken seriously. Well, Zelea would be shortly whisked away. Tiye had at last recognized her many refined talents. The Prince he suspected would be disappointed but not one to suffer remorse gladly. Indeed on returning to his rooms he was to learn from his steward

that the Prince had in fact just gone off to seraglio with his ponce. “His training today must have been particularly unpleasant,” the steward calmly stated.

Thus it was, on returning from his training embarrassments in the martial camp, the Prince sought the reliable compensations, suspecting they too were numbered. Hence the urgency. This day, sitting beneath a wide Ostrich puka, he engaged in the late commiseration with a sedulous ponce over the new and generally lack luster concubines. The daily candid assessment of the harem’s candidates was an ongoing chore -- else a rare individual might be missed. The daily grind. But when the supposed rarities proliferated, the will to act was suborned. The problem of choice. One hour’s fascination was but the next hour’s doubt and constipation when searching for sustained exemplary enthrallment. Such trials!

In the performance hall several new and eager candidates displayed their prize form and special talents. The Prince was then in hock mainly to the resourcefulness of his ponce if not the nostalgic marinade Zelea left him in.

“And that one — with the scallop toes?”

“Nope, a dose. A late discovery. Full blown. Very sad. So unlike the one you left recently off, the kore well behind us, the piper Zelea.” Whose insular new status with Tiye -- ‘a sabbatical’ Thera said to in the women’s house — stung the Prince into outwardly feigning an ignorance of her existence.

“The she who sits in Our Presence, and shuns the late girdle I brilliantly crafted. And yawns like an old puka hand. My dear mother, bless her, has given her airs. The promise of special command service and an imperial guard escort. Pah. We must be mindful of all slights.”

“The Prince is finely piqued this evening. You did give her time a while back.”

“She wanders. Too much poetry. To get her attention. Ever a Greek.”

“And here I thought you were rather fond of her.”

“I am.” The impulsive comment seemed to surprise him. “Well, some days. You have to bone up every time you want some fun.”

“In the research sense of course. The reading gallery.”

“Whatever.”

“You like the maid? Also clean as a whistle.”

“A harpy. And way too fubsy.”

The ponce smiled. By ‘fubsy’ the Prince meant voluptuous, in the Hathor sense. “And the one in front -- the homegrown Nefertiti?”

“Young. And a schemer.”

“Yet not a flirt, nor a siren. And not in any obvious way a Mitanni ‘dance croc’, to reiterate a rather topical reproof.”

“When will this name fad end for Maat’s sake? ‘A beautiful woman has come’. What malarkey! Always looking down, averting her eyes. And sometimes dancing with her back to me!”

“I note she has all the attributes on your list. And comes highly recommended -- by some outside and thus neutral connoisseurs.”

“Her shrewd but humble family lobbyists. All skills. Wouldn’t trust her with a Was Scepter.”

“You might overhear her conversation. She has a lovely voice. And, like your mother, does not strictly follow the Amun ritual. A grace by any other name.”

“Agh. Call in the Tefnut musicians. At least this Greek Erinnyes plays the harp lyre with some skill.”

“Why don’t you flog the creature?”

“And spoil skin like that. She is a paragon of her type, and knows it.”

“Ah yes, ‘type’.”

“Listen up, you. Connoisseurs must play the game. Boredom, note, is a trapped elixir. Patience a redeemer.”

“Well, you are the expert on paragons. And elixirs.”

“Thank you.”

The ponce thought it prudent not to remind the Prince he was quoting his tutor a lot these days.

“And the others. That were suggested?”

“All cows. Swaying like old river dhows.”

“The Queen did lay stress on a ‘suitable’ consort.”

“It’s a refrain we’ll hear again. I’ll force myself to pretend...but not just yet. I may just vex the cat by mussing up her servant...but I want it to look offhand, footling.”

“My word, that sounds expeditious.”

“We’ll see you old clapped out baboon.”

The departure of blithe Kiya and her hand picked crew allowed the wary Amun priests a return to their stolid self-styled cult of Maat, i.e. fidelity to arcane rites, spare if not skint benefices, ready quarrels with court proctors and marshals, and habit of disdain for all else. But the persistent antics of their petulant Prince, especially his truck with unsuitable urchins, the one in particular, bespoke a late vile Greek perversion. Hence the priests were only too willing to enjoin the Prince's ruse to censor and impugn the otherwise halcyon Zelea — a fact observant Tiye took to heart, also believing Zelea's unwarranted influence must be dealt with at all levels, the eventual favour she might receive all the more placatory by its unexpected placement later on. Tiye must appear a rare friend -- in due course. Her plans for the Glaean were fleshing out nicely but still lacked detailing. She picked the priest charged with the precious hectoring herself. Throughout the encounter with him Zelea knelt by the edge of the water garden run off, not once looking up at the intrusive caller, who was a model of sarcastic appreciation.

“The court is very impressed with your musicianship --- agape in a nutshell one smart envoy observed just last night.”

Zelea was not amused. “I was assured my servant would be returned.”

“Well, our most genial Prince is fond of his ‘riddle keepers’, and a fine riddle keeper she is with her fine full cheeks.”

“You people.”

“Her many tales do demand a careful accounting.”

“You must be proud of your bean counter.”

“Our god head Prince, oh my yes. A lad still, but eager to learn the ways of his human subjects. So important for a young Incomparable God in the proper scheme of things.”

Suddenly, uncharacteristically Zelea brandished her dislike. “You might wish to ask him why then he spends so much time with a mere servant — given your age-old proper scheme of things.”

The sharp comment surprised the priest, for the lady had seemed pensive, initially abstracted — a state he presumed natural to the awe a domestic would exhibit before him. Then he noted how his subject sat, her back to him, facing the pond. That surely was odd! What he didn’t know was that the Prince, in a moment of unusual serenity, or perhaps guilt, had just given her an Isis knot pectoral, which the priest now observed in her lap. Plainly the Prince’s generosity had reached an impasse: mock headdresses might be sneezed at, a vintage Isis pectoral never; her abstracted state merely confirmed her dismay — which the priest misinterpreted with a satisfied chuckle. What he did not know was that Zelea’s earlier demurral over the pectoral had only galvanized the Prince, who would not entertain a refusal. Either way she anticipated grief, which the Prince might not be able to stem. The priest vented an audible snuffle and, after a mock obeisance, sauntered from the room.

But as the tidal events unfolded in Kiya’s widening wake — enabling the ascendance of the Aten Godhead — Tiye and her brother Ay had cast about for hidden or misplaced talent and discovered in Zelea a neglected array, which they newly assessed in the quiet anti-chamber to Tiye’s new

Aten shade shrine. The guilt and marble sumptuousness of the cozy room inspired confidences among powerful movers, shakers and brokers.

“This Greek Hebe. With every problem comes a solution. She has many fine talents...I have lately realized, talents he’s mainly squandered of course. She was seen with the Isis knot you know. But wisely put it aside.”

“Not actually wearing it then. But the servant Thera, I understand, is now a focus of attention. A promising development, no?”

“I wish -- she is at least an unambiguous female. But I know my son. He’s playing a game. The hobby horse ruse. The Greek/Glaean kore remains his real focus and favorite -- the stoic, unaffected, self-effacing *she*. Is it stolidity or guile I wondered at first. Then changed my mind. Rather something close to an innate sense of Maat. Can you imagine? A Greek actually honoring Agape. Or whatever. Anyway, the pot is always astir. My son’s ever lived many arcane lives. It’s this pretty new aristo Nefertiti and her pushy lobbyists we must prepare for. Her family is a tight knit web. An Aten votary would you believe! A near match of the Glaean in some respects but with a royal lineage — humble but noble — adequate enough to enter the lists without resorting to back door shenanigans. Another ‘lad’ totally unsuited to being a proper consort, of course, yet quite popular with the parvenus at court. A minion not nearly so easily re-directed or dislodged.”

“More easily suborned, perhaps. I should think.”

Ay and Tiye exchanged glances: Nefertiti’s ne’er-do-well background was similar to Tiye’s.

“Is the lady Mutu, if that’s her name, not a contender?”

“What made you think of her? Hardly. Promiscuous as they come. And a loudmouth. No, we have a very sly fetishist on our hands. Hiding his prize in Greek masks and myths. A most curious greedy importunate boy. I’m hoping you can find a time to lay out the realities for him. Again. He won’t listen to me.”

“I think the current spate of rigorous physical training — among some of the army reservists — should knock the stuffing out of him. I’ve spoken to the Hippodrome captain. It’s proceeding apace.”

“Well let’s hope so. It’s later than we think. The available adepts and finaglers must not be wasted. We will need an array of talent to see this new creed remains afloat. I think you must send this superannuated Greek Hebe to me; it’s time we talked.”

Ay smiled. “She’s maybe good at that too.”

“Bless her.”

And so within the hour the ‘rather intimidating’ player was shown into Tiye’s private apartments. Given late developments, the woman presented to Tiye looked tired, even frail, much less prepossessing than expected. Tiye had been briefed shortly before the usher announced her arrival. Apparently the Amunies had suavely acted and had the degenerate mischief maker — in their estimation — put on a list with a troupe of tomb companions. The story was just making the rounds. Stung by Zelea’s guile or equanimity — so easily affecting ennui, nodding off and the like when his attentions became dilatory, cadging -- the Prince had indeed hit upon

Thera as revenge, and rather witlessly allowed Zelea be ‘made an example’ of by the Amunies, who saw her as a perverse spell caster on the Prince — facts Tiye had long since deduced and even earlier abetted, while not anticipating the Amunies’ late act of unmitigated spite. The Prince became even more fastly enamored and desperate when his paragon was placed in a remand centre with a group of tomb concubines to be sealed within the burial chamber of a nobleman for services in the next life, watching as he had through a sand screen, waiting in vain to hear a single sigh or utterance from the insular aristo. Poise like that left him discomfited, bereft before this Greek-Glaean creed of stoicism. But he could do nothing to intervene with an alien servant indicted for subversion by a standing tribunal, given the King’s insular indisposition and his mother’s apparent indifference. If Tiye was surprised by the summary decision of the synod’s tribunal, she believed the woman a cagey player not a stand in, who well knew and savored her value to the Prince. The Amunies of course imagined they had won hands down. The more fools them. Hence, seizing the initiative, and using her husband’s seal, Tiye set out a royal warrant — an act the court officials occasionally connived at, given the King’s malaise -- to summon the malefactor to an ‘in-house discovery hearing’ at the palace to confront the dryad, or whatever she was, head on. She imagined the summons only added to the woman’s anxiety and the Amunies’ consolation. She also rather enjoyed the embarrassment of her son, for it reminded him of his limited use of power — in an Amun warped state.

After the steward brought her in, Tiye wryly regarded the creature for a full minute before speaking. Oddly, the more she looked the more she fathomed her son's fascination. Despite the apparent exhaustion, a more perfect alert mud-lark she could hardly imagine. Hence her manner was brisk indeed.

"The Prince has taken a fancy to you."

Zelea lamely smiled. Past tense, she thought.

"You will answer when spoken to."

"Yes."

"The Prince has a penchant for attire, costuming."

"Yes."

"You serve as some kind of clotheshorse. Among other things."

"Served. Yes."

"You were bored...?"

"Sometimes."

"He has design skills."

"Of course." This Zelea said with surprising ease.

"Greek armor being a favorite."

"Yes." This comment was less ingratiating.

"Hoplite armour. Or is it Phrygian?"

"Both. Many. He mixes and matches."

"You do not look like a warrior."

"No."

"Why I wonder would he think you might be a stand in for one?"

Zelea smiled, but shunned the silence. “Madame, it’s not a mystery.”

Tiye looked away. “You have a talent for intrigue.”

Zelea wanly smiled.

“And sly ambiguity.”

“So I’ve recently been invested with.”

“Don’t be impertinent. Come and stand in the brighter light.”

Twice Tiye walked about the newly detailed figure before she again spoke, taking note of the spare but symmetrical form, odd blue eyes and wan northern face.

“A simple Glaean tunica, hair as the Fates must have left it, little makeup.” Tiye stopped after a second pass. “‘Nothing in excess’ — to patronize your temple wise men.” After judicious reflection she added: “A face telling of candor, sincerity, sureness. Clear features. Quiet hands. Not an exaggeration then. You play the recorder and lute.”

Zelea didn’t hide her droll amusement. “Yes.”

“So why has my devoted son spent so much time with you?” The question seemed rhetorical. “Other ladies, well some, are as fetching in an understated way, can play an instrument or two, and are surely as indulgent.”

“You must ask him.”

“I have and he clams up. So what indeed can you be up to?”

After a short interval Zelea said, “Your son is interested in many things. He has an excellent memory. And a gift for languages and chronicle.”

“That I know but why you?”

“May I say I’m as puzzled as you are. Yes.”

“You may say so. But you are flattered. That he should sometimes patiently listen to you.”

After a nearly imperceptible sigh Zelea said, “He is ever curious about the ways of language and worship. The lesser deities that his subjects are prey to. He takes some comfort in the folkways of discovery and learning.”

“And he discovered you.”

“One of many examples.”

“The one contemporaneously.”

“Latterly.”

“I wonder.”

By then Zelea could no longer mask her impatience. “He has shown some interest in Keftiu and Glaea. Buildings, rituals, crafts, dress...the sense of beauty there. I am the lone Glaean in the women’s house.”

“What exactly does he ask of you about Glaean buildings?” Her tone was mildly incredulous.

“Of late the stoa storehouses and door locks Glaeans used.”

“Locks?”

“He is puzzled why without ramparts for their capital Glaeans would bother with locks.”

“And?”

“Thieves too thrive on Glaea. As elsewhere. Until some pirates used Glaean caves to store their booty, including some Egyptian tomb trophies, we had no need for ramparts.”

“Some Glaeans were assisting the pirates.”

“Regrettably that is true.” She wanted to add that they paid dearly for it but edited the comment just in time.

“What else?”

With a rather craven nod Zelea added, “The mosaics at a neighbouring island he finds interesting.”

“At Akrotiri.”

“The same.”

“The pretty profiles. One in particular I understand.”

Guardedly Zelea answered, “Yes.”

“Which you are a facsimile of.”

“A misapprehension I think.”

“Which he easily assimilated or overlooked.” In examining Zelea’s profile she added, “Not altogether a ‘misapprehension’.”

“Some say the mosaics have a lingering curiosity. I did know one principle artist. A fine talented lunatic.”

“Who was fond of you.”

Zelea barely nodded.

“You were initiated into the Thyiad priesthood on Glaea I’m told. This information is new to me. It is a daring rambunctious group is it not?”

“It’s rituals are sacred and secret, the rumours of its acts untoward because it is a recondite sisterhood. I was approached about the time our island fell to the Egyptian Shardana.”

“But you were a member?”

“Only long enough to see my servant fashion an acolyte’s gown. They, the members, tended many of the island’s shrines and looked after orphans and the poor.”

“When they weren’t partying, japing?”

“Again, the stories are just that. An Egyptian spa patronized by upper class ladies is an apt comparison I think. At day’s end.” Zelea knew her characterization was largely fictitious, but doubted Tiye would not know this. The memory of her connivance with one orgiastic Thyiad sect still rankled her.

Tiye considered Zelea’s exoneration with an incipient smile then directly turned to face her son’s stoic Glaean kore. Now or never she warned herself. “What do you think of the Amun priesthood?”

Zelea was a moment responding. “They seem a coherent lot. A strong inner trust in themselves.”

“Some priests have mistreated you.”

“Some imagine I poorly influence your son.”

“Have bewitched him.”

“They prize and select their enemies with great care. Your son’s Amun tutor was factually wrong about the size and complexity of Glaean temples, their investiture mazes and codes of honour. My first hand description of them apparently angered him.”

“Who has never gotten over it. Unlike the Prince, he has a serviceably conventional imagination. A sudden rebuke can disclose a narrow mind.”

Zelea managed a smile. “I’m most grateful my servant will be returned.”

“She’s recovered from the sequestration.” The tone was mildly mocking.

Zelea was a moment taking this in yet hid her anger. “Some priests have relentless suspicions. Not unexpected.”

“What’s so special about this servant of yours?”

“We grew up together.”

“She is a menial.”

“We get on.”

“You trust her.”

“She is loyal, fastidious and resourceful. We belonged to the same charity on Glaea.”

Again Tiye changed her tack, as if to distance or slight the earlier exchange. “My son has mentioned the Aten.”

“Many times.”

“How has the subject come up?”

“The story of the Minotaur caught his interest. The escape of ill fortune. The large arcane and destructive power within. The need for an all embracing Godhead. A transcendent Deity.”

Tiye smiled, paused. “Do you think his interest fanciful?”

“Not at all. The rise of the Amun priesthood is a commonplace is it not?”

“We’ll see.” Satisfied her subject was enjoying a sense of relief, Tiye shrewdly indulged her candour. “Their hegemony may not be a lasting blessing.”

“I agree.”

“You do?” Tiye was agreeably surprised.

“Powerful priests, or priestesses for that matter, rarely make good long-term rulers. It is a Glaean dilemma. Rather was.”

Tiye smiled. It seemed a Sinuhe kind of providence may have bequeathed her son a heedful mentor, the more fool him for not benefiting more from her insights and experience.

“Would you welcome a chance to reduce this Glaean dilemma here?”

“I’m something of a pariah with the synod already. Can I be worse off?”

“You have a fine voice. And play the flute well. I’ve listened in.”

This comment surprised Zelea. “Thank you.”

“I’m in need of a special soloist. In both word and song.”

Zelea all but laughed. “I’m here.”

“I’ve arranged for a type of herald, a premonitor of the Aten. Two actually.

And now a third has materialized.” Sternly Tiye looked at Zelea.

Zelea all but winced. “A herald?”

“I need a special catalyst here to help some doubters and quislings focus on the common sense reality, the writing on the wall. To incite the

synod elders to rash acts. In short: someone to get under their skin. And survive.”

After a further moment of incredulity Zelea posited , “A gadfly, a needler?”

“More nearly a brickbat, a provocateur.”

With a droll smile Zelea said, “You think I qualify?”

Tiye demurely smiled. Zelea tried vainly to join in.

“An uphill matter.”

“Only if we slip up.”

Tiye then fetched a small parchment scroll from an inner pocket in her long haik and handed it to Zelea. “The opening lines are from the new invocation to the Aten. The God's very words. In conversation with my son.” There was no hint of censure or derision in her words. “Read the first stave. I believe you call it a strophe.”

Thou settest every man in his place,

Thou suppliest their necessities:

Everyone has his food, and his time of life is reckoned.

Thou bringest forth as thoud desirest

To maintain the people -- of Egypt.

Thou living Aten, the beginning of life!

When thou are risen on the Eastern horizon,

Thou hast filled every land with thy beauty.

Recognizing the rhapsodic phrases with a selfless twinge, Zelea gave a performance Tiye all but marveled at, and stoutly smiled when she fin-

ished. “Better than I anticipated. Both lyric and emphatic. I may presume you play an instrument as well.”

Again Zelea lidded her apprehension as a servant emerged from an inner corridor bearing on a soft salver a type of flute similar to one she played in the royal ensemble. Smaller and brilliantly polished it seemed exceptional despite Tiye’s flinty regard of it.

“Play one of the Seth incantations on it.”

With a respectful ease Zelea took up the instrument and played the first of the declarative refrains from a noted hymn, one the Prince himself had dictated to his Aeolian scribe. Tiye listened keenly but without deference.

“As I thought. Too smooth, genteel, silver toned — the instrument. Which you play very well.” A further nod brought a second bearer with a pristine Pan pipes — a sight Zelea took in with a wry nostalgic nod. “You play this as well, yes?”

“Long ago -- as a youngster.”

“So you will remember some of the airs it is suited to.”

Zelea regarded the instrument with veiled wonder. “It wasn’t a court instrument on Glaea. Shepherds mainly. And youngsters.”

“Your god Pan I understand gave it to a herder.”

“Yes. A rather fantastic herder I believe.”

“You needn’t be apologetic. Play something. For this playful God.”

With a truant’s smile Zelea took up the instrument and began to play one of the first medleys she learned on it — the God primping his tail.

Tiye listened with what seemed great satisfaction and had Zelea repeat the number.

“Yes. Yes. The pipes of Pan. Yes.”

Zelea was about to return the instrument to the bearer when Tiye said, “You must keep it. Practice all you know on it. Sleep with it. Make it your own.”

Gratefully if hesitantly Zelea retrieved the instrument, saying, “It is very well made. Nearly as versatile as the first...the additional larger pipes give it an unexpected range. Pan would be all ears I’m sure.”

“Your cheery, sprightly reveller. Who helped hunters find their target.” Tiye had swiftly taken up the thread. “What we need. Yes.”

Zelea smiled, thinking how the gods exploited Pan’s powers while despising him, and handled the instrument as one might a small nervous pet.

“Indeed. As it should be. The bearer has a case for it. Ay crafted it himself.”

Zelea mirrored the obeisance of the bearer as she accepted the special case and felt a rare satisfaction until Tiye resumed speaking, the tone of the queen’s voice again direct, self-important. Almost accusatory she thought.

“I must be direct. One aspect of the plan may not amuse.” Again she eyed Zelea with a stern appraiser’s stare. “The Prince’s penchant for arresting attire is of interest here. Indeed, a modified costume may figure in our plan. Were it not for your patience with his ‘dress up’ frippery, I would not have spotted the fly in the ointment -- parenthetically a canny

irritant for the Amun synod! You will understand shortly. Please be assured the exercise in question entails no risk or liability -- for yourself or any in your household. I have already released you from the Amun list. You have my word. It is thus essential, though, that we vivify, quicken our special herald.” As she spoke a third servant entered with a young woman wearing what appeared to be one of the Prince’s costumes, a gilded hip cingulum and temple chaplet. “The pan pipes will perplex, the costume, given its provenance, finely vex. Pray note the model’s hair and face is chased with the same auric luster. You have worn similar fare before. Now you can enact, should you choose, a consequence far more telling — an option I will not impose. In short, you are free to walk away now from further involvement. Your decision to leave will not be interpreted as a slight, and your fortunes shall remain no less providential. But you must decide now. Again, you have my assurance that you will be carefully protected throughout the undertaking. We can hardly afford to lose or misplace such a harbinger — indeed, as you will see, a kind of Greek introductory chorus, performed by a single individual. The rewards will be considerable -- as they will for all who cherish the worship of the Aten. You alone must decide. We cannot have apathetic or indifferent retainers and participants at this stage. Only a willful accomplice will do. That path is clear.”

If Zelea was initially chary about an audacious proposal couched in suave words, she was slowly engaged by the attitude and prospect of the wider plan — which presaged a seismic change in religious practice. Did

the Prince not speak with unusual candour and conviction about the Aten? The transcendent centrality it conveyed? They even shared a fervent dislike of the harsh, often miserly, Amun priesthood. The antic of her performing as outlined seemed more cagy than flagrant the more she thought of it, and she would play an instrument she had a nostalgic fondness for! Though she would await the ‘where and when’ with some caution. She believed she would be no less put upon and inconvenienced than she was now -- and far closer to the real players at court. It seemed her mind was made up. Quietly she said, “I will do your bidding the best I can...and take your assurances to heart.”

Tiye smiled. At a clap of her hands a team of make ready artists emerged from the same corridor the other servants used, suggesting the entourage was in place before the meeting. Zelea managed a straight face as the group promptly began to effect her transformation, the many hands upon her like so many beckoning beggars she thought at one stage — her metamorphosis theirs as well.

In due course the newly primped player stood before Tiye and her household steward while Ay, a late comer, loitered in the background. For another long minute Tiye surveyed the Glaean ‘lad’, heartened that she embodied the graceful yet gamesome tease she required for her plan to further addle the Amunies. A more fitting player she could hardly imagine. Her smile produced a self-effacing shrug in her minion.

“When you fathom the importance of what you undertake, you will understand my concern and vigilance now. Please be assured you will make

a most suitable and necessary harbinger. Get changed and join me on the shade shrine portico.” Again she watched with growing surety the girl replace her spare attire. Seeing the Glaean as the gods (not her importunate son) left her, second-guessed her son’s fascination. An appreciation of Attic simplicity, acumen and deftness may auger well she mused. A more subtle yet seemingly tease was hard to imagine. Her past disparagement of the creature was now long forgotten. When Zelea left, Tiye turned to Ay. “What do you think? I want to know.”

“Dove like,” came the measured response. “Very nice in a pared down way. You may need an extra guard or two.”

“Your department.”

The afternoon sun outside the shade shrine was dazzling, blinding. Zelea and Thera sat upon an open litter before the queen in what remained of their best Glaean attire. A dedicated fan boy just behind stirred a warm but welcome zephyr. After some brisk negotiations (Zelea could stay in the guest house in the worker’s village, near Ay’s villa, not the women’s house; Thera would assist the linen weavers there, and some trade would resume with select Glaean merchants) Zelea would begin instruction as a special harbinger of the Spirit of the Aten, so that she might venture forth to recite the Aten evocations and play the sprightly refrains in the older venerated temples — the preamble that had become identified with the call to the new open, vibrant worship. Doing so would disturb the awesome silence of such ancient shrines while amusing if not teasing the gingery yet politic guardsmen, who took the shrill remonstrations from

the Amunies with a grain of salt -- one of Tiye's pertinent insights. The trial run proved a success, the guards readily entertained if sometimes flummoxed by the Amunie response. *A flutist causing such pandemonium? Impudently insulting the gods of the shrine with her cheery tunes and fetching dress? A slight pretty urchin inviting chaos? Who was kidding who?* For a week Tiye had had Zelea titivated by her finest beauticians, her light red hair slicked to the richness of cedar wood oil, her nearly flawless pale skin salved to yield a sumptuous patina. Finely chased old ivory one makeup artist said. The attempt to further darken the flesh was curtailed; the alien lightness would be an added goad to the Amunie vigilantes. Tiye's special insight was the carnal predilection of many Amun guards. The costume decided on after much late deliberation was brief without being sensational. Tiye wanted an entertainer, not a mock-up of her son's raciness. Ay was in on the final look and said, "So, a fine guessing game." Said Tiye, "The reader of eminent poetry, the maker of spritely music and a Glaean sylph: a pithy portent." Needless to say, Thera was not entertained on viewing the new 'royal flutist' when her mistress returned from the inaugural makeover.

"You smell to high heaven."

"You get used to it," Zelea said as she quaffed a large glass of wine.

"It is madness. You will stick out like a glazed thumb."

"I have a protector."

"That Shardana cad?"

"He's got a contract. With the royals."

"Or something."

“No, a contract. Short, emphatic and lucrative. No harm must come to the ‘flutist’.”

“Looks like more dumbo dressup.”

Zelea visited her servant with a quiet droll smile.

“Another poke from our prodigal Prince.”

“The hippodrome captain is a fine hard leg. He’s taken the Prince prodigy under his wing. A kind of ‘house arrest’ I’ve learned.”

“The Prince undergoing military discipline? What a howler.”

“It’s good to know you’ve got your equanimity back.”

“Oh gawd don’t you start.”

“Just glad to know you’re here.”

Zelea cradled her servant’s face in her hands then let her disappear into another room to deal with some aberrant tears. Despite the promises, Zelea suspected Tiye had contingent plans. The court tactics, especially now, were convoluted. Changes might be expected. Yet she banked on the queen’s astuteness to steer them free of any charybdis. After her debut performance she was resigned, if not keen, to continue to oblige and humour her newfound patron, distance herself from the women’s house and the Prince, and thus regale the testy ogres who had impugned her as a willful mischief maker. Moreover, given her experience with the fractious priestly casts on Glaea, the concept of a single omniscient Godhead was seductive. To recap the performance strategy, they met in Tiye’s solarium atop her apartments where the late sun limned all details and expressions. Ay sat to one side savouring a white cake. As instructed, Zelea performed

several variations on the initial approved presentation — interchanging the exalted incantations with simple but lyric music. When finished she bowed politely while dealing with a stubborn smile.

Said Tiye, “I take it that wry expression begs approval?”

Zelea anticipated the celebrated esprit, the Queen’s ‘whip wit’, and replied, “The words and music have a life of their own. And the royal diadem is highly flattering.”

“The Prince supervised the design of it himself. After some observant editing.” She soberly glanced at Ay.

“He does have many talents,” said an affable Ay.

When Zelea raised her eyes she was again struck by the majesty of the small Queen, her Nubian beauty so well attested in the flesh. “Thank you again for the return of my servant.”

Without further pleasantries Tiye got down to business. She reiterated the royal preferment of the Aten, and remarked on Zelea’s late intimidation by the Amunies.

“They are a sluggish but thuggish lot, so I would linger only briefly in any one temple venue. Long enough to incite their pique. Keep them scratching their domes. As you say, a gadfly bite. Your escorts are discreet yet firm. Ay picked them himself.”

“Yes. Thank you. I trust Thera and I will continue to stay in Ay’s guest house.”

Tiye glanced at Ay, saying, “For the nonce. Use the East entrance. Ay’s own guards there keep a close eye on all strangers.”

Added Ay, "Guests indeed."

More and more Tiye sensed the sway this sylphlike creature had had on her son, and was determined to keep them apart. She had many complex yet strenuous tasks ahead, and believed the minion before her would be a serviceable distraction for some of them, italicizing just how unsuitable she would be as a second or third Best Wife to an infatuated youngster. The fact that she had not become pregnant was also a relief. Perhaps she was barren. She had not had a child on Glaea. Another signal drawback as a potential Best Wife. The risk of the Prince becoming especially fond of her in her new adventurous guise remained a possibility of course. Hence the ever tighter schedule and seclusion from the women's quarter. When her lone flute player first donned the chaplet and new cingulum-style schenti, she resolutely believed she had found a fine thorn for the Amunies, many of whom she knew to be as queer as angel fish. All the Glaean lacked was perhaps a costume penis. Though that should be a little craven she decided. The apparent innocence would be entirely enough to set their teeth on edge -- as her area spies confirmed. That Tiye might convert some select antics of her son into a unique perplexity for the Amunie codgers refreshed her spirits. The pretty bum alone could attain cult status the spy said with unexpected enthusiasm. In due course the animated whispering became rife behind the stately peristyles. Tiye's spy's paraphrasing of the censorious comment included the following:

This in intolerable.

The pharaoh is in his cups.

Did you see the gold intaglio? Only the palace retains that molding expertise. A brazen titivated hetaera loitering — in a temple? The echoes. I can tell you.

We must put a stop to it.

But how with those useless guards? The biggest bloody Shardana in the Imperial Guard.

The Vizier must be summoned.

Tiye claims that he is not well -- hardly news -- and relies on Ay to convene audiences.

Ay is a worm.

Prostrate ourselves before Ay?

We will not.

The guardsmen, however, were notably less anxious.

Love that first refrain; gets one in the mood. More country fair than the la-di-da stuff in the court.

God, she could alert a buck at a water hole. Never saw her before.

The chief phartling wants her 'out'.

With the royal seal she wears up front...let him be the first, cousin.

She'll be gone by the time he sounds off.

Pity.

Smart.

As with all contracts, the caveats would surface and be resolved at a later date, as Zelea suspected. The bargain she struck with Tiye that Thera should no longer act as the Prince's 'play nurse' or 'riddle keeper,' as the one whimsical priest put it, was more honored in the breach, for

Tiye was in no rush to deflect her son's attention however clumsy and transitory to a 'real' woman -- a prospect she was loath to truncate. To determine if her son's dalliance was feigned, Tiye's spies kept a record of the candid comment from many witnesses. Tiye's lead spy read from her record of a recent exchange. When Zelea learned of the postponement she was angered and not a little disappointed. Yet she bit her tongue. For Tiye it was a further test. To see if her new player could be discreet, prudent and perceptive enough to see the worth of timely discretion. The coming royal causeway would soon be littered with casualties.

Well, it's about time he got over the pretence of maligning her.

He maybe has; last time he actually talked to her.

Actually consoled -- he pretended she was slighted. Such drollery he prizes as moxie. Pretends one thing, to accomplish another. Thinks he's canny, not the tripper everyone runs shy of.

Tiye barely smiled. Zelea, with some effort, remained apathetic.

He's done that before now, you guys.

Despite the apparent calm she blushes easily. It's her confusion that bemuses him — so unlike the pros in the seraglio.

I still think he's rather bored with her. By her very shyness and awkwardness. I doubt she's pretending. No select words to stay the tedium.

She's no Zelea — in the campy dare reply department.

Tiye all but smiled while Zelea silently dealt with her anger.

Our royal bystander. Strange, before a beauty like that.

Fussy 'Z' got the Prince's ear early on. Zelea the Zephyr.

Mr. Dressup went into a tizzy with her.

A pretty fine tizzy. The court couturier Seda even took a look. You know how rare that is.

In glancing at Zelea, Tiye thought she detected a coming tear.

The ineffable muse the lady Zelea. He's like a punt jar around her. That night by the wadi terrace -- a lot of fragrant sighs.

Well, they don't call him the 'verse monger' for nothing. All that hemming and haw-
ing.

'Hemming', that's good. Down on his knees getting the selvage just right." *S h e*
is pretty in a certain way. Zelea. Tuthmosis wants her for a mosaic. 'Neato and fluent
as a shen ring, smooth as melting wax.' His words."

You would mention that.

Hardly a shen.

Belatedly Zelea swiped at an insect as a guise to hide her pique, prompting Tiye to come to her side and just refrained from touching her hair. "You have performed a miracle with him you know; never before has he doubted his dilatory craft. Looked beyond his obsessions."

To her reader Tiye snapped, "Continue. There are matters here that need to be aired."

The reader recomposed herself, cleared her throat.

An oddball performance -- watching the two of them.

You'd think he might have given it a try at least. She is a find this Thera.

Well he's clammed up tonight with the understudy. Fast moored. No navel engagement at all.

From our stolid punster.

He only baits Thera then -- to vex Zelea? And his mother?

Thera got drunk today. She's learning. He looked disgusted.

Well, he can hardly best wife her or Zelea for that matter. And I doubt Tiye's consoling herself with Nefertiti these days, the one gamin left in the harem. The only royal Aten bird she's likely to get him interested in. For now.

If in point of fact she is a candidate.

Oh come on.

Does Tiye really give a hoot?

Well, he will be King. And a God. Who will need a suitable consort. She's no Tiye. Nor a Zelea for that matter.

How do you know that — Tiye's three times her age if she's a day. Our ageless Bess.

The old King is very poorly they say. Rarely out of bed. It's what I've heard.

That's putting it mildly.

Even neglects his entertainers.

I'd love to see this Kiya troupe perform. They say the weekly fare is much better than in the palace annex. Fantastic stories. Great old mythic scenes. The Nut figure is an awesome presence I'm told. From the palace too.

I wouldn't believe it.

It's so.

A class act — like the lady Zelea if I may say so. Who could do as much?

She does have a musical talent we all envy. Too bad so many priests are tone deaf.

Well, it looks like a stalemate here tonight.

He's not really a tuft hunter. Maybe he is looking for a Hathor.

A co-conspirator more like.

Same thing. And Zelea takes the Ankh charm there. Now free of all this.

I'd say Nefertiti is the more likely Ankh charm — no infamia in her resume. And from a royal family as you said. That's something.

But poor and no repute either. Not a real credible player.

Why do you think she's not a player?

No tits and no one's seen her. Her family has at least one epicene.

That's just a silly rumour.

Nice neck but no chest.

She so has.

His are way bigger.

So what does that prove?

If you have to ask....

Tiye had sustained an expressionless demeanour as the spy read through her jottings. When finished she said to Zelea “They do cherish their tittle tat.”

Despite the patronizing tone Zelea lamely smiled.

Continued Tiye, “It is a consequential matter — the Premier Best Wife. More than one King has repined his selection. The welfare of the Kingdom can rest on it. And often has.”

Softly Zelea answered, “I do understand.”

As much to herself Tiye mused, “It was and is an ongoing challenge. Finding a Hathor. I do not blame you. He can be a brat, my son. And you have amply widened his interests. For that you are much thanked.” Summarily she stated, “Your servant is thus refunded. With interest. Minus the lecture perhaps.”

“She’ll get a hug.”

Following an unfocused look at Zelea, she added, “It is, as a Glaean might say, an Epicurean phase, yes? Or is it Dionysian? Which you’ve helped refine.” Zelea faintly smiled. The spy’s words had rekindled a burn that seemed somedays endemic. Whatever the ‘phase’, the embarrassment lingered, even as the subventions of her own self remained a wonder. Pleasure was a wily adventure. She hadn’t encountered a sensual omnivore before. As if absolving her complicity Tiye added, “I’m convinced you’re the player I need at the moment. You execute the role well, and there will be other tasks as delicate and important. Now that we’ve managed to extract you from the ‘costumier’.” Again Zelea could manage a smile but nary an apt word. “We will talk again soon.”

The session over, Zelea swiftly returned to Ay’s guest house near the worker’s village, which was now almost deserted, for a new Aten shrine had been opened near the gate in the outer surround wall. The two guards loitered nearby. A curious talkative crowd had gathered about the shrine. As she entered the narrow doorway with its assortment of hex figurines overhead, she too was buoyed by the commotion, for the merri-ment would not soon wane. Again, the past weeks wavered as a mirage. Still, the principle aggravation, as she thought of it, was over. The end of a desultory even perilous beginning. She might even get a decent night’s sleep. She would greet Thera with a prompt hug. The sojourn here with her fastidious servant, her devoted pillow-puncher, now had a mutual effacement to it. Their Glaean ethos weathered but not sunk.

FOUR

For some time the Prince was dissatisfied with his Amun tutor. His carping about things the Prince delighted in had reached a shrillness that grated. He was too engrossed in trivial, material things the tutor said, a criticism that implied a neglect of the Amun observance and veneration. Well, it was bound to happen, this ‘dereliction’ the Prince thought. Making him more keen than ever to rid himself of such whiners and embrace the one God he alone would be responsible for and obligated to. The God who had always been there, timeless, ageless, patiently awaiting his avatar. The time was long overdue he reasoned. A God can put up with only so much footling drudgery and toffy slights. But the urgency was scored by a lesion that had never really healed. Making his anger with the Amun synod even more vindictive.

When Thera was at last ‘reprieved’ (installed as a seamstress to the court ushers and heralds, to which Zelea was attached as an ‘at-large musician’), the Prince sensed an unforeseen lacuna in his young life. Finding his blithe complicity with Zelea stalemated, at least temporarily, and Thera a dull stand in, he was keen to foil his meddling mother despite the gamble it entailed. Taking his ponce’s advice, he spied again on the late arrivals in the woman’s house, in particular the comer with the rather banal name of Neferneferuaten-Nefertiti. Surprised to find her so unlike the vouchsafed regulars — something he had absently or carelessly overlooked -- he saw another opportunity to redeem his amour propre. He was further alerted to discover in the newcomer an engaging listener, a favorite in

the royal nursery, and generally free of the mental pins and needles his truck with Zelea entailed. “Something for the busy master, the short arm extension -- not to put too fine a point on it,” the ponce suavely remarked with his usual smirk. The Prince’s liaison with the Glaean had, it seemed, bewildered the seraglio denizens. A knotty point for him in that only his costumes really engaged the daemon, and even these had a limited captivation. In the end she always seemed to be avidly introducing subjects of numbing complexity and variety. Now, with the quiet soulful Nefertiti before him, a credible antithesis to the Glaean, so far, the Prince decided he wasn’t all that interested in restive Olympian spats, endless Glaean mazes, busky daemons, lyric goat herds, dusty argument-rich agoras, bull vaulting, intricate door locks, ready-flush lustral basins, cantilevered masonry and elaborate trade seals -- but a few of the subjects he had examined with Zelea as she imparted her Glaean heritage. Tiye’s area spies soon logged the following comments about the newcomer from the royal nurses, handmaids and tutors, including the close-lipped but heedful Thera who was now a corps member of the royal watchers. The candid relish in the remarks assured canny Tiye that the scuttlebutt was likely apt.

They say she’s embraced the very latest Aten rites.

And the ‘they’ is duly pissed off.

As potential Best Wife -- another numero uno boy.

But for Thera -- we’d all be guessing. And hoarding tales.

Does that mean we get a raise?

It means Thera can breathe again. She and Zelea are gainfully employed.

Do tell us Thera. Any borderline regrets?

You never did say if he was any good — as a conversationalist.

That got a smile — eh Thera?

To imagine our royal 'flinch bird' a raconteur is a rise. Well he is a fidgeter.

I know that smile Thera — they call it 'stoic' don't they?

The Greek 'moue and bear' it crowd.

Well, this new she — 'a beautiful woman has come', ho, ho — hasn't much 'play nurse' potential. That one can see. Always hiding herself too. What for? Is she a lad after all?

You always were thick as a plank.

Thera's right; better to stay alert and keep quiet. Pretend great stupidity and earnestness: the only way to deal with virgins and office-bearers. Make them feel needed. The 'foolocracy'.

Not bad -- from a footling stooge like you.

What do you think Thera? Draw a line?

Thera's smart: stay mum, keep your council for the boss ma'm.

Well, I'd like to have Tiye in my corner. Who wouldn't. Hey Thera?

As long as she is.

We all dream don't we.

But there were other blowflies in the tent. Indeed, it was a period when the Prince identified with the Aten in an imperious, defiant even contemptuous way, so riled was he by the meddling of his mother. As the Godhead *He* would do *His* bidding. Steer his own chariot. Snub the sticklers. He simply, emphatically would not take up a Best Wife he did not cherish. If the Aten was to be a an idol breaker, a wild Sobek *and* majestic

Horus, he must be the sole master. He had discovered in the poised Nefertiti a choice substitute for Zelea, and he was not about to abandon *this* consort, *this* royal! He would stride upon the firmament as a Colossus, be steadfast as the Great Pyramid. Period.

Tiye, as usual, was ahead of her urbane brother-in-law. And not always assuaged by the fact. They talked shortly after a daunting performance of the Prince's Greek dance troupe's homage to spring which featured a nimble Nefertiti. Tiye sensed her waxy head perfume running.

"She consented to it! The minx. Now that's a knot of a very different complexity. Agreeing without demurral to be a willing performer, a pert 'Terpsichore'-- the 'guest' part the last bloody straw. And acting with all the facility of a pintail. I still can't believe it. A dance troupe! A royal in a notorious dance troupe!"

"He's actually been with her then?"

"As thick as thieves at a Heb-Sed festival, for some time now." She paused to indulge a glower. "We've got to clear out that seraglio."

Ay managed to keep his smile circumspect, knowing Tiye's hand in staffing it's servants and vetting it's candidates. "You're certain it's not another ruse? Muddying the waters and so forth."

"The wadi is crystal clear: he's given her a Menit ring."

"Ah. So they are at the least fond of one another. Was a time coming, I must say."

“Must you. He doesn’t come bearing gifts out of charity. The Glaean figured that out early on.”

Ay played with a smile as he recollected the Prince’s sly patronage of the new hippodrome commander. “Ah.”

“Well, her time is up.”

“You don’t think we should wait a bit?...no, I can see you don’t.”

“Such a performance makes us look like idlers. Shirkers even. Not really in earnest -- letting one ‘boy’ in, then another. Our late finesse all but trashed. Such witless petulance from our boy Prince.”

Ay wanly shook his head.

“An unending nightmare -- his entertainment troupe. Sheer truculence. Boy wonder at his pin cushion.”

“Yes, I did hear -- about the late ‘performance’.”

“Can you imagine — our carefully planned and staged performances in the provinces sullied by a blatant louche sideshow -- a Thalia!”

“Who the devil is Thalia?”

“Agh. She’s Glaean or Greek — Greek!. One of the so-called Muses. Happily, blithely shameless. One of a klatch of rowdies and bawds.”

“Ah.”

“The audiences for such a performance are jaded idlers — many from our new ascendant ruling class. As far removed from the Aten as the fetishists at Naucratis.”

“Oh surely not.”

“A noble ancient Sun God indulging triflers, to showcase a minx and vex his mother -- not a disaster? All for what -- to flatter a poor royal, sell her to the dilettante set. His unctuous audience at the moment. For whom the Aten remains a relic. How surprised they will be when the tide turns.”

“Well they are parodying the Amunies. Are they not?”

Tiye had had enough. “Oh get out you imbecile.”

Conversely, apprehension in the Amun priesthood was acute. Apprizing the craft of gamesters was not their forte. Being as humourless and stolid as they tended to be, the late habit of slighting, even mocking tradition, defied understanding — Kiya’s acts in particular. The Prince took up with one kook, then another. His very own oddity seemed to metastasize as he grew. Indeed, Kiya’s otherwise fine even virtuosic act and Zelea’s new engaging deeds — the very vehicles Tiye needed to prompt her new religious bent — were seen as whistle calls for layabouts and wheedlers. The Vizier’s words. A development even canny Tiye had not anticipated. If dour Amun faces were rarely seen in public, fewer even than before, newly venomous words haunted the temple vaults and sanctuaries. The Amun priesthood was only beginning to discern, in their eyes, how lax the court proctors and overseers had become, to say nothing of the audacious and mischievous cohorts of the Prince, indeed the rashness of the Prince himself -- developments that put all time honored praxis and sinecure, indeed all sanctified order and ritual, at risk. Echoing voices in

the stoney inner sanctums were vibrant with alarm. An alarm as luxurious as that year's bumper crop.

It's monstrous and unheralded. Amenhotep is a ghost, shameless Tiye's in charge now, the Aten bawd. And those new pylons...that were to be painted with bakers loaves and spinners wheels -- now with Ankh signs steaming down from the Aten!

Monstrous.

None of these facades were to be finished so — the synod had agreed on the motif. Tiye thinks she's immune with this Aten craze in the towns and countryside. On all four pylons yet! Can you imagine?

And what a farce this fop Prince is proving to be. Any ritual he champions is tainted, debased — and he's still got his Amun tutor, who says it's just a phase — when he's not tearing his hair out. Unbelievable.

And this latest Lapwing, Nefertiti. Being a lead reader, even a dancer in these she-nanigans. A 'guest' reader! The peri of dread some call her.

If we don't put an end to this we'll never salvage the patents of devout respect. The very awe for the time-honored and tested hierolatriy could be in serious jeopardy. And when you tamper with durable order and ritual? To say nothing of conniving at, even sanctioning, bestial perversion.

Well, lets not be rash, that could be a plus — with this new epicene he's taken a fancy to. No ample Hathor potential there — which Tiye will need if she's as head-strong about this Aten ruse as she appears.

What are you talking about?

Oh come on. The birdbrain is smitten with the wily thing, what's her name again — Nefertiti. Has been for some time, apparently, after the Glaean hetaera left. Or was kicked out. Even his ponce didn't know. Pestering the Glaean servant was only to mis-

lead — us for one! Always he has fancied a boy, and now he has a doozer -- with a sturdy family pedigree. Skinnier than the Glaean cat's paw even.

You finally figured that out, did you?

This is no time for recrimination.

They will try to discredit her, perhaps even kill her. They must! The sterile Aten will need a womanly presence, fully nubile, patient and seemly; it'll be a laughing stalk otherwise. Two randy lads at the Window of Appearances. A disaster for King and Kingdom.

Well one lad. And one 'you-tell-me'.

Have they any other choice, really? Have we?

Best done before any betrothal, obviously. I assume there may be a betrothal. Hence soon.

Oh surely not; someone will intervene.

And what has our apathy, our leniency got us so far?

It's Tiye that must be stopped. The time is fulsomely ripe. Her craft has always had a delayed poison to it. And consider: this perversion of the Prince may yet be a blessing. Yes, it may be. We should try to delay it — the killing, at least. With Tiye's hand's tied by a betrothal we can draw out the embarrassment. The Prince is not yet of age.

He's very close to the Enunciation of Majority.

But how would they commit such a thing? Where and how might we nix it?

They'll surely be on to it soon. They must.

The burnished heads were briefly fastly silent in the dim light, the topes of so many canopic jars suddenly revealed in a newly ransacked tomb. Then an elderly high pitched voice issued forth like a disturbed bat.

An overlooked crypt companion! Why not? That might fly with the army, which slights the Prince. For now anyway. She was pledged after all to the old King ages ago. She could well be on a list somewhere. Find or add her name and pretend a mixup — Tiye has, after all, kept us in the dark for months now.

She can't, mustn't be a fixture too long...much harder later on.

Yes, sooner is likely best. The tomb business will take a while. A swift demise will nobble the clowns for sure. Send a message to the Prince and his lackeys. We gain nothing by a delay.

'Swift' means an abduction, at least. A fanatical killing even — a sturdy fed up citizen. A clenched hand.

Yes, a good prompt shakeup may be the key — for everyone, parenthetically the Prince and his toadies.

Again the silence bristled with unsparing yet unresolved implications.

Are we not in haste here? No, I see 'we' are not.

Delay, irresolution is the risk. The momentum of this extravagant farce has reached a tipping point.

It would have to be carefully farmed out. A killing I mean.

This brought a smidgen of comic relief.

That door is open Horem. No need to kick it down.

Still, no one laughed.

She and her maid servants have been going to that enhanced wadi lately, early in the day. The one near Maru-Aten. Not a customary haunt.

As easy to isolate her there as anywhere. An outside team. A robbery, an assault. Or stray madman say. The Shardana are good at that sort of thing, but expensive.

As able mercenaries are these fine days.

They do have the ear of many desert brigands.

But they are transparent as worn linen. The one captain has been a most reliable source, yes? Reliable to every paymaster.

We'd better set a watch on that wadi though. Tiye may not be that far from us in thinking about the matter.

Tiye that desperate? A pretty thought.

She's upset about the Prince's growing gaggle of rowdies. They can only add to her ongoing concern about the suitability and comprehension of this new companion. Who has already joined in one louche entertainment as a performer.

Yes, Horem.

The question is where else? And should we stop with the one figurehead?

Those two rake hells in the provinces — Asya and Kiya.

Gets complicated.

They might be easier to target.

But the confusion would be greater. Upping the anger and suspicion outside the capital. Which we don't need more of now.

Still, they're the ones attracting the audiences — like flies to a shambles. Turning field canteens into shrines for heaven's sake. Open to the sky! Open to every malingerer, cheat, hooligan.

Yes, the provinces. Clever. Little time there for shenanigans like here. They are mainly farmers after all. She was shrewd to open up there. We must give her credit for that.

Soldiers and craftsmen too. Merchants, quarry workers, regional officials. Envoys going and coming. Visitors. Many who come to the cities.

Well, she didn't see the dissolute idlers here. That's plain.

She knows her situate lands and towns though.

Well she does come from a humble family doesn't she.

On the second last comment Tiye would happily agree, adding: masons, brick makers and layers, shrine attendants, cooks, estate gardeners, herdsmen, fishermen and ferrymen, diviners, indentured servants and harried housewives — by the thousands. Her deft harbingers were performing admirably in the provinces, with both artistic élan and enthusiastic popular engagement. As anticipated, Kiya's troupe's heady proclamations, largess offerings, heralded by her own deft entertainments, become progressively more spirited and drew ever larger, animated crowds to the older neglected Egyptian temples that were being renewed with new facades on pylons and peristyle walls. Her late act was back dropped by the resplendent cascading Aten sun rays that ended in hands fanning out to frame the image of the King on the new facades — the 'Hands-On God' Ay said. But the curiosity, not at first appreciated by Tiye, her advisers or couturiers, was that the Aten might thrive on its own with just this example of largess, freedom, openness, protean energy and brilliant regalia entertainments. Kiya's supple seeable presence became a focal point for many grateful audiences who sensed the brio of an epicene or monad deity as the golden ball augured the singular beneficent Aten worship. Signalling a transformation clearly inspired by a unique transcendent Sun God. If the proximate, 'sun shy' Amun priests were scandalized they were also cognizant of a surging tide they might not contain, even as they continued to steal many of Kiya's props, which she seemed to conjure out of

thin air. Similar throngs greeted Asya's troupe in Upper Egypt, and the capital was slowly brought to a high state of anticipation as the two teams converged. By then the politic Chancellor had 'seen the light' and sided with Tiye's growing entourage. The very dynamism of the new converts spurred on his wonder. Tiye of course, being the practiced realist she was, waited to be convinced. The raw question of her son's consorts lingered, their boyish aspect mocking her keen sense of the durable Godhead triad, a travesty the Amunies now used to rebuke the new followers of the Aten.

Said the Chancellor, a soloist now in Kiya's choir of benefactors, "She has become a kind of two-in-one idol, an astral body herself. And as such, may she not solve the dilemma of the Godhead? This consort you're so exercised about." Ay indulged the Chancellor's complacent smile while a newly feisty Tiye quipped, "And eclipse the Prince? This supple jinn? This snake-headed peri? No, we need an unambiguous fecund woman, and an heir, a godly threesome, the comforting triad Egyptians have trusted from time immemorial. Osiris, Isis, Horus over all. If need be: Ptah, Sekhmet and son Nefertum in Memphis; Amen, Mut and Khonsu in Thebes. Kiya and Asya have served their purpose, getting the sled on its rollers, but we must soon perfect the staging at the Window of Appearances, the Aten's early rays defining the god and his goddess consort — a female, not an episcene. Not an urchin."

Said a convivial Ay, "Buxom and a bellyful. The gravid division."

"Not, I say again, Nefertiti."

The Chancellor was finely amused. “He does pursue her; she’ll be pregnant sooner or later. A bellyful then so to speak.” But Tiye seemed not to have heard. “She’s a faygaleh’s dream. I’ve had them watched. He fancies her as a Greek. She dances with her arms raised -- to ape a boy no doubt. With arms outstretched to greet the Aten, so enjoined at the Window of Appearances, she is a puny child. Pah.”

The Chancellor lamely smiled. “Her family is protective. Is she not rather shy as well? Not an upstart or adventurer.”

“Being coy she is an expert at. Pretends to be led. And her parts are always hidden. The rumor of an epicene in her family further taints the Prince, and sullies his minders.”

“Ah, that.” Whimsically the Chancellor added, “The bonnet monkey.”

Tiye was not amused. “Silly or not it cautions the undecided, harries the traditionalists. Also incites the Amunie blowhards and their stooges — the maggots in the bazaar.” Tiye was expanding her select epithets.

“Yet being able to single them out now will be a plus. Surely.”

Immediately Tiye responded. “‘Now’ may be the key. Their slurs lessen her chances of course, but continue to implicate the Prince’s devotion to the Aten! Our benign neglect has itself spawned dismay in some quarters. She may have to disappear. For a time.”

The Chancellor shrugged. “Ah.”

“Her growing popularity and avid relations aside. ”

Ay at last joined in. “Assuming she has some. Some that matter.”

“Don’t be obtuse.”

The Chancellor sensed a reprieve. “So then. Some new talebearers — to soap the talebearers. A bedbug rout.” He smiled broadly. “We impute a rare peculiarity about her, to our dismay...which the veteran rumormongers run with.”

“Do continue. And don’t fudge the details.”

The Chancellor took a bracing breath. He had been briefed by Ay on the situation and chose now to play his hand.

“Well now. We have two problems. Her inappropriateness as a Best Wife for a, well, ‘bountiful’ Aten — and the Prince’s affection for her which the Amun synod uses to slight the Prince and the very worthiness of the Aten. The solution, as I perceive it: One, we divulge the palace dismay, ‘our’ dismay. Set our rumormongers to speak of agile connivers trying to advance her and her family — recruiting the Prince’s finaglers to do so.”

Ay laughed. “The constipated Amunies will be shitting bricks with excitement.”

Tiye was a moment responding. “Indeed. A tactic attributed to the connivers who have infiltrated themselves into the Prince’s circle.”

The Chancellor sensed another opening. “We want to see what the synod does, who it contacts, yes? What Psammet et al might propose in dealing with the opportunistic backers — including the newly touted epicene, Nefertiti.”

Ay smiled. “Not risk free.”

“Do continue,” said a newly transfixed Tiye.

The cue prompted the Chancellor to play out the scene he suspected Ay favored. “Well now, the early success of the touring companies is now unquestioned at court. The momentum is underway. Execrating stolid Aten backers *here* the Amun soreheads will readily undertake. They must. Sooner than later. We find out who, among them, sit on the sidelines. Easy enough to suborn when their principals overstep themselves. As they will. For they will need the Great Kenbet council and the Vizier to indict. Affording another recruitment drive in the Amun camp you might say. We nix the opportunists and alert the prudent.”

Tiye mulled over the idea in a fast silence, then stated, “My sainted brother is a natural at that sort of thing.”

“My very thoughts.” The Chancellor lightly coughed, using his fly whisk as a fan. ‘Now or never’ he said to himself as he opted to openly conclude the plan. “And, finally -- a sudden puzzling disappearance of the ill-considered Nefertiti. Baffling, enervating the other side. Their target vanished from view. Another hiatus in which to act as we choose.”

“This ‘disappearance’ can be, permanent? In your estimation.” Tiye eyed the Chancellor with wry humor.

The Chancellor courageously smiled. “It is the uncertainty that will stymie the synod.”

Ay took them both in with ready lenity, saying, “If we are in earnest, I will need some delectable and ingenious talent. Some natural, inspired reconnoiterers. To find and commiserate with the laggards, the hesitant

Amun readers. The reckless blowhards and soreheads may be easy enough to stymie, as you say.”

“I’m listening.”

Again the Chancellor, carefully eyeing both Tiye and Ay, readily took up the thread. “What about those two Greek ladies. Good listeners and engaging tale bearers — in both senses to quote the current consensus. Each an alert observer, tolerable to look at, and dispensable in a pinch.” Surprised by Tiye’s sudden standoffish look, he added, “Of course we would be circumspect.”

Said Tiye, “The Glaeans you speak of may be useful down the road. Your plan means one or both risk seizure and abuse by the soreheads.”

“Of course. Which questioning we will overhear.” But the Chancellor’s enthusiasm was quickly put on hold by Tiye’s glower.

“The lady Zelea has already handily addled some senior Amunies. It’s doubtful if even the wavering Amunies would confide in her now.”

Said Ay, “I’ll do my best to keep their pantry boys locked away.”

“Don’t be flippant. She’s already been a target of Amunie vindictiveness.”

The Chancellor smiled at Ay. “Ah.”

Said a focused Tiye, as much to herself, “She’s not a gambler. Nor a monkey. And has already ‘visited’ some of the older temples. With fine results.”

Ay joined in. “‘The pale piper.’ She’s now riled most members of the synod. Who are stymied by the openness and benignity of it all. Her art-

ful felicity. Teasing the lecturers for one. Timely words and tunes so spritely rendered.”

Buoyantly the Chancellor added, “Well there you are. The very one to draw the undecided out. Who must surely be impressed by her poise and sturdy education.”

Ay finally committed himself. “Iffy. Too many probabilities. They know too much of the Prince’s dalliance — for her to appeal to their sensibility. She’s most useful now as a harbinger, a ‘talismanic herald’. For now. She sees a lot others would miss. Already she has a sturdy knowledge of Amunie habits and protocols, to say nothing of their temper and crotchets. She’ll be good at logistics, vetting surveillance teams and such. Vetting recruits even. At the right time.”

Said Tiye, “She can and may help out — in appropriate venues. Now she ‘performs’. Exceptionally well. In due course her energy and spunk will be useful elsewhere.”

With a grin, Ay joined in. “As you have often said. ‘The useful hetaeae here are not plentiful.’”

Tiye ignored the comment, instead reinstating her juridic look. “The suggestion of Nefertiti’s ‘disappearance’ should be explored. Duly, without compunction. Resurrections too can be salutary. If need be.” She faintly smiled at Ay, knowing the Chancellor must notice.

The Chancellor happily shrugged. Both Tiye and Ay had heeded his evaluation and inferences. He sensed a beggar’s reprieve. And a budding alliance.

In the end he and Tiye favored Ay with several able and observant assistants, including the Glaean duo. To help assess aspects of the new strategy. Identify the likely apostates, from past encounters, how they might be approached and by whom. Tiye had decided to see through the maze with the help of Zelea's eyes, ears and evaluations. The art of perception. The anticipated split in the synod would reveal the factions as never before. So the triumvirate of the Chancellor, Ay and Tiye reasoned. If Zelea and Thera retained suspicions about their new overseers, they were belatedly reassured by the busy, self-assured and orderly Ay household. A heedful composure that allowed them to catch their breath and savour this new and exclusive conscription of their services. Said Zelea to watchful Thera. "Think of yourself as a new special advisor, a kind of trainee vizier. The eyes and ears of the Kingdom."

"From the high water optimist."

A sisterly hug followed.

Apropos the day they settled in, Ay was attended by his barber on a clear sun bright terrace overlooking a new shrine obelisk and hypostyle hall. Unknown to his new cohorts he savored one modest gesture that was sure to bear fruit. Giving way to a satisfying whim he had Seda, the couturier, make a chiton for wary Thera, a very Greek chiton! — one of his sly benefices — which was being fitted that morning. Again he was reminded that, in Tiye's words, 'Simple Thera could, without knowing it, suborn almost any obdurate scribe with an interest in real women.' Like

Tiye, he too believed such stand-in players could be a bonus. Seducing the marginal Amun member -- by a heathen Glaean — would cast a pretty shadow, he thought to himself. Stealing glances at Thera in his polished brass, as the peplos was set measured and draped, he felt keenly alive. Amid such rare equanimity a wire-puller might plan. Zelea sat nearby, in her customary if wily solicitude, mending a shawl. He was always amazed at her ingrained prudence, which she sometimes hid, the better to perceive another's motives. Indeed, the banter of his new team rarely let him down.

Leida, his head servant, who had begun to apply a soothing lotion to his face, in preparation for his morning shave, said, “You do this more often and it won't smart so much nor burn so easily. For such a handsome face.”

Said Ay, “Keep the chatter low key now. Concentrate on what you're doing. I don't want to look like a skinned calf.”

Said Leida, “ Oh much older and wiser than a calf.”

“Which you must not forget.” After a practiced moue Ay fondly continued: “Who's that smart redhead again? The one behind us.”

“That's Zelea's long-standing servant-companion, Thera.”

“That haik she has on is smashing. Very swish.”

“The chiton” It must be — you instructed Sedu to design it.

“Did I really? For a servant. This Zelea must be a real mind bender.”

Leida smiled at Zelea. “She can be — when she puts her mind to it.”

Ay again pretended ignorance. “She's staying here, is she?”

“Yes. Even now.”

Without looking up Zelea said, almost as an afterthought, to Seda. “An additional jabot off the shoulder would work — for a comely spirit.”

Said Ay, “That’s enough from you two freebooters.”

After a judicious pause Zelea responded, “So then — my name is Sekhmet and the Aten’s but a ghostly pearl!”

“That’s very good — we can shill that line for sure. What Amun scribe won’t sweeten his swill over that.”

Zelea and Ay were getting on.

Said Leida, “Any chance it’ll end up on a pylon or stela? Temporarily of course.”

Zelea smiled.

Ay snickered. “Tiye warned me you were a widow maker.”

Said Leida, “Her husband, I understand, was a very happy man who met with an unfortunate accident.”

Said Ay, “Not then an unfortunate man who met with a happy accident.”

Leida continued. “If you’re talking about his marriage, that must be so.”

Mused Zelea, “An idealist who met with a mundane accident. Hum.”

“Did he beat you then?” Ay imagined he must have — how else would he have managed.

Zelea looked up. “Most, if not all, men beat their womenfolk. So I’m told.”

“Ha!”

Zelea smiled. “Queen Tiye, of course, is not a ‘wife’ but an Olympian, Pelasgian division. ”

Ay heartily laughed, then added, “I shall tell her.”

In a more thoughtful tone Zelea added, “Remind her that Pelasgian means original.”

Said Seda, eyeing Thera, “We all are. Aren’t we?...”

Said Ay, barely keeping up. “Well, for the time being at least. Ouff!”

Thera took in with a growing wonder the new chiton but was slow to acknowledge Zelea’s nearby smile.

A courier then arrived with a message for Ay. On reading the note Ay’s features hardened. A new silence pervaded the terrace. Abruptly he swept from his seat with lather still on his face and entered the central hall. Half a minute later his servants saw his chariot leave in a dust cloud for the palace. The gatekeeper too seemed surprised.

Tiye paced the loggia that overlooked the Summer Pool when he arrived. The Chancellor stood nearby. A distant crane vented a call for a mate. Tiye spoke up immediately. “The cat has pulled a fast one.” Ay was puzzled, mutely shrugged as Tiye continued. “She dumped her family. Yes her! Nefertiti you lunkhead. Adopted the Gyre Uraeus as her benefactor and guardian.”

Ay was even more baffled, but managed to wonder aloud, “How do you do that? Is it important?”

The Chancellor too faintly shrugged.

Tiye glowered and audibly cleared her throat. “Someone who’s up on older social codes must have slipped in a hint or two. It’s not a commonplace rite. It dates from the Ahmose reign when many families were indicted for treason.”

Ay smarted. “You can’t think -- one of my staff?”

Said the suave Chancellor, “What about the Glaean — she’s up on court formalities by now I’m sure.”

Said a cautionary Ay, “Not that historic. And she’s been with Seda and the others all week. No, must be some disgruntled or impoverished scribe.”

“Well it’s done. And she co-opted Kiya into the bargain — as the facilitator and witness. That Mitanni brat. Somehow they got to the chapel seal. Thereby hangs a tale. We’d best look to nobbling the consequences. Well don’t stand there like a bird-soiled pylon -- find out where she’s gone! Nefertiti you dimwit.”

By then Ay and the Chancellor were alarmed. ‘Nobbled’ in the queen’s special parlance meant a discrete decisive removal. The consequential alternative.

A mere two hours earlier, according to Tiye’s tipsters, in a complex, screened rite of passage, Nefertiti formally ended her childhood and her family indenture by adopting the protection of the double Uraeus, the empire cobra in its guise as sentinel protector and late Great Enchantress. By doing so, she might eschew her humble family (one of the ill-provided royals) and seek a new alliance, given her new stature, a discrete formal liaison

and betrothal to the Prince. Her infra dig escutcheon would no longer be a caveat in her suitability. If the rite was old school and cryptic, a judicial council would be challenged to revoke it. Kiya, who briefly interrupted her travels, presided as Isis with her timeless rattle. The ring she obtained in the temple where her Naucratis instructions were imparted was, unknown to Tiye, a close match to the chapel seal. With some amusement Tiye learned from one spy (who was secreted in an adjacent loggia watching a smuggler's towpath at the time) that Nefertiti's voice had a catch in it the morning she recited the incantation. Ay and the Chancellor were with Tiye when the spy was ushered in. Tiye had the paraphrased exchange between Nefertiti and Kiya repeated several times. The reader was a natural mimic. Nefertiti had spoken first, reciting the opening incantation.

'Greatly praised, Mistress of the Sycamores, Premier Best Wife of the King, may she live...' When the rattling stops it's over yes?

Well, you kiss the snakes; don't worry, they're stuffed. Just ignore the stench.

I feel a bit of a fool. My pushy family. Going off like this.

One more stanza and you're home free. Quite literally.

It's all been written out.

And will be promptly registered.

I won't forget this Kiya.

Don't worry, they'll come to their senses. It's a start.

If Tiye was miffed by the clever summary act, which would require a lengthy court examination to untangle, her unease soon devolved into sus-

picion. Kiya's participation was a further concern. The Mitanni appeared to be siding with a new coalescing faction. The Chancellor was particularly entertained by her personification in the rite. Isis indeed! "Curious that Nefertiti's family members were not present. Are they so clan-ish, bigoted? Envious? Or just apprehensive?"

Tiye managed a rare audible snort. "There are some things that brood doesn't want public -- their ignorance or sufferance of this sub rosa enactment is a clue. There can be no other explanation. She has been shrewd, I'll give her that. By adopting the Gyre Uraeus — alien to her family's escutcheon — she is free of their circumstance and not formally bound by the woman's house protocol. With the Prince's patronage she can set up her own household. Yes, I know, I was nodding." Ay barely smiled, given over to a flinty stare as Tiye continued. "Now she is free to seek a liaison and betrothal with the Prince on her own terms. I am, yes, at last convinced he's infatuated with her, for the least admirable reasons of course. But he's not yet King and the rules of engagement here allow for a tribunal to vet the attributes of a peeress consort until he is.

Said an absorbed Ay, almost as an aside, "Rather academic though. For he can wait until his majority. Moreover, the King, as the Aten may elect, could pass on any day now. The sober actuality."

Promptly Tiye averred. "And then he may not. And if there is some monkey business about her nature, he's in a pickle. It's a gamble. The stakes, for now, still reside with the observant minders. However 'academic' as you sometimes say."

For a time the three looked like idled envoys. The Chancellor was the first to resume. “So: a new regal peeress with registered title -- a sculptor waiting to strike a bust or two.” Tiye added a footnote. “Affirmed by the Prince’s old tutor, to his hall’s dismay -- the Prince’s dandy wry necks are stumbling over themselves to, well, ‘titivate’ his instincts.” Dryly Ay noted, “And then they become betrothed. Sooner than later. Sounds like we’re licked.”

Again, as she sometimes did, Tiye paused to swat an insect, hiding her pique, then dramatically changed the subject. “How’s our champion God-head Warrior shaping up anyway?”

The Chancellor nodded with amiable concern. “Well, he’s not given up, not entirely. The early tears have long since dried, I’m told. So he is putting forth an effort. Incidentally, one story making the rounds bears repeating, involving the group the Nefertiti hangs out with. I mention it now because it points to the ease with which she can be spied on.”

“That’s as maybe. We must proceed as planned.”

But the Chancellor welcomed a good story to ingratiate himself and cleared his throat. “To continue, if I may: The old eunuch someone elected to inform Lady Nefertiti of her recent preferment in the entertainment troupe is a clumsy near sighted fellow who, while seeking her out in that secluded pavilion she sometimes haunts, managed to blunder into a chamber that’s also used as a lounge and fitting room for of the Prince’s performers, where he promptly stomped on her toe. Being a fine sluggard

he managed to communicate his message despite fact the cat and her attendants were mainly undressed.”

“Yes. ‘Mainly’.”

“When they asked him how he would conduct himself under a similar advisement, he mimicked a swimmer and declared ‘I would glide — as a swan’. Dead silence but for a few snickers; the number they were rehearsing featured a wounded swan! The following burst of laughter left the messenger quite flummoxed, and he walked into a messy wardrobe in his haste to leave. A lively commotion followed. He was seen hurrying down a peristyle corridor wearing a mask the Prince once had given to Zelea. It took him a time to release it apparently. Coated with honey inside.”

Tiye added, “A hazing he won’t soon forget. The performers themselves were greatly amused. We have the text of their after words.”

Ay smiled at the Chancellor, saying, “Thera, who’s one of the wardrobe mistresses, listened in.”

The Chancellor grinned. “I’m all ears.”

“Of course you are.” Tiye then read aloud from a papyrus scroll.

Is he really blind, or just an old jewel thief?

He’s a star gazer.

What’s a star geezer?

Star gazer. With salty eyes.

A peeper?

A nose that sees.

And can’t smell.

Listen to his salutation to the neat Nefertiti.

*‘Queen of heaven, thrillingly alive, may she live forever,
beautiful child of the Disc. Daughter of unbounded time and Sovereign Sun..her moves
ever celestial...’*

He went on for about a minute. Inspiring quotes from all over the place.

He always was a windy old fart.

Fine old baby pooh.

The air is full of remembrances.

His worshipful backside is a celebratory hippo cake.

Our lessor Osiris mystery.

Said a sagely smiling Ay, “Such antics seem endemic these days. Finding for the Prince and his minions, in whatever area, is a popular antic. Our Amunie shills pretend to brazen it out. So we’re getting there. Our witling Prince will come round when he realizes we’re the only durable audience he has.”

Tiye fetched a second papyrus roll from a stilted cabinet. “I have something on that score. One of my ears has given me a very late exchange.” Again Ay smiled, lamely this time. Tiye continued without acknowledging the moue. “My clerk jotted down a few of the comments — words between a Shardana captain and the Prince’s steward. The captain is particularly candid.”

He’s a wuss and a kook. Look at him. What a combination.

He has got a savvy regard of the Aten, and the current debate.

I’m sure he does. All I can say is I hope Tiye lives forever, and that she chooses his ministers with the same care old Amenhophis did in his heyday.

So we can count on you then...to stay the course.

Just don't let him off his chariot — in public!

That's a tall order.

Ay was quick to add, “The initial handiwork, all things considered, is bearing fruit. The training has knocked some of the stuffing out of him — taking it on the chin in the exercise yard. For too long he’s slighted his prospective role as Seth’s Conquerer, and senses a lack. Shardana bone crushers can have that effect.”

“Let’s hope so.”

“The ‘nutmeg cuties’ he calls them. Not to their face, of course.”

“Let’s hope this new ‘comer’, this crafty Nefertiti, has such a sense of humor. She’ll need it.”

What followed in the ongoing roundabout was Ay’s staging of an ‘empty street’, as it came to be called, which followed hard upon the hour the Prince toiled so earnestly to placate his warrior Shardana mentor. The ‘empty’ part came during Nefertiti’s conveyance in the royal sedan chair to a tomb dedication. She had anticipated many eager, curious onlookers, whereas the concourse to the shrine was deserted, suggesting she might be a nullity after all, a non-entity for Amunie diehards and their bullish marshals. Her two bearers, from the Prince’s household, seemed unconcerned. (What she didn’t know was that Ay’s own marshals had cleared the passage corridor of all but a few select onlookers. Her bearers would discretely relate the scene to Ay later that day.) Said the lead bearer to Ay

after the incident. “She sensed a lack right off I think. But remained composed.”

“Let me know all you can remember. In real time parlance.”

“Of course.”

The request lent a sense of high drama to the transcription. Late gloaming sunshine filled Ay’s formal audience chamber, as if the two bearers and Ay were fixed in amber. The walls teemed with a colourful array of dancing consorts alive in lambent tresses and love locks. (It was one of Ay’s fancies to decorate this chamber as the Prince might have.) The lead bearer cleared his throat and keened his voice before beginning.

“‘It’s very quiet’, the peeress said. She whispers to herself sometimes — but this she said aloud. My partner behind said, ‘The matins prayer rite for the town folk is always so, ma’am. Still not used to the new openness.’”

“‘We’ve not disturbed it I trust,’ she answered. Kind of snooty like.”

“‘All for your taking in, ma’am,’ I said. I think she wasn’t all that enthused with this comment. For I remember some occasional voices we could not quite place, likely in the nearer peristyles, the dark tone in them real enough — sort of like a distant enemy army camp.”

Ay smiled. The distant rumble was obviously well performed by his planted hecklers. Just audible to the intent listener. “Can you recall the words — of this group?”

The chief bearer looked at his assistant. “We did our best, Eminence.”

“Proceed.”

“They weren’t all that kind.”

“Proceed.” The bearers exchanged glances, then one began sotto voce.

So she’s on her way.

The sunny boy ‘best wife’. Boy Oh Boy.

Tiye will make arrangements; she always has.

So what will they do, moon the Sun Disc?

Good luck buddy.

You too, eh?

With arch looks like that, what do you think?

The sun shy daughter of a sun burned clan.

Her red faced family now out to lunch. Daughter’s gone off. Poor fobs.

On the whole Ay was pleased. The scenario he worked out with Tiye was being played out with satisfying sureness.

Some comments though the bearers kept to themselves. They had long since learned how to talk in discrete tones when by themselves. Waiting for her return from the ceremony they genially conferred -- a brisk banter that was logged by Ay’s twosome in the peristyle crowd, though they couldn’t identify the specific speaker!

Ay put his trust in many ‘ears’.

Well, she’s light as a feather and sits still, unlike the old guy.

So she is in balance then, so to speak, this dolled up feather.

Like sand in your face, these toffy bell weathers. What they can’t stir up when they put their minds to it.

They say she’s accomplished, and an Aten devotee. Which on top of her being a special lad will be an adventure.

They never take cover, lapwings like her. Always on the fly. She'll be off in a month on some kiss-the-stone hello-everybody trip. Mark my word.

How soon do you think?

I give you a month, even odds, a stater a week.

You're on.

Here she comes, and we're off again to the carver. What's his name, Tuthmosis. One more frickin' bust.

Make that two staters.

Days later, in Tuthmosis' cluttered workshop, it was apparent from Tiye's icy silence, and the Vizier's belated dismay, that the latest bust was unacceptable...too lifelike, the pectoral chosen too significant...while the young Nefertiti, her face fresh and natural as a spring flower, sat through it all, bemused, eyeing her vexed sculptor without, perhaps, actually seeing him. She was the first to test the frigid waters.

"Well, I think it's lovely. An improvement even."

Snapped Tiye, "No one asked for a middling opinion."

The Vizier, in his usual insular abstracted state, as if arriving at a shrewd conclusion, said, "It can be a matter, at this juncture, of accommodating the new vernacular; the face as the Aten would leave it, yes?"

Tiye snorted. "You've finally scraped acquaintance with the Deity then."

Said Tuthmosis, "Not 'scraped' — smoothed, chased. As in 'burnished'".

“Give a listen to the flatterer!”

The Vizier faintly nodded. “Less familiarity would leave the clerics less suspicious, less wary. Something to consider.”

“Exactly.” Both Tiye and the Vizier looked at Tuthmosis.

Tuthmosis whispered to a non-existent fourth presence, knowing Nefer-titi must hear him. “Worried they have an individual on their hands.”

The Vizier added, “I think so — an icon, not a familiar visage, to be frank.”

To Tuthmosis Tiye said, “So get on with it.”

The next week Ay stopped by to see the latest effort. At least with Ay Tuthmosis could talk. They had a mutual interest in royal renderings. A breeze off a neighboring brilliant kamut field keened the air.

Said Ay, “The pectoral itself is devised then from a stitched fabric?”

“The heavy saffron thread is closer in appearance than resort to an intaglio, and matches the link stitching quite well — for the matrix model you understand. Yet this too may be nixed.”

“Why do you say that?”

Tuthmosis frowned. “Tiye’s beset with the eyes and skin. The one out front is the most realistic — the waxed colors were blended very carefully. She’s gamin, light skinned, oval eyed and usually looking down. But they want a severe look — straight on. I may have to flatten, harden the eyes again. And deepen the color.”

“Pity. But why not a more natural face?”

“‘We need a totem, not a sprite; something to inspire awe,’ the Vizier said. Or something like. After getting his ducks in a row. A bust you can adapt to another, I guess.”

“Yes, Tiye sometimes talks to the Vizier.”

As they duly regarded the bust, Ay with an amused alertness, Tuthmosis a prosaic wariness, Tuthmosis was the first to speak.

“I don’t think Tiye much cares for the creature. The bust will probably never see the light of day, yes? This one anyway. Too inquisitive I think. Too alert.” A further laden silence followed before he continued. “I’m struggling with the eyes on this one. Flatten them some more I’m told. Wants to render her as a sphinx if you ask me. A haunting, goading pain in the ass. Fear, not family. See the one in the back. Nixed.”

Ay was quick to respond. “Oh I think not. This current example is much more genteel than that; you’ve really done a splendid job, under trying circumstances.”

Tuthmosis grunted, yet seemed unconvinced. “I think things now have everybody a little head up. Like that notorious glass story.”

“My god, you’ve heard that up here?”

“The virtuosic gossips -- that someone pays well.”

Ay briskly added, “I think we should down play it. For now. It could be just some back parlor talk. I think so.” Tuthmosis knew when to keep his council and curtly nodded. By then the exceptional and peremptory story of the coloured glass had been severally ‘outed’, an event that put al-

most everyone on their guard. Such events send one scrambling and often leave a destructive swell.

Said Tuthmosis, with wry finality, “The glass...needs a pass.”

“Medju’s ju ju glass. Now a kind of epiphany in *some* quarters.”

“Barely news, let alone an epiphany. If people were more observant of common, mundane events.”

Ay smiled. “Difficult for an unfledged royal. Or an Amunie.”

“And deadly for a mere artist.”

Ay easily smiled.

The story of ‘Nefertiti’s glass’, as it came to be known, was kept low key at first. It began with her discovery one day of a strange fragment from a broken hyaline vase which ignited her curiosity, also the superstitious bent she tried very hard to conceal. At the time she was particularly sensitive to all incidents that might disparage her worship of the Aten and her place in the Prince’s entourage. Stolid Medju, an adjutant adopted by Nefertiti at Kiya’s suggestion, was confronted with the item in a private chamber, after being sworn to secrecy. Ay, as it turned out, happened to be standing behind a ceremonial dais colonnade examining an old rare Aten cartouche he’d discovered, and overheard the exchange. He would need no reader to recall the encounter. Nefertiti then vaunted the raiment of a Best Wife, and was an understudy for the reading of the Prince’s late dramatic poem to the Godhead. Medju appeared humbled by her newly

vivified presence, but was soon distracted with the confounding glass she brought him.

“Where did you find this?”

“Among the pieces of a broken vase. An expensive piece. The servant fled in panic I think. One of the newer translucent materials. But that’s not why I’ve asked you to come. Please note that when a shard is poised obliquely, like so, does it not show a multiplicity of colours — even in this sliver of skylight? It is even more brilliant in raw sunlight -- as at the Window of Appearances.” She continued to ignore Medju’s puzzled frown. “Should light from the Aten be so varied? So diverse? At first I wondered if I was seeing things. But I see you see it too.” A brief silence swaddled the room. “Could it be an Amun trick do you think? To disparage the Aten’s unity.”

Medju was all but loath to proceed, having been embarrassed by freighted questions before. And this seemed a doozy.

Nefertiti soberly continued. “The unity of the Aten might be questioned. In some minds.”

“And you think this oddity a problem — this show of many tints?” Medju’s face then was lined with concern.

“Well it is a curiosity. The glass itself is nearly clear, free of defects. As the Aten is, and must be. So where would the color come from if not the Aten? The darker tones especially.”

“Hum.”

“A rainbow of color from some angles. Yet if the Aten’s golden rays can be so disparate, so fragmented...should one not be concerned?”

Medju was still uncertain how to proceed and fearful the question might be a test. “You haven’t shown it to anyone else?”

“No. As you know Kiya said I might trust you.” They exchanged candid glances. Menju scratched his bald dome then studiously relaxed as an out came to him.

“Could it not be a — a triad: Osiris and fair Isis with young Horus — together in the Aten!”

“So one might, could think. But sometimes you see more than just three.”

Medju however was on a roll. “Why then...children, many children...kids make you see color, no? Some days, anyway.”

They both smiled, Nefertiti mainly to herself. “Most days, I should think. But humor begs the import, does it not?”

Medju kept up his thoughtful sanguine pitch — as if his life depended on it. “I think a triad is a good bet and, well, a retinue...which the Aten reveals to his chosen few. Yes, I think so. Such beauty cannot surely be other than a heavenly assortment of beings.” With each word his satisfaction grew apace. Was he not mastering royal speak after all?

“If but one may be assured.”

“You’ve been most observant, my lady. But it is surely a blessing. The wonder itself is a happy omen.” He was relieved to find this comment agreeably received and his interlocutor resigned if not consoled.

With daunting frankness she said, “It was a curiosity, rarefied to be sure. One you take up on a slack day. You’ve been a help.”

“They fairly dance, the colors.”

“In the rising heat yes.”

“Well then.”

“A curiosity. But not perhaps an issue. Not now at least.” She eyed Menju with a rare intensity.

“A most arresting find. You can count on my complete discretion ma’am.”

“Thank you. There seems to be a lot going on these days. What others may take from it.”

“My Lady, I keep my council.”

In the ensuing silence Medju easily bowed and took his leave. He felt Ay should be told but wanted to maintain the confidence of the Prince’s new favorite and resisted the temptation. He was also afraid that there was more to the separation of colors than was salubrious for a bold messenger. But what neither Medju nor Nefertiti knew was that the exchange had been overheard by an Amunie priest as well as Ay. On his way to a seminar the priest had passed along a loggia above the ceremonial dais. In the ensuing days, the story of the ‘stained’ glass prompted many tongues to wag outside the royal court — a development that strafed when Tiye and Ay learned of the ‘other’ witness. Medju, after learning of the story’s ‘outing’ waited with heavy head for the Amunies to seize this opportunity

to slur and perturb the Aten, mock its unity, and sensed a raw entanglement for himself. The waiting alone became a curse.

For his part, Ay was frequently seen cooling his heels — as often as not by himself in one of the water-garden pools, with perhaps a lutist nearby lining the breeze along with neighboring birdsong. This day, an Aten priest, one of the newly vetted cadre Tiye had conscripted, sought an audience, and stood over Ay's shoulder in a thoughtful stance. Ay got along with the man and believed him adept with incommodious details. The day was astral bright and razor clear, the distant livid Nile ribboned with parrot green. The crops would be exceptionally bountiful that year. They talked for a time about some newly proposed levies for the royal archives. The priest then got to the heart of the matter.

“Tiye, you say, doesn't like her.” The priest seemed skeptical.

“Pah. Old hat stuff, the carping — too gamin, sly, not womanly enough for a nubile Aten consort. And now this glass business — an iffy game piece if ever. A tail in a gate. Mazy words invite gossip. Ignorance is a noisy pig.”

“She could stop the marriage then.”

“Difficult to say. The Prince dotes on her and she will, or has become, Tiye's rein on the Prince — for the time being. He's not King yet. Tiye could still send her packing. Footling stuff really.”

“Though not for long.”

“She's a sensible if not cagey girl. Knows her Amunies I think, their distrust

and shrewdness. She is a newcomer after all. Anyway, Tiye has plans to make her life exacting. Particularly now. You know Tiye. Always a late entrance test. This glass thing has upped the ante. Firmed up the test, so to speak. ”

The priest did a double take. “How exactly a test? Not surely the canard over her normality — the ‘Goddess not a Goddess’ caper? You’re pulling my leg?”

Ay closed his eyes, venting a fat breath. “The Aten triad itself must *look* incarnate. Of the flesh. Reflected in the disc. She more, perhaps, he less.”

“At this Window of Appearances — two Gods — boy wonders. Is that the nub?”

“Well, it’s being said he looks more like the female. The problem ‘glass’. The ‘medley’ of tones. The specious shades.”

“By whom?”

Ay looked up with arid incredulity.

“Ah yes. Them.”

“Yes. Them.”

“The Amunies she calls them. I believe.”

Ay smiled and took up the thread. “The interest ignited by Kiya’s and Asya’s teams throughout the Kingdom lit the fuse. The populace fancies a reprieve, a bit of revelry, wants some unfettered benevolence — especially an end to the bickering. But in time it will also want a return to the familiar — to the stability of unification. Solidarity among the orders. Even if

the Aten thrives for a time, as it will, the knives will be waiting. This glass thing opens the evil eye.”

“They’re both talented misfits. And when he’s King, look out. Is that it?”

“Well, it’s them or the Amun soreheads for now; Tiye’s determined to end their growing hegemony. The Aten rite will rival and even eclipse theirs, at least in the short term. As for Nefertiti, despite her willingness to play along with the Prince’s cadres, Tiye may yet find some disqualifying attribute.”

“So -- that stray epicene rumor -- the dress thing?” The priest was enjoying this.

“It’s balderdash of course, but Tiye’s not ruling out any pretext right now.”

“Pretty hard to stick though. Even as rumor.”

“Well, these things can lead to other things. It’s a small world.”

“And you still think the Amun synod may consider an accident, even a death? The word is out.”

“It’s something Tiye must reckon with. The Amun heads will tolerate Nefertiti as long as she vexes Tiye; but they won’t accept her as a First Best Wife should Tiye seem weak before the Prince — should the old King die tomorrow say. So who knows. I’m sure they already have a plan in place.”

“I thank you for your forthrightness. You seem resigned.”

“It’s a pretty common presumption. In general terms. How it plays out is the puzzle. The factions will soon be plain enough. No Aten Prince

will be facilitated by the synod. Particularly a teenage Prince. Let alone his new consort as potential Best Wife. The glass thing has warped the Aten's unity, purity. In some eyes."

"I understand."

"I sincerely hope so. The ambiguities stall any rash action -- for now. But the lines are drawn. The Amun synod's lust for power seems inexhaustible. They see themselves as the sanctified power."

"Perish the thought. But how will Tiye manage? What can she do?"

"Well, impertinence is never really out of fashion. We fashion reality out of fashion. The Aten will need a Goddess. Immutable, unambiguous. The look may be the key. It may all come down to a fashionable presence... to as flimsy a matter as a suitable gown."

"Gown? You mean what they're calling 'bafflegarb'?"

"Both. For now. Again the revealing look. The polished mirror image."

"You've lost me."

"You must listen more carefully to the surrounding echoes. Worrisome words from a rival are often taken more earnestly than candid ones from a friend."

"I'm not sure I know what you mean."

"Good. Then you can't quote me."

"This Best Wife *image*...it has something to do with perception — with some fashion jape? Something to do with a look — a gown you say? For a Goddess?"

“How quickly we catch on.”

“A lavish, colourful...arresting look? A new frock. For a Best Wife Queen.”

Ay dryly smiled and waved for the lutist, who had interrupted her playing, to continue. “‘Arresting’ for whom is the question. The ramifications ever require defining.”

The priest congenially smiled. Ay, he knew to be a clever politic player, and Queen Tiye their lone bulwark against the aggrandizement of the Amun priesthood.

The matter of the ‘Goddess gown’ had become an in-house fixation when Nefertiti showed up at the royal fashion studio to select and be fitted for a new trousseau — one of the perks that came with her new status, however problematic that status seemed to some at court. Seda, the reigning couturière, was celebrated as an incomparable genius at court. She was also a perceptive, politic woman, aware of the special staging the palace envisaged for the Window of Appearances -- a consignment she felt must be broached straight away, and was thus relieved to find that her client, who plainly coveted a haute ensemble, eager to facilitate it. Knowing Seda to be a secret tribade, Nefertiti hoped she’d be no less inspired. Arriving early she easily removed her traveling cape to stand before her designer in a chaplet and spare schenti. So determined was she to stanch the scurrilous rumors that she debated removing the schenti. It would be the first time she ventured so in public yet decided against the act — as solici-

tous — and lightly smiled at Seda who also smiled while savouring the hesitation. Her attendants had been instructed to keep their discourse circumspect and businesslike. “She has a beauty the true connoisseur must treasure. Any untoward comment outside these walls and you’ll find yourself working in the village laundry.”

To Nefertiti she said, “Thank you for coming early, and letting me study you so; it does help immeasurably.”

“Not at all.”

The couturier slowly walked about her subject, after asking Nefertiti to raise her arms above her head.. “The upraised arms, to enjoin the Aten’s rays, will alter the tie placements of course. But that shouldn’t be a problem. Your shoulders are comfortably wide.”

“I greatly admire the new jubilee robes for Queen Tiye. They are much envied at court.”

“I must say I am advised to entertain more spare designs that bare much of the figure...I’m relieved you’re amused.”

“I’ve always wanted a wardrobe by you and would not limit it to just that now. Gossips never lack for spare material, as they say.”

“Splendid. I’ve many designs to show you, and we’ll try them all. I’ve brought one of my Greek servants to help with the lighter gowns. She’s about your size and you’ll be able to see the frocks on a live figure. A display that should help in arriving at the final look.”

“Excellent.”

“May I assume that what you have on constitutes the ‘irreducible minimum’ as they say? Though most everyone knows Tuthmosis wants to do you unclothed.” With fine heedful circumspection she eyed her presiding attendants. She knew the prospect must appeal to the new consort, for such a sculpture would stanch some of the mischievous gossip.

Nefertitti shrugged, looked down, intimating indifference. “Well, I prefer to see your creations, not me. I know that some recent fashions are audacious, even rather salacious, but it’s surely a fad.”

“Some of the latest haiks are also very close fitting. The newer fabrics allow more movement, and a few clients like the natural contour.”

“That’s fine for some items.”

“Some traditions celebrate the figure itself more than others.”

“Some, yes.”

“So. Let’s honor the Ankh.”

In due course many ensembles were considered, showcased by the Greek model, some of which were fitted onto the regal subject. A portion of these were later selected for preview at the palace, six of which Nefertiti modelled herself in the palace woman’s house. Tiye and the Chancellor, who sat in on the showing, took in the enthusiastic applause with admirable composure.

Said a sober Tiye, “A disaster — does she think she can upstage the Prince? The cat.”

The Chancellor seemed pleased. “I’m told she likes the simple ribbed linen one.”

“What she likes...don’t be coy with me you old ram.”

“Just trying to ‘skirt’ the dilemma as you call it.”

“It’s more apparent than ever that she’s not flesh to flesh out the Aten. For that you need, must I say it again, a singularity she clearly lacks. What she likes.

“She does have a fine belly — sunny side up division.”

“She is a boy. His chest is way bigger than hers.”

“Necessarily a drawback is it?”

“I am surrounded by apes and peacocks.” Tiye was playing her offensive cards that day.

“A pretty thing tho. Why not put him in a breast plate or a cuirass? He could use some manly appurtenances.”

“He is a God first, a Warrior second — and only when He slights being a God. The Omniscient Godhead does not heft mundane battle armor.”

“Yes, of course. Pity though.”

“And she eschewed the new materials.”

“What was that?”

“The new materials -- she avoided them entirely.”

“The ones that look like congealed palm oil?”

“The patterned haiks that are all the rage. That flatter almost any good, healthy, unambiguous figure.”

“Ah. The moon maidens.”

“So what does that tell you, scribe?”

“I must admit you’ve left me.”

“About wanting only your least serviceable attribute noticed?”

“A rare example of modesty?”

“It means she may have something to hide.”

“Ha, ha, ha. That old niggling slander. Pah. Such a duck would be ‘out’ by now.”

“Tell me of a better reason? Modest the cat is not.”

The Chancellor shrugged. “You feel the Amunies breathing down your neck don’t you? This way you pretend to at least entertain one of their crazy goose concerns. But is it not a little forced? A bit too precious? Also, it does seem a bit late in the day. For such a craven assessment.”

Tiye eyed the Chancellor with guarded satisfaction. “We’ll see.”

“How indeed will you proceed?”

Tiye indulged or feigned a momentary abstraction. “I think we call in a reliably preposterous medicaster -- our mad, suspicious in-house Amunie; it’s time this ‘boy’ was exhumed. A near and dear concern of his.”

“Ha. Even if the concern obtuse.”

“Seeing is believing. In the red eye sense. For our near sighted friends.”

“You’ll cane the gull after of course.”

Tiye narrowed her focus. “With a clenched hand.”

“Indeed.” The Chancellor smiled. “Well, she is cute. You’ll need a dispassionate witness, of course. I’m available.”

“‘Dispassionate’, yes.”

“A very private undertaking I presume. To keep up the pretence for as long as possible.”

“Don’t be impertinent.”

On ‘what happened next’, it was chary Thera, one of Ay’s new ‘eyes and ears’, who logged in her diary the choice scuttlebutt as she conversed with the staffers who were not dismissed the night Tiye ‘put her foot down’. The diary was first shown to Zelea who gave it to Ay, who gave it to Tiye. Even the humbler servants who were sent off managed to hang around, waiting for some tidbit of scuttlebutt. A nosy supervisor in the cosmetic and unguent stores, hand picked by Tiye herself to ‘spy on’ the proceeding, was a lead disseminator and hence jealous of her information and censorious of all prattlers, most of whom recognized her as a central but stolid and suspect witness. Shortly after the fated exam a klatch of rumour mongers gathered at a near fountain house to compare notes and rile a few sensibilities. After a few peremptory quips, the supervisor began, affecting an earnestness that slowly entertained.

I couldn’t see everything from my vantage point, but I know they carefully assessed her — her speech, bearing and mannerisms, acumen with prayer points, court etiquette, household knowledge and experience, and yes, the rumour of her of her being, well, an ambiguity, at least for Tiye’s Amun ‘fire proofer’.

The eagle eye who can’t see. But only taste.

Whatever that means.

Such delectable contrariety she is mistress of.

Come on you two. She can spot a harp polisher a mile away.

Our fine far sighted Queen.

Blind as a water jar when she chooses. Thinks it politic to do so.

After the sniggers waned the supervisor continued buoyantly. Though not for long; the eager prattlers were soon upstaging all reasoned assessments. Their comments later echoed through many naves and peristyles confirming the nimble gossip Tiye relied on. Despite the supervisor's tact and overall sensibility, it was the 'broad analysis' that acted as thermals for the storm petrels. The question of the 'ambiguity' upended all reckonings. Sooner than later the supervisor conceded that Nefertiti was at one stage 'wearing a lone smile'.

Well Tiye was desperate wasn't she, with all the Amunies crying foul. The insult alone would be a sop to some of them. When they seethe they see what they must.

So were they disappointed finding her so normal?

I heard the quack had her masturbate, so as to detect any irregularity in her manner. Well yeah, men do it different.

Oh gawd, you people. That's nonsense.

I heard he goosed her standing up and she was big as beer after.

Where do you nutters get such bilge?

Well we gotta make do with the scraps don't we.

In fact he asked her to recite some lines from the Book of the Dead. Fact.

Boring.

But wasn't she a little surprised when the priest handed her the text from the Hymn to the Aten? It's the hymn that the Prince penned a while ago. The rendition she expected to read was in fact re-written I understand, and she clammed up. Isn't that it?

Boy is that a show stopper.

No, let's hear it.

You're right: it's the part that begins, You are my beloved. There is none other that knows you except for your son Neferkheperure Waenre, whom you have made wise in your plans and might...living in truth.

Big deal.

It's the last line in that stanza that she balked at.

Maybe she just didn't give a hoot.

Oh go bake a brick.

No really -- it's something everyone noticed. She wouldn't read it. Said it was flawed. It begins — or is supposed to! — As for the King's Great Wife whom he loves, the Mistress of the Two Lands, Neferneferuaten-Nefertiti, may she live and flourish for ever and ever.

How in tarnation would you know that?

A friend assists the clerk who transcribed it. His eyesight is failing.

Lucky you.

So what didn't she like?

The text she had must have had another name for the Great Wife. And she didn't have the nerve or sense to read in her own name. She isn't a 'Best Wife' yet.

That's what may have happened. She saw it as a test.

Maybe Tiye had the text changed.

That could be. Yes. Or the Amunie prompter.

Or maybe an astral spirit.

Yes dough head.

They did have her stand with arms up for the Window thing. That much is for sure. You can't dodge that one.

It's the common rap for gazdsake. She lost it reaching for the Aten's horny rays -- the exhibit at the Window of Appearances. Big big handicap.

You two could harden the horns on a snail.

Come on you two, they were out of sight in the sanctuary by then. So who really knows.

And what would have been the point? What's obvious is obvious. The room was well guarded. So you guys are simply full of it. As usual.

Simple and full — hey Anubis.

As everyone knows, her belly is her best asset — that's why her new gowns may be open at the Sed festivals. She has great looking pubes too. Apparently.

How would a blind pig like you know that?

Especially from the front. I'll bet.

You birdbrains.

If you have to ask....

Would she really have agreed to all this -- the so-called ultimatum and all?

Tiye's not one you cavil with. Let alone argue.

I heard the quack still thinks they used beeswax or something.

For what, you idiot? I've never heard such drivel.

And you bunch really believe all this is so...and she agreed to it? Being subjected to such a rigmarole?

Well, many Gods and Goddesses are rendered and presented so, right? Bare ass cooties.

Someone had to see if she was the real thing. Well I guess.

She wouldn't do anything like that -- not in front of Tiye and the priest.

I heard Tiye got mad and sent the quack packing for insisting.

Oh come on; it's a seraglio pastime, for heaven's sake. You have no idea of the heavy tedium.

Lookit, if they examined her as thoroughly as you say — what would have been the point? She's a Ba bird, a 'soul' bird... for heaven's sake. Whatever.

I know they had her standing, turning around at one stage — to find the best vantage pose I suspect. For the Window. They had moved into the solarium then, and my friend could see a little from the West loggia.

That's where someone saw her give the quack her schenti and tell him to help himself.

That's just another canard. Even the guards backed the hall. And they were arm to arm. Your mind is a sewer.

Well maybe one guard's got eyes in the back of his head. Ever think of that?

You people. What do you do when your imaginations shut down — you actually have to do a day's work?

Boring.

Anyway, she seemed very tired then. Lots of people say that was when her maids started quipping. Thera, note, wasn't there then.

And that was when some of the silly stuff took place?

I say let's have it for the 'silly stuff'!

A friend's friend was behind the guards but claims the priest did look at her.

And demanded she do something -- couldn't see what it was. Several people must have seen and heard it. Her arms were above her part of the time — a total dare. I've heard it said.

Guess who by.

I heard the ghoul was perplexed. Quite oblivious to the antic disbelief he provoked. Tiye was playing all her cards. That's pretty well the story out there. Making the Amunie look like an imbecile.

Tailor made for gummies like you.

Not what I heard.

You hear what you fancy.

Well, Tiye got her needed reprimand — from a moron she could disown and rebuke later.

I wonder if she's a squirter. Like Lady Zelea.

You are the absolute limit.

Everyone that I've talked with left in awe of her overall beauty. She is, what is it -- a paragon -- as the Greeks say. A she-stuff boy, maybe, but a beaut.

So. She did? Goose herself? In the seraglio bumble bee way?

Oh piss off.

No. No. Come on. What did old tacky ask of her? One of you prune faces must know.

Pimple face, Tiye promptly kicked the lard ass out. Most people say so.

Not before he did his thing though I'll bet.

You're full of it -- and yourself.

There is something a nut cake like you might find titillating. Might. I honestly think Tiye was taken with Nefertiti. She is pretty nice, her skin entirely unblemished, her face and neck an artist's dream. The neck for one. Ask Tuthmosis. I did the modeling for her trousseau Seda designed. And Tiye we know likes Asya. 'The old and young forelegs' the old chatelaine used to say.

Still, I think Tiye must have been cautioned by the Amun ogre. She and Nef spoke briefly. My friend didn't hear what they said but Nef smiled she said. Tiye then carefully reconsidered which positions might enhance the look, which of the proposed angles best contoured the profile for one — she always looks a bit pregnant. Tiye and the Chancellor were nodding then, finely excusing themselves no doubt. Then, with the approved gown and pectoral they went directly to the rehearsal.

So she's in, then? You think.

Well, she's got a form and bearing any caring mother would be proud of. Period. Anyone who's spent time in the King's select chambers would know that. You people, really.

Someone said the Prince's attire exaggerated his manhood.

That's right -- change the subject.

Well it does, did — one of the big sporran things up front. Big as a sheaf!

Talk about bountiful.

So who attended the rehearsal at the mock Window?

Just Tiye's inner circle. Mutu did some last minute fiddling with both costumes. It was rather settled then. They tried a few more stances, listened to the director's ideas, left shortly afterward. A consensus.

So what in tarnation did the quack think he was there for?

It did seem that Tiye was determined when they began. Perhaps she just wanted an official provocateur to lead the way. To excuse, screen her own vexations. Flatter the Amunies. Delay the reckoning with the synod.

That's smart.

But why? Tiye could have asked any of us about her.

'Any of us' do not an Amun tribunal make.

And you think Tiye in the end was 'enamoured' by the spectacle? That's rich.

Boring.

Well, Tiye was seated before her. My friend said she couldn't see everything, but I can't imagine Tiye not reassuring herself the show was possible before they began the rehearsal, after which Nefertiti classically curtsied to the audience, a gesture that hugely entertained. Even Tiye could not suppress a grin. She really seduced all of them I think. She is a fine performer. An understatement. With a very dry sense of humor.

Well she has guts and poise. And moxie. Who of us could do as she did?

Out of one corner of the maze...yet feeling a fool, I expect.

Double boring.

The Prince's obviously infatuated with her. And was from the start I bet. But he had to play his little game too.

So the Aten has an Osiris and an Isis; can Horus be far off?...

Seda must be enjoying a big sigh of relief.

She is.

In the days that followed, Nefertiti and a close servant stole to a window analogous to the frame of the Window of Appearances in a deserted house some distance from the artist's village to effect a rehearsal of their own. The servant had told another that despite her apparent calm, the prospective Premier Best Wife was not looking forward to the first Sed festival — how she would be received by the general audience and so on. The window, curiously enough, overlooked the village of the tomb artists. The house had apparently been abandoned because of a sand-shift plateau. Nefertiti and her servant arrived by stealth, their bearers instructed to

stand watch some distance off. With a nimble wink to her servant Nefertiti put on a prototype of the gold flecked gown she would wear at the coming festival. As Tiye had directed, and Sedu fashioned, it was broached just below the breasts, all but hiding them, but fell open below with a high waist tuck, leaving her belly, pubes and thighs plainly visible from the front.

“A three-quarter profile the director suggested,” Nefertiti commented as she moved to stand in the unfinished window.

“Looking good from this angle, precious. When you’re preggo you’ll be a knockout a stadium away. Why the squint?”

“I think I must get Sedu to design some kind of eye shield for the crown — we’ll be squinting someday. Won’t we?”

“The special days the rays supposed to be behind love — the aura genius.”

“If they keep to the date marks. This time the late solstice I think.”

“Your audience will be doing the squinting then.”

“Some thinking we’re a ‘pair’, I dare say.”

“Well, Gods is Gods, I always say, and they do their own thing; it’s the cakes and ale the rest’ll be waiting for.”

“And not for long. If Tiye has her way.”

“Very savvy that. Is this then the last of the revised gowns?”

“It’s one someone elected at the last minute.”

“The Prince himself?”

“I don’t know. More likely Queen Tiye.”

“Who didn't fancy the idea of you being only half a goddess — which everyone with a tic's sense knows you ain't.”

“‘The sturdy connoisseurs,’ Ay ventured to me.”

“Ay's always stoked, and now his sister's eating regular he can get on with things. What's the matter now?”

“I hope we can get all the giggles out of the thing — too stately and everyone will be snickering.”

“That's the casual angle, right? A family sort of familiar but unholden... letting the golden Aten in...so unlike the ass end Amunies...always tucked away, out of sight...and groveling like a Hyksos captive before a marshal.”

“The golden opportunity.”

“Think of the many hands of the Aten. That should keep you alert.”

Nefertiti sighed. “So many many hands.”

Both women treasured their mutual laughter.

Ay, too, in due course, leisurely re-savored the details on the island shrine of a shaded garden pond. The queen sat opposite, still as a cat, revising the lines for a satrap stele while working on a letter to Asya.

“The Prince, I hear, went to Sedu himself.”

Tiye remained frozen in the moment. “It's a phase. ‘The interminable feast’, my dear husband was fond of saying long ago.”

“I take it the royal spirit is amused.”

“Well, let's hope she's pregnant by the coming Sed .”

“The rumors set it down as ‘an unprecedented possibility’”!

“Rumors! The excuse-ready innuendo. I think you’d better update your spies at the main Karnak temple.”

“I have. And they have.”

Tiye was a moment responding. “Well.”

“Our versatile priest has written out an approximate scheme — deduced from the few audiences he has attended. The synod is particularly vigilant these days. And antsy to act.”

“Do go over their plan again. Complications arise in the detail. I hadn’t expected this turn of events so soon. Someone there is keeping an eye.”

“Indeed. The Amunies, who’ve dealt with agile upstarts before, are apparently just now hatching a plan to embarrass both the ascendance of the Prince’s new consort and the court’s revivification of the archaic sun deity, the Aten.”

“A tall order. How, again?”

“By showcasing an Amun candidate whose presence removes all ambiguity about womanhood and the bane of mortality by rising from the dead!”

Tiye interjected, “Do that Nefertiti!”

“The staging of such a performance they trust will squelch any further royal dalliance with the ‘the Aten Phyrne’ — their esteemed phrase. Ephemera they deem her. The plan was suggested by a priest who had

been seduced-at-a-distance, so it's said, by the female in question. A priestess by the name of Uma."

"How ironic. Yes, continue. With your usual candour. Uma indeed."

"Uma, a Sacred Hearth priestess in the small Northern island Kingdom of Sythera in the Great Green Sea, is renowned for her beauty, her devotion to the Theban triad of Amun Mut and Khonsu, and her talent as a seer. Some say, according to the smitten priest, that in a little known competition convened by the Greek wonder boy Dionysus himself, with a Spartan beauty called Helen, Uma won hands down, but that the insignificance of Sythera was eclipsed by legendary Sparta and Helen's sensational philandering which trumped Uma's prosaic seemliness; the one a catalyst to a seismic war, the other a sustainer of equable serenity. More or less. The sensation jackals were naturally thumbs up."

"Such prattlers."

"One of the Amunies' Nubian heralds, the cagy but charming Ramsu, has been sent to the Sytheran court to extend an invitation to the priestess to visit the temple at Karnak. Considerable time has been devoted to advising her superiors about the dramatic role she could play in fostering the venerable religious tradition partly shared by the Sytheran elders — to say nothing of becoming a celebrated Best Wife. Needless to say her direct superior was a little wary at first, but an infusion of funds to refurbish a temple there helped her reconsider. Mulling over the prospect of the quiet sometimes woolgathering Uma becoming a Pharaonic consort, the superior at last discounted her misgivings. The laconic second-in-command in

the order, however, was a little less sanguine. Regrettably, my head snoop has it only second hand. He's talked with some Sytheran visitors here and believes the account given him plausible?"

"Always a risk, letting the bulkheads talk too much."

"I found it believable."

"Did you?"

"May help with estimating the wit of the candidate. And the mood of her order. Maybe she can be turned when she gets here."

"Keep to your devised script."

"I've penned two voices from my notes. A kind of 'socratic' dialogue between the two heads of the order. I image that Glaean you've taken under your wing would be a natural at this."

Tiye dourly smiled at her brother. "She does what's she told."

As much to tease his sister Ay intimated two distinct high-pitched nasal voices — ostensibly the head priestess of the Sytheran shrine and her second-in-command, his delivery beginning with subaltern.

It may be for the best: her presence here can be a distraction.

Her beauty, yes. A kind of vexation some think.

Which can impede the focus of the communion.

She is a willing performer.

Such beauty diverts the ritual.

In some minds.

The minds we should be concerned with.

Said Ay with mock commiseration, “Sounds like conscientious harpies to me.”

“Yes— what the Amun nitwits here honour.”

“Blessed be the nitwits.”

“I still think there’s more to it.”

Ay chuckled. “Women. Always hatching things.”

What Ay and Tiye could not entertain was the late crisis in the Scytheran worship itself, which they would learn after the fact. Curiously, the dilemma arose because the exceptional presence of Uma, a late remarkable initiate, created a situation that in its way mirrored the dilemma at the Egyptian court. Beauty or comeliness had never been problematic for the Scytheran temple’s directors. Or their ritual. A secret celebration to be sure, yet two of the senior priestesses had ever argued over the look of the rite as opposed to its substance, the undisputed essence of its worship. Growing out of the earliest fertility rites, tradition had fostered an exultation of the fertile archetype, the voluptuous feminine benefice, which in time of peace and plenty more or less absolved beauty of its peculiarity and taint, and lasciviousness of its extravagance. The celebration of life had thus devolved into a love of form, of grace and beauty — that might inspire sensuous art and ritual or indeed the wrath of a Spartan when his deme’s goddess heroine was sullied, resulting in a Trojan War. A consequence that can rally the former purists, the formalists.

“A mere veneer,” the second priestess was fond of saying, in reference to the late physical trappings of worship.

“Splendor elevates the soul,” the new head priestess would say in response, sustaining their socratic exchange.

“The soul needs to be chastened, not titivated.”

“It’s the celebration that keeps one hale and optimistic. We celebrate what we cherish.”

“If we lived forever.”

Apparently, according to the observer who briefed Ay’s spy, both priestesses usually ended talking to a third party despite the fact no third party would be present. Thus Uma’s coming to the order perplexed some members, alerted and amazed others. A few were exhilarated, one or two of these even smitten. Until her arrival most members had been happily stolid, unenvious participants -- being as it were mainly plain, pacific, generally grateful for the safety and camaraderie the order provided. Each might enjoy the other as they were without deference to a particular presence except on temperamental or health grounds. Then, with the coming of this singular visual wonder, their individual identity became somehow suspect, disingenuous, no longer benign. The easy near nudity of before — lustration too embodied a ritual — revealed now a demarcation, a parting of the conviviality. The irony was that Uma, at least on the surface, appeared devoted to the cult, her participation in its rites steadfast to the point of effacement. But as her girlhood metamorphosed into the present youthful splendor, the emergence of slackers, skeptics and com-

plainers became perceptible, spite and rancor loitering like a warm flush. Yet, for the more energetic and imaginative players, a new vista opened. Tales of an earlier hierodule (sapphic) period surfaced — when some remarkable aspirants helped fund the order -- to both wonder and condemnation. Hetaerae had attributes that tended to foil, out figure collegiality. Needless to say, the Elders readily delivered Uma to the Egyptian court, where sorceresses of all kinds were axiomatic, proverbial. Candour and expediency were never better matched.

In preparing for the move the Egyptian emissary learned that Sythera was a former Glaean ally and thrived in the sea supremacy of Glaea until the pirate Typhon enraged the Egyptians with his pilfering of aristocratic tombs, the spoils of which were secreted in some caves on Glaea. When the Egyptians invaded Glaea and established a viceroy, Sythera lost much of its sea lane protection and trade, leaving its temples and shrines impoverished, some unattended. Indeed, rumor had it that Typhon himself tried to abduct the peerless Uma but was thwarted by the arrival of the Egyptians.

When Uma arrived in a heavily escorted pentaconter, the flamen of the Amunies who was charged with receiving her, set about immediately to present her as a pre-eminent hierodule to the court. One with a gift for divination and enticement. Gossips thrive on imputation and aspersion — high or low. Soon Uma was performing clairvoyant feats in the manner of a Delphic Pythia (oracle), perched on an ancient stool raptly immersed in reaching *other world* communicants. Stories of some wondrous (finely engi-

neered) coincidences and predictions drew hoards of petitioners to her shrine. A remarkable creature, numinous and beautiful, whom no one would mistake for a lucky precocious urchin. If somewhat less deft and agile than Kiya, Uma's presence became more familiar, congruent. What a swank mortal might dream of as never before. Trouping her with the semblance of a royal entourage, this stand-in for a godlike Mut, was soon a gate mouth obsession.

Tiye's own wary interest and curiosity was taken as a plus by the Amunies. Recognizing in Uma a haunting and unambiguous Isis, Tiye was torn between abetting her enemies and convening the instatement of a suitable Best Wife. A sound orthodox Kingship might be retrieved, salvaged after all — initiating a truce that allowed both sides to pause and regroup. A close debate until the inimitable Uma began a series of problematic pronouncements about a certain sun disk that haunted the land, especially the provinces, and a potential ruler who was taken with its flashy tenuous nature. *Yes your son will survive provided the orb blinding the father is dimmed...yes the marriage will be a happy event if the pledge to a rash troupe of emissaries can be revoked...yes you will succeed if your lively daughter tends the hearth at home not the field shrine....* In consequence, Tiye's awe for the newcomer soon faded.

“They have enacted a strategy and drama with this trumped up divine that incites all touts, snitches and bellyachers. The impudence looms. The court itself is deemed a kind of pariah. In so many words — words as if from a deific spring. My son's harem has become a sub rosa amuse-

ment, the ‘limp wrist club’. My son, the Prince, is deemed the ‘nibbler’, the Aten a ‘pancake’.”

The Chancellor was amused. “Well, they will resist the tide. But none of them swim very well.”

“I want the name of that priest who spawned this last insult. Devise something special for him.”

“Just so.”

“Such precious tales they’ve concocted. Exploiting my son’s witless shenanigans. We can’t be complaisant here. You see well in the light of the Sun.”

“Usually.” Ay had been nodding.

Tiye scowled at her half-brother. “No special mention for scroll winders.”

The plan decided on by the Amun curia to thwart the progress of the otherwise sterile Aten entailed not only the celebrated coming of an unambiguous Mut or Isis, but a death and resurrection that would showcase a goddess incarnate — to confirm Uma’s status as a divinely apt consort, and italicize the Aten-fixated Prince’s lack of such a being — a plan that took some daring, to say the least. Tiye at first, being the cagy realist she was, scoffed at the idea, but came round when it became apparent the Amun planners were in earnest and bullish. “Desperate holders of lush sinecures are ever a menace,” she snorted. In due course the Amunie ruse was given the highest security priority by Tiye’s faction which duly set out to assemble a team of trusted agents, cryptos and saboteurs (if necessary),

including Tiye's select gadfly Zelea, who was verbally instructed by Tiye herself to a) scrape acquaintance with some Amun retainers, primarily the couriers, and b) inform Nefertiti of the need to avoid public outings for a time. "She is not in a competition. We must instead rally the Aten facilitators and converts. Our now implacable base." Zelea duly smiled, the new task newly arduous.

In point of fact, Tiye's daily exacting responsibilities were taking their toll, her mindful comments to Ay an index of the dramatic complexity. If he was surprised by the fuss Uma's coming caused he didn't let on. Tiye was vociferous enough.

"I remain vigilant with our sweet parvenu, less the fussy name the Vizier advised. Ankhkheperure Neferneferuaten! On its own, Nefertiti is bad enough, given the gunsels' looks. Yet she must not be slighted or snubbed at this stage. That would be a windfall for the synod blowhards."

Absently Ay replied, "Let them in on the closet embarrassment."

"To be countenanced in good time...you scroll winder. There is more than one game piece on a board. Asya's suggestion of staging a murder of our own has some merit. Yes, in a recent letter." Suddenly and swiftly Ay sat up, prompting Tiye to quip — "Make our 'nearest and dearest opposition' sit up and take notice. Make them doubly leery and wary. Up their protocol jitters."

"Yes I can see how that might happen."

"'Might.' You must get more sleep. You're beginning to nod like a retired nurse."

“Never a fear.”

“In the meantime, get Zelea to tell her of our wish to advance the instatement of the new exclusive crown. That smaller Uraeus feather thing. Not too imposing. We’ve little choice now — a concession that comes best from an outsider. How to keep everyone watchful.”

“Ha! So she’s useful again, this rib with the sweet Glaean name.”

“The cat will listen to our gadfly — a blow-in like herself. She knows Zelea is a court emissary now. And that a sanctified crown lives on. The Amunies don’t have an inviolate crown to pass on! Not yet anyway. Or retain canny connivers like you.”

“You don’t think they may recoil at such a maneuver? Regroup?”

“They will discover the sanctification after the fact.”

Ay was silent for a moment. “What do you do with Nefertiti after?”

“She’s merely a clotheshorse. The crown can fit many suitable heads.”

“She’s no fool.”

“I sincerely hope so. Death and Transfiguration is more than a parlour trick, as these arch Amunies will soon learn.”

“I must admit you’ve lost me. Who’s death and resurrection exactly?”

Tiye’s face muscles hardened. “On hearing of the dreamy Uma, Asya suggests we upstage the Amunies by performing a Death and Transfiguration of our own.”

“Good heavens.”

“After we get rid of Uma of course. The idea has legs. We give Nefertiti a new transcendent stature. Our hectic excuse making — is over,

lapses — finally. We must thank the Amunies and dear Asya for pointing the way. And pert Kiya. Leaving us the dramatic talent to pull it off.”

“Dear me.” After a double take he added, “You’re on.” When he looked up Tiye was regarding him with feral boredom. “Well, you are a frisky lamb to follow into a slaughter.”

Tiye snorted. “Such imposture.”

“The topical word!”

Providentially, the intervening days were parched by arid winds, which tended to reduce royal and palace activities in general. The air was sweeter in the upper sand-screened loggia where, on the designated afternoon, Zelea arrived to

advise Nefertiti about the compound strategy of upstaging the Amun ploy via the necessity of ‘making herself scarce’ for a time. Ay’s precious words. “In case the Amunies plan a second more permanent death.” The intricate plan was swiftly concocted, and literally incorporated an adroit parallel of the death and resurrection the Amunies envisaged. “A mouthful for some,” Tiye had said to Zelea, “and no one better than you to convey it.” By then Zelea was accustomed to Tiye’s habit of deft horse trading and suave understatement.

“A ‘manifest disappearance’ is the way Tiye put it,” Zelea said with some forbearance after her introduction to a heedful Nefertiti. “The period will allow the transformation — the ‘metamorphosis’ of a royal consort, Tiye said — and the unparalleled sanctification of her crown.”

Nefertiti silently considered the imputations for a minute then said, “The mazy surprises here. The new Amun candidate, the prodigious Uma, seems providential — for everyone. She lacks for nothing.”

“Except an ordained crown,” Zelea amiably added.

“Who would have imagined?”

They smiled at one another, a take on their thralldom to religious exploit. As much to herself Nefertiti said, “The implication is that I may be serving merely as a shill. To model the new crown. A necessary shill, but still a shill.”

“My lady, I’ve said what I know. Ay will have a caller here within the hour to detail the matter. He suggests you be alone.”

“The quiet here lets one alone.”

“My lady.”

Nimbly Nefertiti changed the subject. “You are Greek.”

“Glaean.”

“We have a mutual patron, I believe.”

Zelea faintly smiled.

“No, not another laden joke. Your island is ruled by an Egyptian Viceroy is it not? I’ve heard you were implicated in a plot to embarrass the first Viceroy, who was recalled.”

“Our island state was sacked by Egyptian mercenaries. A pirate who used caves on our coastline as storage caches, had stolen some royal Egyptian burial trophies.”

“But the Viceroy restored order did he not?”

“One of his children was murdered in a sanctuary on our island, and he undertook a wholesale purging of the Glaean aristocracy. My household was high on the list.”

Nefertiti paused before continuing, as if vetting a query.

“You were wealthy, were you not, and a widow?”

“Moderately wealthy, yes, by Egyptian standards.”

“They never did find the perpetrators — or the pirates.”

“No, my lady, I don’t think any were Glaean. The suspected pirate was Phoenician.”

“You would like to return to Glaea?”

“It is my home.”

After a protracted but not indifferent pause Nefertiti resumed in a low soft voice: “When this is over I’ll see what I can do. You have been direct with me and plucky in confounding the Amunies. There is much I wish to learn about the situate lands. That your community could exist without a steep hierarchy or omnipotent ruler is extraordinary. Your intrepid nature bears this out.” With a light smile she added, “And Glaean art work is engaging connoisseurs here.”

The implication of the last comment Zelea all but winced at. Yet managed to say, “I am grateful for your concern, and the return of my retinue.”

“Egypt well weighs all bona fides. The prudent covenant.”

Both women exchanged a wistful smile. Egypt, not its rulers, Zelea noted.

“Go in the peace of the Aten.”

As she left, Zelea was relieved Nefertiti had not mentioned the Prince’s involvement with his ‘Greek kore’. Still, she was not at ease over this lacuna. Unmentioned lapses tend to ferment and cause a stink later on. More than ever she was determined to put an end to the lascivious exploit once and for all. Though she could then think of no safe and lenient way of foiling it. His sly attentions of late had a desperate aspect that tugged at the heartstrings yet augured mayhem. She needed a hiding place but despaired of finding one on her own. The risk of being kidnapped by Amunie henchmen had become all too real. She did not want to end her days as an abandoned desert ‘madwoman’ or ‘dedicated’ tomb companion. The game had become onerous, her options outside Tiy’s coterie non existent.

The next day Nefertiti was outfitted with the vintage crown. During the fitting the involuted plan, outlined the day before by a close-lipped army captain who bore Ay’s ring, re-assailed her senses. As the tall crown settled on her head, the voices inside her were particularly insistent and acutely real. The plan had taken on a dimension she hadn’t fully comprehended. Tiye’s restless, ever active mind was working overtime she thought. The ghoulis undertaking — a murder to foil a murder! — suggested fickleness, desperation even. Were the fates so raffish then? Was she then the gull she sometimes imagined? Despite her incredulity she could readily imagine the exchange between Tiye and her select agent.

She has agreed then?

To the necessity and staging of the mock murder yes.

Well?

She's not thrilled about the requisite appearance in the necropolis, nor the use of a drug while she's there.

But she is clear about the necessity of the deed as an indispensable way of countering the Amun strategists? The realization of a renascent, transcendent and inviolate new crown? Its deific transfiguration?

Well, 'realization' might be a bit strong. Yet she is aware of the peril the Amun priesthood still poses. No love lost there. The 'indispensable' deed is the rub.

Unfortunately, the one available candidate. 'Possible losers cannot be choosers. Only plaintiffs.

So, at the wadi then.

Nefertiti's Words with Ay himself later that day tied the knot.

Said an ebullient Ay, "You'll become a legend...an incarnate Hathor-Tefnut."

"'Two' in such a short span."

"Well, only you will be manifestly alive."

"Couldn't she — Uma I believe — just be abducted, sent away?"

"We'll see. A vanished soul cannot debate."

She knew Ay would not tell her what was in store for the unusual oracle and paled at the thought of her pending demise.

"So. Who will believe it — this re-incarnation? You're sure I'm up to it." She laughed in spite of herself. Tiye she knew had reluctantly opened a door. Just. "Who do you think will credit the event?"

“Our superstitious hoi polloi, the Amunies’ idle, disaffected many-too-many, the court nobles and priests who will manage the inventories in the new storehouses, the hopeful new acolytes, our pledged army captains — belief and need easily collaborate. The benefice sacrosanct to doubt.”

“All the heedful shills and opportunists.”

“Who sense the coming tide. All keen alert players, great and small, artful and stolid, will mark the crown’s transfiguration powers with great rejoicing, for it will affirm the life sustaining rise and pleasure of the bountiful Aten! Your return and re-incarnation will animate a dynasty.”

Nefertiti winced. “The drug for the mortuary stay...”

“A sedative, to help you relax. No more, no less.”

“I will be watched at all times.” Sullenly she added, “Mine will be a ‘fresh corpse’, which embalmers have been known to insult.”

“We’ve been over this many times. Medju himself will sit guard with a cohort of my own Shardana and fetch your spell mate — the Sedu servant — at the appointed hour.”

Again an abstracted Nefertiti sojourned a pause. Then: “A corpse for a corpse...she will come to no real harm my ‘spell mate’?”

“Certainly not.”

Almost to herself Nefertiti said, “She modelled some of my trousseau gowns — a small but amenable fact. Did you know?”

“Her form is a good match. Her face will be covered with the funerary mask. The synod must suspect nothing until you appear at the Window of Appearances in due course.”

“The Great Goddess Necessity...against whom not even the Gods contend. ‘The Strong Fate’, the Greeks call her.”

“The Greeks are conversant with many things. Some things better than others.”

Nefertiti wondered in silence what the Glaean Zelea would make of all this. Death on Glaea seemed a final incontrovertible affair. For most. What Nefertiti did not realize, and perhaps would have despaired of if she had known, was that stolid reliable Medju — her indentured minder in the necropolis — had become smitten with Uma. He joined the audience at her shrine several times, and even submitted a petition to her to know whether he might one day become a happy wealthy man. If the reading was inconclusive — ‘the incompatible duo’ the Pythia said of affluence and joy — he was beyond caring. The beauty of the woman inflamed his senses and scorched his wits. He could think of nothing else. Only the stout cordon of guards who protected the shrine prevented a personal calamity. In growing desperation he lapsed into a voyeur, a craven snoop, seeking by stealth what niches he could find in the shrine’s surround to get a glimpse of her. One day, spying her playing with a cat — she had come from her chamber and was not yet fully dressed — he nearly despaired of living another day. By then he had been noticed and was again briskly shooed away. It had come to this...dressed as a beggar, scurrying away like a petty thief. Only his carnal energy sustained him. The visiting hetaerae in the shrine’s stupa revised that night their estimate

of Nubian stamina and largess. Only drink did him in — which they resorted to in the end.

Ay shook him awake the following day, initially thinking he had suffered a fatal injury, never knowing just how close this estimate was. “What is the matter with you? You look like a dead rat.” Medju sat up and welcomed the shaming. He might get through the day. Here was the queen’s own brother rousing, scolding him. “The team is waiting you nit. If you value your hide you’d better be ready before they finish provisioning and harnessing your chariot. Unbelievable.”

FIVE

The banality of the morning ablutions always seemed to invite comedy. Especially when her minders elected to visit a new cordoned wadi. The ritual of capes, towels, fans, hair pins, jars, pumice stones, unguents, gossip, luminous smiles and ingratiating words. Dress the carefree option. An identity parade.

On the fated day, Nefertiti could detect no variation from the norm. Yet she knew the Amun priesthood was stung by her rise and would have suborned some of her servants, making her wary of the day’s unfolding, despite the meticulous planning. Ay being the controller of the day’s events — and contingencies! — was some comfort. He had managed difficult ‘happenings’ before. Her late dislike of many Amun clerics kept her grimly focused. That one of their elders would stoop to insult her so, doubting even her femininity, insinuating she was a freak and a poseur.

Even when Tiye kicked the ogre out, it became all too obvious he had not been the only quibbler and captious holdout. Tiye's framed words merely confirmed her late suspicions: her very modesty had fueled the rumor of being a freak, a Greek hermaphrodite perhaps. But it was apparent by then that Tiye, though still watchful and inquisitive, was no longer assessing her so much as casting her in the new, essential royal pageant, the sensuous consort in her new cap crown with its cobra Uraeus spitting fire on its enemies, after Tiye spitting in the eyes of the Amunies no doubt, contributing to Nefertit's belated equanimity and ironic curiosity. Throughout the initial staging for the Window of Appearances the Chancellor had, more or less, exhausted himself with mirth, and Tiye dealt with a stubborn and no doubt heretical grin as she signaled for the new gown to be brought forth and the rehearsal begin. Such layered memories! It was then that Nefertiti suddenly realized the wadi marshal, the nearest of the perimeter watchers, had been eyeing her, with some anxiety.

"My lady appears tired."

"Enervated."

"Your new servant Mutu may help."

"The one who talks a lot."

"Yes, a real clothesline sheila. You hardly get a word in edgewise. Want her to scram, tell her you saw a snake. A water snake especially."

"Two in our party are down with the grippe, yes?"

"Yes, Nefer and Sitamen."

Nefertiti nodded and said to herself, “Only two. Not bad.” Then repeated, “‘A water snake especially.’ I didn’t know.”

Although the breeze remained temperate, many bathers departed early or headed to the other more clement side, leaving Nefertiti and the newly installed Mutu suddenly alone in the waters’s clear silken waters...a rarefied interval in which alert Nefertiti recalled that it was the voluptuous Mutu whom Tiye once hoped might beguile the wayward Prince. The chosen minders followed at a distance — as planned.

Said the ebullient Mutu, “Someone’s seen a charioteer further down, one of the new Northerners in the army. There he is — another Lothario with more nerve than brains.”

“A beautiful horse.”

“Look at Teneb! She’s always in on the action — rarely takes a ‘servant’s entrance’ or misses a dare. Poor man.”

“He does look confused.”

Mutu chuckled. “They’re all blockheads, chariot runners. Most anyway. Boggles his poor mind that he may have got this far. Simply can’t decide what to do, poor bloke.”

On the adjacent embankment, above and out of sight of the bathers, two furtive but well armed figures sought the shade while following the progress of events in the wadi. Reflections from the breeze rilled waters gamboled in the sunlight. Palm fronds ticked in the light wind. The sound baffled distant conversations and seemed to increase the anxiety of the trackers, one beefy, one skinny. The beefy one exhibited some impatience.

“The bold charioteer has caught the attention of the main party of the bathers...so come on, you two Hathors, turn back into the Mangrove. Gawd, they’re talking like a couple of trade seal collectors.”

“No, there they go.”

“You’re sure this bird Mutu is frightened of snakes?”

“Positive...that’s right the second grove, just off the pavilion.”

“So let’s see this actor Ay’s been touting. Not much to look at. Sure we got the right pair?”

“The tried and true strategic pause... yes, by the Mangrove root.”

“So that’s the one. The ‘other ‘boy the Prince has taken up.”

“Only from a distance.”

By the selected Mangrove tap root Nefertiti cast a condolent eye about her. “I just want to rest here a moment.”

“That dizziness again. They’re a way off, the rest.”

“I won’t be long. Do head on in if you like.”

“And leave the ‘two’ of you here alone? Not on your life.”

“There is no ‘two’. I just didn’t sleep well last night.”

“Well, I won’t touch that one with a banner pole.”

The bigger of the two vigilant pacers in the shadows of the adjacent bank added a footnote. “It’s to look like a crime of passion. Flagrante, right?”

“Only later — after the initial scare.”

“Flagrante less the delicto. A hate crime — ‘ostensibly’ as you say.”

“Yes. ‘Ostensibly.’ You can make do with that can you?”

As Nefertiti rested, another shadow player, a snake wrangler, moved into position in the Mangroves. Soon a hypocotyl bough laced with snakes fell from above the bathers. A stricken Mutu tries to help but panics on seeing the many snakes and flees in terror. With fine aplomb Nefertiti enlaces herself with the wrangler's pet Anaconda, affecting a struggle that proves to be protracted, and exclaims, "Okay, where ever you are, please get this cozy pet of yours off me." From behind one of the Mangrove trunks, a voice pleaded, "There in a jiff — soon as Mutu's out of sight. And the minders alerted."

Half an hour later, Ay and Tiye carefully listened to the latest dispatches from the team's messenger in a pavilion off the palace water garden. The evening was warm, the pergola above the terrace heavy with fulgent grapes. A swath of carmine sky rouged the horizon, the dark Nile snaked in the distance dimpled with water diamonds and blowfly dhows. A klatch of pintail ducks squabbled in the lagoon. The messenger, a short flinty woman, spoke in a raw schoolmarmish tone.

"The one Anaconda was a bit stiff, but easily disengaged."

Ay added, as if scripted, "And she managed to float down current."

"And out of sight. At least two witnesses glimpsed the body further down. The lady knows how to float and barely use her hands. Very realistic. The rest of the bathers wailed like a Greek chorus."

Tiye scoffed, "Except that bodies rarely float in such shallows."

Calmly Ay said, "Only an expert might think to ask. To ask mind. The current there can be brisk. The larger gate was left open."

Said the messenger with assured promptness, “The Nile itself was high again — above the lower cornice — and flow in the outer wadi in fact quite brisk.”

Ay smiled, nodded. “So it’s credible.”

But Tiye was not slighting her reliable diffidence. “If the tale bearers get it from the wrong source....”

“We’re nearly there,” Ay said as he dismissed the messenger, who left after a curt bow, shaking her head at the ducks.

When alone, the silence punctuated by rare distant thunder, Tiye continued: “If this fails, she’s finished of course. And you’ll have to take a sabbatical.”

For a moment Ay regarded his sister with wry concern. Of late he wondered just how in tune she was with the plan, whether she had a secret resolution of her own. Her continued wariness edged his own anxiety. Yet he managed to say with sobriety, “Which I may in any case.”

“The witnesses, if finally suspicious and ambitious, may prove troublesome.”

“Their jeopardy will be manifest though. The servants who saw the body will only spread and affirm a tragedy. Misfortune upstages happenstance.”

They both entertained a discrete moment of reflection. Then, from Tiye an unexpected query, as if she suddenly sensed a lack. “Do you think she still dislikes me?”

If surprised by the question Ay was also reassured. “That's a rise. No, I think her enmity right now is directed toward the Amunies. The rest of us are family now — who must be honored, esteemed.”

“Tolerated.”

Ay fondly smiled.

Happily, Tiye's words continued to hearten, as if her initial caution was but a precaution. “She does have considerable poise, and intelligence. Which I hadn't anticipated.”

“A near match of the Glaean, then. In some respects.”

“She sticks to the script. Once she's committed to something, I've yet to see her falter.”

“An analogy that braces, yes? I see you had the ‘other’ goddess, the problematic Uma, taken abroad. That was generous.” It had been Ay's idea, but only belatedly taken up.

Tiye was again in charge. “Better a disappearance than a death. No smudge marks. The Amunies are left with their sausages. Medju supervised the abduction, as you suggested. And has ravaged her I presume, this Tefnut Goddess.”

“Yes he was enamored. Quite smitten.” He smiled, thinking of his own fascination. “So. Nefertiti. Our ‘beautiful woman’...has arrived.

“Another pretty hoyden. Just my luck.”

Ay easily smiled. “The Prince will need a gifted hand.”

“You can say that again.”

The ‘flagrante’ aspect of the plan (to fashion a frightening corpse) was accomplished on a darkened embankment, a finely staged encounter witnessed by a stooped and perhaps timid figure, mute and still as the embankment stones. Only later did he wonder at his neighbor’s caution about seepage from the weir gate which someone had opened. At the time his senses were alerted by the splashing in the dim twilight.

With dispatch, a mysterious hooded figure pulled a limp form onto the waters’ edge. Some kind of tussle ensued before the victim lay limp beneath the now unusually calm sword palms. If he thought he heard some whispering, he decided it was his own astonished mumbling.

From the distance the words of Nefertiti and her ‘attacker’ were perhaps just audible but indecipherable.

“Not a peep now. Ay’s folk’ll be here shortly. The old guy had a good look and he’s headed in. The soldiers will intercept him shortly.”

“Up a bit further, a stone’s in my back.”

“Better if you turn your head the other way — skewed to the body. And leave the mud. You’ve been dragged up, beaten and robbed right? And died of your injuries. It’s pig’s blood for the telltale lesions. Like so.” Not seen by the fated witness, and half visible to the select perimeter guards, was a lean figure swiftly painting with a fine brush slash lines on the victim’s face, arms, hips and knees. “I think we better add a tear to the wrap. It’s a great linen chlamys by the way. Zelea’s right?”

The sudden embrace was a turn Nefertiti hadn’t anticipated yet accommodated. Attendants had grazed, touched her before in the women’s

house, usually first soliciting her good graces. Now her theatrical attacker concluded her ministrations with a plaintive and furtive embrace. “You are so special,” she said. “The Prince is blessed. May the Aten thrive.” If the moment was suspended, impended, the faint sigh was unadorned. Said Nefertiti as she blinked water from her eyes the better to see her admirer, her own voice a disembodied other, “You’re sure the witness has gone?” The quiet voice belied its urgency.

“We are very much alone. The guards know I would be here a minute or so.” Then another wondrous exclamation. “You are so...you are our life!”

Had the instrumental witness lingered he would have seen the ‘lifeless’ form folded in the attacker’s embrace. But in leaving he was soon accosted by a cohort of foot soldiers who rebuked him for being so near the royal enclosure, then briskly escorted him to a waterway garrison and the company sergeant. If the witness was surprised by the sudden presence of the soldiers, the grim fearsome visage of the sergeant alarmed.

Said the sergeant, “You told my subaltern that you saw an attack. You remember where you saw it?”

“Well yes — across and very near my overflow gate.”

“You thought at first they were royal female servants?” The sergeant’s tone was fluently derisive.

“Well, they sure weren’t field hands.”

“But you didn’t recognize either did you?”

“Well it’s not surprising is it? Though the one did look vaguely familiar.”

“How so?”

“Well, there’s this model head in the artists’ workshop. A teaching form maybe. For the icons. It’s new I think. I live across from a form maker in the tradesman’s village.”

“And you think one of the two resembled the model head? Which one?”

“Well, when they’re dolled up they all look alike don’t they. Still, could have been the one in the water. Most like.”

“You went there to check a gate. Which needs some repair.” He glanced at his subaltern who made a note on a papyrus remnant. “Did you see or talk to anyone in the area?”

“Well there’s no one to see out here is there? I was surprised seeing them there at all.” He glanced again at the formidable soldiers. The size of the javelin runners particularly amazed. They seemed to tower like colossi. A side of beef turned on a spit in the back of the hall near the stable which, despite his anxiety, he eyed with growing interest.

The sergeant briefly conversed with one of the soldiers then returned to the farmer. “A Shardana captain in the King’s regiment must be informed. A party from the women’s house was at the enclosure today. You are a primary witness of a potentially serious act. You will come with us.”

The farmer hesitated but obeyed when told to step lively.

In a large mud brick guard house near the royal perimeter pavilions, he was set down before an imposing Shardana captain who eyed the farmer with flinty disbelief. Two of the guards exchanged wry knowing grimaces.

“Tell what you saw. And no more. Leave the speculation to us. Get on with it.”

After a mindful hesitation the farmer began thus: “This figure — the one with the hood and cape. Came out of the rushes and into the wadi. I didn’t see the floating body at first — only when it was pulled onto the shingle.”

“But not out of sight.”

“No. The hoody seemed to look about — to see if they were alone — so I thought. The hood hid the face. But it was likely a she as well — maybe a thief.”

“Not an aristo?”

“I didn’t see no insignia. In the dimming light.”

“But a woman you think.”

“Pretty sure. The costume under the cape was what you see on those blousers.”

“Blousers?” The captain looked up to the nearest guard who dryly said, “Not a complement.”

“Then what?”

“Well I thought the poor tyke had drowned. Lay like a dead fish. Then I’ll be a croc’s snout if the hoody didn’t begin to try to revive her.

Hard to tell. What I thought at first. But maybe she was just robbing the victim — you know searching her.”

“The one who looked like the model, the bust?”

“Well I guess so. Couldn’t believe it myself. Perhaps with the higher water.”

“You think she drowned.”

“Well, hard to say. The hoody had to struggle to get her out. She didn’t have much on.”

“You didn’t try to help?”

“Swim across the whole wadi at high water — me? I’d drown first. Like her. And my punt was below the gate head wasn’t it.”

“Didn’t you shout or something?”

“Well, these things are not what they seem. Sometimes.” The farmer looked warily around at the surly guards.

“So you did nothing.”

“Well it was over right quick — as I said.”

“Then the hoody fled.”

“No. Pulled the body up further — into the papyrus rushes.”

“Out of sight.”

“Well, I could see — I think — a foot. Maybe not. Could have been a man-grove root.”

“Then what?”

“Well I was thinking I must hurry to tell the wadi superintendent when you guys showed up.” The anxiety in the farmer’s voice was still palpable.

“You’re sure about that.”

“Danged sure.” Again the witness furtively glanced at the ominous guards.

Suddenly the captain relaxed, became solicitous. Momentarily the witness panicked. The captain dryly smiled. “Stay and have a meal. We’ll escort you home. But keep your experience to yourself. For now. Understand.”

“Oh yes.” A finger across his lips seemed to appease the captain.

“Later, the captain told Ay’s point man, “He’s probably told twenty field workers by now.”

“Typical.”

Ay’s point man, his select field witness, was more relaxed this time. The plan seemed to be playing out well, almost too well. Ay nodded when the man finished, and proceeded to reiterate the events by placing questions, carefully eyeing him the while.

“The witness was not ill treated?”

“No. After his deposition he was given a good meal. Ended joking with his minders. A natural windbag.”

“And the body was fetched by a pavilion team and taken to the necropolis at Saqqara?”

“Yes. Without delay.”

“A formal announcement with assurance of a follow up investigation — she might initially be believed to be an royal servant, an acolyte or

priestess — must be delivered directly to the Amun temple in Memphis, you understand.”

“My messenger is on his way.”

“If questioned, note how the finders weren’t sure of the identity, the body being bruised and bloody as it was.” He turned to Tiye. “The Saqqara home was the right choice. That will give us a little time.”

Said Tiye with a flare of impatience and bother, “Time for what? The drug takes effect almost immediately.”

Ay shrugged. “Just so.”

“The matter must be moved along with dispatch. Tell us again about the farmer.” Ay’s man glanced at Tiye then staidly began.

“Well, he has nicely started the babblers, that’s been confirmed — and that the court is embarrassed by what appears, as of now, to be the death of a royal peeress. Which the minders and soldiers surmised, and the farmer glommed onto.”

“Our peeress.” Tiye nurtured a scowl.

Ay smiled. “Just so.” And gestured satisfaction with open hands. Tiye again managed to resist adding any grace note.

And so, to a shaded embalmer’s bier came a fresh body at the Saqqara necropolis, its legs fastly found to deter assault, though Ay’s Amun shills pretended indifference to all but routine protocol, the limp form ‘still free of rigour mortis’, one stolid attendant remarked. Many people stole a glance at the still, candle-gilded form that first night, though few would ad-

mit to the act for the cadaver was set out as a commoner would be, no incantation or incense: the flinty and arrogant Amun overseer there proclaimed no exceptional event, and treated the demise as the misadventure of a would-be paranymp. Thus the troubling consort was relegated to an entombment rite as a mere burial trophy, a concubine servant! If the rumour mongers were livid with speculation, Ay calmly and Tiye alertly assessed events by a warming brazier. Only Tiye's favored steward remained in the room. Tiye was the first to prompt the impassive Ay, her director of the staged tragedy.

"She almost balked you say."

"Medju was able to persuade her the time would pass more quickly if she took the drug."

"It could have been a disaster if she hadn't."

"I think she also concluded that not knowing was best."

Tiye indulged a snuffle. "Well, if the deed is finally accomplished, she'll be unassailable. The sobering price. Well, for now."

Ay smiled. "It is a fine luminous night. The moon a perfect sphere."

"A mirror to stark events."

Both huddled in a sultry calm against the creeping cold.

As Nut's reign reached its apogee, a curious incident in a storage cellar might have alerted an Amun sentinel but for the presence of the imposing Medju seated nearby, an emphatic apparition who embodied formality and conformity. If he looked imperturbable it was because his mind was awash with thoughts of Uma. And to think in the end he was so aw-

estruck by her beauty that he barely touched her. Well, some witch told him he would beget palsy if he pearled her. He imagined he was already quivering with desire. Still, Uma gave him a reading he wouldn't soon forget. *I see a princely falcon at the Egyptian court graced with a Nubian amulet.* In the end he had simply done as he was instructed — put her on a merchant ship to the island kingdom of Glaea with an introduction to the Egyptian Viceroy there. The oracle there had died of a fever.

As his mind returned to the mortuary and his custodial assignment there, he noted one of Tiye's servants, disguised as a necropolis attendant, in the shadows behind him. He thought he recognized her but wasn't sure. In a dim corner a svelte Greek awaited a pectoral this attendant carefully removed from her own neck — a near match of the Isis pectoral Nefertiti would wear at her coronation.

Said the Greek girl, "After the removal, I'm to lie in her place for a time then be seen walking due East just before sun rise."

Said the attendant, "With the Sekhem sceptre and this pectoral."

"Your team will cue the pathway?"

"Yes. Follow the palm fan leaves."

"I'm to pass the Window of Appearances just as the sun clears."

"Then go directly back to the well in the artist's village. Wait for the worker's departure, for your special friend, then return to your digs."

"She is all right is she?"

"Fine. The drug takes a while to dissipate. So, on your way."

The Greek looked forlornly at the still figure on the bier.

Said the observant attendant, “Child’s play.”

The news of Uma’s quiet unexpected and unexplained departure was greeted with dismay by the Amun synod, who realized they’d been hoisted on their own obelisk (their trust of Shardana officers, covertly bribed by the palace, to guard the oracle) whereas Nefertiti’s resurrection was greeted with fulsome and wondrous celebration by almost everyone else. Her recovery or ‘transfiguration’, as the palace called it, posed a fine perplexity for the synod as their spy emissaries returned to confirm Nefertiti’s felicitous reappearance: an affable ‘shade plant’ allotting time to herself, yet honoring all bequests, visitants, attenders and patrons with affability, her ineffable poise and a stature newly apparent to all...a prized lotus in her own garden which one was privileged to see in numinous bloom. So the select gate mouths gushed. Talk of an accommodation to this charismatic bloom was soon underway...even among the stiff-necked Amun elders. Said one of the testier energumen, “Since you nincompoops did not personally check out the body we’ve little choice. So self-evident was it?” The fact no available Amunie had actually sought out an outside authority to affirm a death seemed then both deplorable and prophetic. The sorry state of the ‘corpse’, and their abasement of it, had seemed at the time entirely sufficient. A tribute to the handiwork of Tiye’s shadowy makeup artist.

If Tiye was relieved, and treasured the late return of a tired Asya to court, she remained stoically alert to Kiya’s late activities -- the one sur-

plus stand-in. Because of her sojourn with Medju she was chosen to coach and reassure Nefertiti's proxy at the mortuary. Now she lurked as a talented but stray edgy figurante. Protagonist and antagonist, both seemed to thrive even burgeon in one body. Whenever the Mitanni Princess appeared to be idling, something consequential was afoot. So Tiye mused. Ay, though, making good on his threat to take a sabbatical, was unaware of any ruse or complexity, especially when they played senet, for Kiya was one of the few beginners who posed a challenge. The game was overseen by several in Tiye's entourage who deduced that, given her current stay, Kiya was extolling all options.

Said Kiya, after removing another of Ay's pieces, "You've played this game before?"

"Never with a so-called novice as resourceful. Or daring."

Kiya paused to display one of her masterful moves. "Banking on a good opinion is expensive, I'm told."

"Well, may you always be as flush as you are now."

Then Kiya surprised with what appeared to be an earnest question, a rarity he'd learned in her company.

"Is he -- really considering a new capital? In the desert?"

Ay was momentarily taken aback. "Where in the world did you hear that?"

"I overheard one of Tiye's engineers. A busy chap."

"Ah. That bunch." Resigned, he continued. "Well, there has been some speculation."

“What kind of ‘speculation’?”

“The earnest kind.” He shook his finger at her.

“So where will, might, it be?”

“You are interested.”

“Of course.”

He looked at her and again decided she was the animus that beggared them all. The youthful source itself. He had never seen her so pretty, so seductively made up. Her attire elegant and beguiling at the same time. “At last estimate, halfway between Thebes and Memphis.” He amused himself, again, by thinking of how the Prince was so intimidated by her nimble athletic grace.

“There’s nothing there...you’re teasing of course.”

“Who knows.” Briefly their eyes met as he hesitated on his next throw, saying, “And how are the two promising ‘Deities’ these days? Would you say?” He smiled without commitment.

“Nef’s very reflective right now. They call her Meretseger, ‘she who loves silence’.” She smiled when he finally elected a move. “A lot of silence between Thebes and Memphis.”

“She may be our best hope.”

“Well, I’d say she’s earned her Sun Crown. You can quote me.”

“With some help from her friends. Has she got him up and running face to face yet? Just curious.”

“She’s working on it.”

He smiled again. To have two such royal ‘wonders’ at court was a rarity. And a pity the world at large would probably only know of the one.

“Want another game?...”