



The Shadow Women

By Angela Hunt

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Merytamon

On the first day of the third month of akhet, the season of flood, in the fifth year of the reign of King Ramesses II, my mother told me I would soon marry a god.

The thought made a shivering rise from my belly. Marriage itself did not frighten me-I had lived among wives of the god for all my fourteen years. Since lying in the arms of a god did not make them overanxious, I did not fear marriage to the king.

Nor did Pharaoh's divine nature alarm me-though then he was not so familiar as in later years, I had seen him laugh. Once, when he returned from a hunting trip, I saw him bleed from a cut on the arm. Though he lived among us as the incarnation of Horus, I knew a cloak of flesh solidly concealed the burning spark of divinity.

Neither did the shivering in my soul have anything to do with marriage to my father-in truth, I hoped to know him better. As king, he had countless wives and concubines, and pharaohs before him routinely married their daughters and sisters. Since the time of Narmer, the great king who united Upper and Lower Egypt, whoever married the Great Royal Wife possessed the right to sit upon the throne of the Two Kingdoms. My mother was Nefertari, bearer of the king's firstborn son, Great Royal Wife and Lady of the Two Lands. She was Isis to us, God's Wife, God's Mother, Sweet of Love and Beautiful of Face.

The trembling in my belly rose from an empty place . . . a fear that what should be was not, therefore what must be might never occur. If my fears proved true, how could I be Isis to Egypt? How could I please the god my father if I could not bear children? For despite my daily sacrifices to the gods, I had not yet begun to bleed as women should.

"Mistress, be still. I cannot apply the kohl if you jiggle on the bench."

Though Nema, my handmaid, was but a Cushite slave and a full two years younger than me, I obediently stilled my nervous knees and lifted my gaze to the adorned ceiling in my chamber. Nema dipped a smooth-tipped rod of alabaster into a jar, then clucked her tongue. I closed my eyes as the rod swept over my quivering eyelids with gentle strokes, leaving trails of ground malachite. The priests say evil may enter the body through the five orifices of the head, and the eyes are the most easily breached. Since malachite magically prevents access, I have never neglected this aspect of my toilette. I would never appear before Pharaoh with unadorned eyes.

"There." Nema pressed her hands together and backed away, her head bowed in obeisance. "You look every inch a royal lady."

My stomach, which had settled under Nema's steady ministrations, lurched upward. I was not one of the king's women, not yet, but everyone seemed determined to move me from my mother's apartment to the royal harem. Rising upon legs that felt as hollow as river reeds, I smoothed the wrinkles from the fabric at my belly. "Are the others assembling outside?"

"Wait, my lady, and I will see."

Nema turned on the ball of her bare foot, then moved silently toward the carved door and the hall beyond. The door opened; Nema bowed again. "Your mother and sisters are assembling in the hall."

"I am ready." Though the thought of facing my father-soon to be my husband-sent a tremor scooting up the back of my neck, I stood, accepted the palm-leaf fan Nema pressed into my hand, then lifted my chin and stepped into the hallway. The atmosphere outside my small chamber vibrated with the voices of excited women and children. Not all of Pharaoh's family had made the trip, of course, only his most favored wives and offspring above the age of ten years. I sought the light of my universe, Nefertari.

I found my mother at the end of the hallway, standing apart from the others in a deliberate aloofness. As Nefertari turned to survey the noisy group behind us, I saw signs of suffering in her face. Thin lines appeared around her lips, and her heavily painted eyes were half closed. As a tear leaked from one of them, I realized my mother was in agony. Again.

She regularly suffered from excruciating headaches, and thus far none of the royal physicians had been able to cure her malady. When the head pains struck, she could not bear noise or sunlight. Retiring to her chambers, she often took to her bed, pale, trembling, and unable to eat, but when duty demanded that she appear before the king, she obeyed. 'Twould be unthinkable to refuse.

"Mother." I slipped my arm about her waist. "Can nothing be done for you today?" She straightened as the door beside her creaked upon its leather hinges. One of the white-robed priests of Amon stood beyond it, lifting his hand in a come-forward gesture.

Now, like me, Nefertari wore the colors of malachite and kohl and ochre upon her chiseled features; she also wore a sheer garment of pleated linen. We were nearly the same height with a similar cast to our features, but there the resemblance ended. My body was yet young and unformed; motherhood had molded hers into soft curves. My belly was flat; hers, a gentle mound. My breasts resembled the budding fruit of a palm tree, hers recalled the round ripeness of melons.

The most striking difference in our appearance, however, lay in our headpieces-I wore a simple tiara in my wig, while the golden cobra of Egypt rested upon my mother's forehead, the symbol of Wadjet, the goddess who traditionally offered the crown of Lower Egypt to Pharaoh. As I followed her, behind me shuffled the other children of Nefertari-my brothers Amon-hirwonmef and Prehirwonmef, and my sister, Mertatum. They were followed by Isnofret and her daughter, who were trailed by lesser wives and their children. As we snaked through the freshly scrubbed halls of the palace, the priests' music, complete with the rattle

of sistra, the clicking of crotals, and the thump of drums, heralded our approach . . . sounds that could only bring more discomfort to my suffering mother.

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