

The Horus Throne

Chapter One

Live or die? No matter what I did, I'd be damned for it. By now, the whole world knew that I had claimed the throne of Egypt. If I lived, my reign was expected to be wretched, forgettable and brief. If I died, my people would be defenceless before our enemies lurking here and abroad, hungering for the soft throat of Egypt. These were the kinds of bargains the gods laid before a woman who had become a king.

In theory, I was the most powerful person on earth, yet I felt like I'd been hacked to pieces and served up on plates. I had never expected to be king—I had never wanted it—circumstances had forced me onto the throne. My brother had died without an heir and my daughter and I had been the last living members of the royal family. But soon that would change. Soon.

I stood in the heavy humid darkness. Bright glints from the oil lamp danced along the gilding of the bed where my three-year-old daughter slept on a bare mattress. I looked down at her, swathed in a loose gown that covered her from neck to ankles to protect her from insects. Her subtle, innocent scent rose from her hot damp skin. Other children slept naked beneath gauze mosquito nets, but not Neferure. When she was a baby, someone had hidden a scorpion in her bed. So great was my fear for her, I had banned linens and nets—anything that might conceal another deadly surprise. The long gown was the only way I could protect her. This was a burden my kingship had placed on my daughter. A guilty tear beaded on my cheek, hot as molten lead.

Amongst the courtiers, furtive little whispers, like tightly closed buds, had been circulating, hinting that I should give up the throne. But Egyptian kings could never abdicate or be deposed. Relinquishing the kingship required my suicide.

The tear fell and stained Neferure's sleeve; an omen, accusing me.

She stirred in her sleep and kicked the gown askew like a bad idea. I straightened the filmy linen and covered her legs again. 'I could never abandon you, little one,' I murmured. No mother had the right to suicide. Yet, there were those who believed that my death was necessary to restore the world to order.

One law for mothers, another for kings. No one but me had ever been bound by both.

In seven months, my brother's concubine, Iset, would give birth. Then the whispers for my death would swell to a clamour. The royal physician's tests had confirmed that Iset was carrying a male child, but he had told only me. If I surrendered my life once the child was born, the boy would become Pharaoh and everything would return to normal. With me out of the way, corruption and treachery would flourish as they had during my brother's reign. Egypt would face annihilation. But aversion to female rule was so ingrained that many preferred an infant on the Horus Throne instead of me.

He was male. I was not.

I could save Egypt, and myself, if I intervened before his birth. The Great God Amen-Re had shown me what I should do. Did I have the courage to make the choices he was asking of me?

My own choices had trapped me in this dilemma in the first place. Nine years ago, I made a pledge to follow the path the gods had set before me. I was swept up in one harrowing predicament after another and ended up as the God's Wife of Amen, an awesome responsibility, when I was only fourteen. Then my father had asked me to marry him, but I had refused. I had consented to marry my brother instead, and it had nearly cost me my life. Worst of all, my dying father had passed the Royal *Ka*, the life force of the god Horus, to me. His act had conferred the kingship on me, but I'd kept it a secret and allowed my brother to take the throne. Egypt had bled because of that choice. But the gods had brutally disposed of my brother, compelling me to take the throne and all the burdens that came with it.

Mosquitoes whined, disturbing the air near my daughter's head. Neferure wore only a sidelock of hair; the remainder of her shaven scalp was a tempting target for the hungry insects. This ramshackle old palace couldn't keep out rats and sparrows, let alone mosquitoes, even with linen stretched over the windows. I waved my hands over Neferure's head, trying to disperse the insects. 'Begone, you creatures of Seth,' I hissed. The mosquitoes persisted; the words of a king meant nothing to them. If such tiny creatures ignored my commands, how could I control courtiers grown sly and wilful under my brother's lax reign?

A shadow paused in the doorway. 'What are you doing in here? Why aren't you asleep?' My old nurse, Inet, tugged on a shawl that didn't quite cover her ample bosom.

'I'm watching over Neferure,' I said softly.

'I was looking after the princess,' Inet said. She waved a fly whisk in her plump fist. 'I just left for a moment to fetch this.' She stood close to me and peered at my face. 'You've still got your make-up on. You're waiting for *him*, aren't you?'

'Don't lecture me, Inet.'

'Someone has to!' She drew me away from my daughter's bed.

'Hatshepsut, I have put your welfare above all else from the day you were born, so you must listen to me. The gods may have put you on the throne of Egypt, but you will have to fight to stay there. If anyone discovers that Senenmut is your lover, your reputation will be ruined. You would be discredited as king.'

'Senenmut is the most intelligent man in Egypt. He doesn't take foolish risks.'

'Senenmut isn't always rational when it comes to you. It doesn't matter how smart or capable he is—he's a commoner. The other courtiers resent him.'

'Even if he were of high noble birth, they'd still resent him. He's smarter than they are—he understands how to be useful. And he's the only man who understands me.'

Inet sighed and strangled her breasts with her shawl until she could knot it. ‘My dear, please. You get very little sleep when he visits you in your bedchamber. You need your rest.’

‘Some things are more important than sleep.’ I hugged Inet. Beneath her motherly exterior lay a ferocious desire to protect me, even from myself.

I left my daughter’s room and entered my own bedchamber. I was never at ease here. Within these walls, my brother had inflicted vicious abuse on me. Who could sleep with such memories reeling about?

I sat on my bed and gazed out the open doors to the moon-rinsed courtyard. I heard footsteps from outside the courtyard wall—one of my guards, patrolling the perimeter. Aside from Inet, my guards and servants were banned from my private rooms after I had retired for the night. It was the only way I could be alone with Senenmut, but even he couldn’t always slip past the sentries. I sat straining my ears, waiting for a sign that my lover was near. The Nile whispered a hymn against its banks.

My need for Senenmut was more urgent than a mere physical ache. The Great God Amen-Re had planted ideas in my mind, and I hoped I had interpreted them correctly. Only Senenmut could tell me if what I planned was feasible; I prayed that he would be up to the task that I was going to ask of him.

I intended to make an announcement in the morning, at my first formal audience as king. I needed to accomplish a deed so audacious and so visible that there would be no denying that the gods themselves had placed me on the Horus Throne. If I succeeded, the doubts about my reign would evaporate. If I failed, I would lose all credibility, and Egypt would be lost with me.

I heard a faint scratching noise coming from the bathroom. At last! I waited, but Senenmut didn’t appear. Perhaps the toilet attendant had fallen asleep again and she was still in there. I walked to the door and pushed it open. The flames from the bathroom’s diminutive oil lamps shuddered; rippling shadows fingered the walls. ‘Who’s there?’ I called.

My nostrils caught a faint wisp of sweat; someone had walked past here just moments ago. I sifted the air for hints of unfamiliar scent.

Next to the limestone partition that enclosed the shower, I spied a curve of light on the floor. I leaned forward, trying to decide what it was, held back by some ancient fear. My breath hung in my throat—I made out fat coils, curled against the partition. A cobra? My heart hurtled to my feet.

But no—it was only a rope. But what was a rope doing on the floor?

There was a sensation of heat on my back, then suddenly my breath was cut in half. A leather thong dug into my throat; I felt hands behind my head jerking, tightening. I could not cry out. I reached back to fend off my attacker, but I was dragged off my feet and flung sideways. My head struck the limestone wall; pinprick stars wheeled before my eyes.

The sweaty hands twisted the thong tighter. I heard laboured breath drawn through clenched teeth. I tried to imagine my attacker's stance, then jabbed an elbow backward with all my strength. A staccato grunt rose from the depth of his guts.

A sharp kick cracked into my ankle. My body crumpled. Dark waves washed across my vision. The thong sawed into my flesh; a waterfall roared inside my skull. My hands hung numb on the ends of my wrists. My thoughts beat their wings about my head: 'I must not succumb, I must not desert my daughter.' I willed my waning life into my hands; my fingers clawed at the thong. I caught hold of my attacker's thumb and wrenched savagely.

He gasped and lost his grip. I yanked the thong from my neck and gulped huge, wet breaths. My veins ached at the sudden rush of blood. The slap of bare feet running faded behind me.

I crawled out of the shower, shaking and dizzy. I dared not call for Inet—if she left Neferure's side, the assassin might strike there next. I dragged myself to my feet and vomited.

I heard the clank of swords and slap of sandals hurrying across my bedchamber. ‘Your Majesty? Forgive me, but I heard a noise.’

The captain of my guards, Dedu, stepped into my bathroom. ‘Mother of Night! What happened?’ he cried. ‘Inebni, sound the alert!’ The big Nubian helped me to stand upright.

‘My daughter! Protect her!’ I coughed. I grabbed his thick, muscled arm.

‘Two guards are with the princess and Lady Inet. Is Your Majesty injured?’

‘Someone...choked me,’ I croaked, feeling the welt on my neck. I drew my fingers back; my nails were varnished with blood.

‘How many attackers were there?’

‘One...in the shower.’

My body servants, Tui and Kira, ran into the bathroom. They shrieked and ran to my side. Kira ordered Tui, ‘Fetch the royal physician. Run!’

‘Watch your back, Tui,’ Dedu called. ‘There’s an assassin on the loose!’ Without further ceremony, Dedu scooped me up with one arm, brandished his sword with the other and carried me to my bed. He laid me down and checked my limbs for breaks with one huge hand, while Kira wiped my face with a damp cloth. My servants ran about, lighting lamps and exchanging terrified glances.

‘Bring Neferure to me,’ I said, forcing the words out.

‘I was just doing that,’ Inet said, entering my bedchamber accompanied by my butler, Senimen. Senimen carried my sleeping daughter cradled against his shoulder; Inet wielded a bronze lamp stand like a mace. Even Dedu gave Inet a wide berth as she directed Senimen to sit in a chair where I could see my child.

Tui returned, dragging Menna the physician behind her. Menna’s round red face blanched when he saw me. ‘Please lie still while I examine you, Your Majesty,’ he said. His eyes moved as if he were seeing my bones through my skin. Menna told Dedu to help me sit up while he propped me up with cushions.

He carefully prodded my throat, examined my face and eyes and asked repeatedly if I could breathe freely.

As Menna worked, the guard Inebni trotted in and spoke to Dedu in hushed tones. He handed Dedu a length of coiled rope. My vision was blurred, but I could see a noose on the end of it.

Dedu crouched by my bedside. ‘Your Majesty, Inebni said that your attacker has disappeared without a trace. Can you tell me anything that might help us find out who it was?’

‘Didn’t see,’ I rasped. ‘Not tall, though. Barefoot.’

‘Probably a servant, then,’ Senimen said. ‘Servants can go almost anywhere in the palace unchallenged. Whoever did this could still be close by, waiting for another chance.’

Dedu’s massive jaw worked in frustration. ‘With all due respect, Your Majesty, I did advise you weeks ago that the present security arrangements were not adequate. You require more protection than your father and brother did.’ He hefted the rope in his hand. ‘Your attacker meant to hang you—just in case he couldn’t kill you by choking.’

I stared at the rope I had mistaken for a cobra. In reality, it was more dangerous than any snake. Once the assassin had strung me up, my death would have looked like suicide.

Menna applied cool cloths to my neck and checked my breathing frequently. He prepared a sharpened copper tube in case my throat swelled shut—I didn’t ask him how he intended to employ it if the need arose. Shortly afterward, a hubbub erupted at the door to my apartments. Dedu, who was perched on a stool in the

corner, looked up from the spear point he was sharpening. ‘Senenmut,’ he snorted. ‘Why am I not surprised to hear that voice?’ he muttered.

‘I sent him a message,’ Senimen said. ‘I thought he ought to be informed.’ Senimen and Senenmut were half-brothers; between the two of them, nothing in the palace escaped scrutiny.

‘Admit him,’ I said.

Menna tented his pudgy fingers together and scowled. ‘Surely, Your Majesty’s Chief Steward doesn’t need to be involved in this. You need to rest.’

Senenmut burst into my bedchamber, breathless and flushed. He hadn’t bothered to cover his short cropped hair with a wig and his kilt was slightly askew, but every muscle in his lean body was taut as a bowstring. Slung over his narrow hips was a belt holding two wicked-looking curved daggers. ‘Are you all right? What happened?’ he said, reaching for me.

Menna knocked his hand away. ‘Must you always ignore protocol? Do you think a commoner can manhandle the king?’

‘I can manhandle you,’ Senenmut said, dragging Menna to his feet by the front of his tunic. ‘How is she?’ he demanded.

‘Brother, calm down,’ Senimen said, shifting my daughter in his arms. ‘You’ll wake the princess, who is in my special care at the moment.’

Menna beetled out of Senenmut’s grip. ‘The king will recover,’ he said, rearranging the pleats of his tunic along with his dignity. ‘The cut is superficial, but the bruises are deep, and will take some time to fade. There is a slight chance that her throat might swell shut in the next few hours.’

Senenmut knelt at my bedside. My eyes warned him. He needed every fibre of his will to prevent his hand from touching mine. His dark eyes blazed like the night sky. ‘Your Majesty, the message said there was an assassin.’

‘I am safe now,’ I said.

‘The attacker has fled,’ Dedu said, ‘but I’ve sent for more guards to comb every closet and corridor in the palace, and determine every person’s whereabouts.’

‘No,’ I said. I shook my head; the pain in my neck made me gasp. ‘No commotion.’

‘Why not?’ Dedu asked, puzzled.

‘Because we don’t want word of this to get out,’ Senenmut said. ‘Don’t you understand? An attempt on the king’s life makes it look as if there is opposition to her reign.’

‘But there is opposition to her reign,’ Dedu blurted. ‘Forgive me, Your Majesty; I’m only a simple Nubian soldier, but that’s what the people are saying. They’re afraid of female kings. Such people are fools, of course, but...’

I raised my hand and cut him off. ‘The rope, Dedu.’

He held the noose out for Senenmut to examine. ‘Inebni found it next to the shower enclosure.’

Senenmut ran his long graceful fingers over the rope. ‘Fine cordage, strong and carefully made, to disguise a murder as suicide—an admission of defeat by the king.’

‘I would never, ever do that,’ I barked hoarsely.

‘Calm down, Your Majesty, you mustn’t irritate your throat,’ Menna clucked.

Senenmut looked at the rope as if it contained a secret code. ‘This is not the work of someone who wants to make way for a male king. This is the work of someone who wants Egypt without a king at all. Think! No one can be sure if Iset will bear a male or female child. By killing the king before Iset gives birth, the downfall of the dynasty is assured.’

Menna tugged on a lock of his wig. ‘But it might be possible for Princess Neferure to inherit the throne.’

Inet hovered closer to my sleeping daughter, her fist tight around the lamp stand. ‘How long do you think a little girl would last as a child king? Whoever put the scorpion in her bed could strike again.’

‘My daughter can never take the throne!’ I cried. ‘She was fathered by my brother, not the god Amen-Re. There is no doubt of that.’ My outburst made my head throb like a drum skin. All Egyptian kings were sired by the sun god, who manifested himself in human form to engender his heir. My daughter’s degrading and violent conception had been the work of my despicable brother, egged on by his vicious friend, Nefer-Weben. Menna held a beaker of a bitter tincture to my lips and forced me to drink.

Senenmut said, ‘Tonight’s attack was not politically motivated, not in the ordinary sense. It was motivated by pure hatred—hatred for Hatshepsut, for the royal family and for Egypt itself.’

That kind of malice burned in only one heart. ‘Nefer-Weben,’ I whispered.

Inet shied like she’d spied a demon. ‘Not here! In the palace!’

Dedu shook his head. ‘All the guards are on the alert for any sign of him. With that hooked nose and pock-marked skin, and the way he slinks around like a jackal, we wouldn’t have missed him.’

‘He’s clever enough to hire someone to do his dirty work, and could have told his accomplice about the layout of the king’s private apartments,’ Senenmut said.

‘Not an Egyptian!’ Dedu protested. ‘And no Nubian, either. No one who knows what a Horus King is would dare harm one. They’d face the Second Death.’

‘But one of Nefer-Weben’s vile Hyksos relatives would do it,’ Senimen said. ‘They’d do anything to regain control of Egypt.’

‘Or Nefer-Weben could be in league with the Amorites or Syrians,’ Senenmut said. ‘We know he fled north after the death of Her Majesty’s

predecessor. So even if the assassin is a servant in the palace and is pretending to be Egyptian, we can find him out. All we have to do is carry out an inspection of all the male servants, saying it's for the sake of hygiene, and then check the alibi of any that aren't circumcised.'

Menna dropped the cloth he had been wringing out in a basin of water. 'And you expect me to complete this unwelcome task?'

'It's important, Menna,' I said. 'Senenmut is right.'

'Nefer-Weben may have attempted to disguise his confederate as an Egyptian by having him circumcised,' Senenmut said. 'Only the Chief Royal Physician has the skill to recognise the age of a surgical scar or the style of a foreign operation.'

'You needn't use your flattery on me,' Menna snapped. 'It's a disagreeable undertaking, but for the sake of Her Majesty's safety, I will do my utmost.'

Dedu laid his spear across his knees. 'In the meantime, I'll double the perimeter guards, and Her Majesty and the princess should have bodyguards in their rooms at night.'

Senenmut's temple throbbed. I could see what he was feeling—the lax arrangements that had made our nightly visits possible had left me vulnerable. 'Guards are only a stopgap measure,' he said. 'It's impossible to defend any part of this old palace completely. Your Majesty, I proposed a plan for a new palace after your predecessor died, but you felt it was too extravagant. Perhaps tonight's events will persuade you to reconsider.'

'I have other projects... far more important,' I hesitated. My first acts as Pharaoh had to bolster my political position; a new palace would seem like self-indulgence.

'Hatshepsut,' Inet said sharply. 'Do you ever want to spend another night like this, cowering in your chamber while an assassin roams the palace?' She looked pointedly at Neferure, who was stirring in Senimen's arms.

My old nurse was right. All my other plans would be pointless unless my daughter and I lived. ‘We will build a new palace,’ I acquiesced.

Senenmut knelt and took my hand, despite the disapproving glances of my attendants. ‘It will be my greatest design ever. You and Neferure will be completely secure.’

Although I longed to feel his strong brown arms encircling me, I withdrew my hand as if I hadn’t noticed his ardent touch. ‘I have every confidence in my Chief Steward.’ I only hoped his enthusiasm would remain when he found out what I wanted him to do before he built my palace. ‘I’ll announce it at my morning audience.’

‘Surely, you’re not going ahead with that?’ Inet asked, incredulous. ‘You’ve nearly been strangled—you can hardly speak.’

Menna dabbed the damp cloth along my throat. ‘The bruises will be much worse in the morning. Injuries like this will set the tongues of the courtiers wagging.’

‘I must proceed as if nothing has happened,’ I said. ‘Senenmut can read my proclamations. As for the bruises, I’ll send for Sopdu. He dealt with my brother’s pimples—disguising a few bruises shouldn’t be too much of a challenge for him.’

