

‘HATSHEPSUT WILL BE KING’

Princess Hatshepsut was upset. It wasn't the flies, although they had been worse than ever this summer, even getting into her make-up jars. It wasn't the fact that her four-year-old-daughter, Neferure, had been ill for weeks. It was what Hatshepsut saw at the military parade that had really upset her.

General Ozah's army had just returned from the south, where they had won many victories. Hatshepsut had stood beside her elderly father, King Thutmose, as the troops marched past. The general looked magnificent. The captured treasure looked magnificent. But the ordinary soldiers were in a terrible state – thin, tired and many horribly wounded.

One man was so sick he collapsed right in front of the royal platform. When his wife ran out of the crowd to help him, a guard kicked her away. The soldier lay in the sun for hours, and when the ceremonies were over, slaves carried away his dead body. The unnecessary cruelty made Hatshepsut's blood boil. But when she complained to her husband, he just laughed and called her a 'softie'.

Hatshepsut hated him. Not because of his ugly skin disease – he couldn't help that. No, she hated him because he was vicious and didn't have an original

idea in his head. All he wanted was to be like his father. But the only thing the two men had in common was their name – Thutmose. Hatshepsut didn't reckon her husband was even worthy of that. She always called him 'Fritty' after his mother, the cowardly Moutnofrit.

Walking down the marble corridor towards her father's private rooms, Hatshepsut tried to cheer herself up by thinking of the good things in her life. As a respected royal princess, she was wealthy beyond most people's dreams. She was also beautiful and intelligent and knew how to read hieroglyphs as well as any scribe.

The trouble was, she was a woman. Egypt was run by men. When her father died, the wretched Fritty would become king and waste money and wage pointless wars. Hatshepsut could hardly bear thinking about it. If only she were in charge

'Welcome, Thunder-face!' smiled the king when his daughter entered. He was lying on cushions on a marble couch. A slave gently waved a large fan above his head. Hatshepsut bowed and gazed into her father's face. Although she didn't like his warlike ways, she respected his wisdom and his honesty. It made her sad to see how old he now looked. 'What do you mean, "Thunder-face"?' she asked, trying to sound surprised.

'You have no secrets from me,' he replied kindly. 'I can read your face like the carvings on a tomb wall. What are you worried about?'

Hatshepsut knelt beside him. 'Why have you sent for me, father?' she asked, ignoring his question. 'Are you unwell?'

Thutmose raised his hand. The fingers, once so strong and nimble, were scarcely more than reeds now. 'Listen carefully, dearest daughter', he began, 'For I have called you here to tell you something of great importance.'

'You are angry because you love our country and our people, and you fear what will happen when I am gone. But I promise you have nothing to be afraid of.'

'What?' blurted out Hatshepsut. 'Father, how can you say that when you know what a cruel boaster Fritty is?'

'Shh!' said Thutmose, slowly shaking his head. 'Answer this: what would you do if you were King of Egypt?'

Hatshepsut had thought about this a thousand times. 'Change things!' she said eagerly. 'You have been a mighty king, father. Your armies went far and wide, and their victories made us rich. But now we need peace, time to enjoy our success. You know my dreams? I want to send ships to God's Land, where the glorious King Mentuhotep sent ships 1,000 years ago. My ships will return with gold and spices and scents and –'

'Just so!' interrupted the king with a smile. Then, to Hatshepsut's surprise, he lay back, closed his eyes, and spoke in a voice she had never heard before.

'My favourite child, you are right. Egypt needs peace. And therefore I prophesy by the Great God Amon-Re that one day you will rule Egypt.' His voice sank to a whisper. 'Yes, when the gods are ready, Hatshepsut will be King of Egypt!'

PRINCE FRITTY

When she left her father's palace, Hatshepsut's mind was in such a whirl she could hardly think straight. She – a king! It was unheard of! Yet it had been prophesied. In the name of the great Amon-Re, too. So it was up to her to make the prophecy come true.

As soon as she got home, Hatshepsut took herself off to a private room to think things over. But no sooner had she kicked off her sandals and sat down when Amith, her daughter's nurse, was shown in. Although Hatshepsut wanted to be alone, she always found time for Amith. The old slave, as wise as she was wrinkled, was one of the few people the princess felt she could really trust. She looked on her more as a mother than a servant.

'Come in, Amith', Hatshepsut called. 'How's little Neferure today? I hope you've got good news for me. I need it.'

Amith smiled. 'Well yes, Princess. The news is good. The doctors reckon your daughter is definitely on the mend. She ate two bowls of rice and fish, and asked for more! Shall I bring her to you?'

'Yes, do', replied Hatshepsut. 'I shall take her to the temple to give thanks to the gods for making her better.' Amith moved towards the door. 'But before you go, the

princess went on, 'I need your advice on another matter. Come and sit on the floor beside me for a moment.'

After she had dismissed her other slaves and checked to make sure there was no one about (Fritty was in a habit of paying slaves to spy on her), Hatshepsut told Amith about her father's prophecy.

'Well, what do you make of it?' she asked.

For a minute Amith said nothing. Then she looked Hatshepsut in the eye and asked slowly, 'And do you want to be king, Princess?'

'You know I do.'

'Then you probably will be. But don't hurry. First prove that you can rule as well as a man, and keep quiet about your dreams of peace. They may be seen as a sign of weakness.'

'And my husband? What shall I do about him? Have him killed?'

Amith looked surprised. 'You don't mean that, do you?'

Hatshepsut shook her head. 'No, of course not. But how can I be king while he's around?'

'You can't', the nurse replied. 'But he's not a strong man, and the jackal-headed god Anubis may well lead him off to the underworld before long. Just be patient, Princess. The gods always provide for those who wait. Now please may I go and fetch your daughter?'

As Amith was getting to her feet, the sound of angry voices came from the passage outside. Seconds later, Prince Thutmose burst into the room.

'So here you are, wife', he sneered, 'plotting away

with this old hag as usual. What is it this time?
Are you going to poison me?’

Hatshepsut stood up and faced the prince. Her face was as hard as marble. ‘These are my private rooms, husband. Please do not come barging in like that.’

After looking round scornfully, the prince coughed and spat noisily onto the floor at Hatshepsut’s feet. ‘Yours? Ha! The old king will be dead before the end of the summer. Then I’ll take over, and everything will be mine. And everyone will do what I say. Even you, Princess hoity-toity Hatshepsut!’

Hatshepsut looked away. ‘That’s what you think, Fritty fool’, she muttered under her breath. ‘But by Amon-Re! You’ve got a shock coming. I promise you.’