



The palace of Bilqis, the queen of Sheba, was nestled in among Tolok trees and palms. It rose out of this greenness with its stone walls and pillars whitewashed to a startling brilliance. The broad steps were of alabaster, as were its floors and rounded openings. Some called it the Alabaster Palace.

Formal gardens filled every space within the walls that surrounded the palace. These gardens were kept constantly green by the steady flowing of water through the irrigation ditches. The same water poured out of ornate fountains and spilled over into pools cut in the hard rock. Peacocks furled their plumes as they strutted picturesquely under the trees, and tigers and panthers glowered from cages fastened into the walls.

Inside the palace one was first impressed by the soft light pouring through the fretted openings of alabaster. It rested at various times of the day on different portions of the dusty old tapestries, gleamed from gold javelins and shields, and spilled out over worn rectangles of alabaster that formed the floors. This was made even more striking by the general darkness of the whole interior. The palace seemed to be filled with huge, unwieldy storage chests, screens, and oversized, rusted brass incense burners.

Even the throne was enormous and ugly. It was raised off the floor by a series of tiers covered in black ebony. Tradition said that it had been carved out of alabaster at some far distant time by workmen who first worshiped the bull-shaped moon god. A bull's head with red ruby eyes glared from its back while each armrest was the bull's foreleg and ended in crudely carved hooves.

In short, the palace still bore the firm imprint of the old king. It even smelled more of musk and stale beer than of the rose petals the queen had ordered strewn across the floors. Her own rooms and bed chamber were oppressive. The huge bed with its curtains, the carved chests for the royal robes, the old wooden stand with openings stuffed with documents, and

the ever-present scribe's desk took up most of the space.

The Egyptian maid complained that she had only large baskets in which to store the queen's cosmetics, and the collection of gold shields that had been the old king's pride left no room for the silver mirrors that she had brought with her from Egypt.

The one redeeming feature was the bank of latticed windows that let in the fresh breeze and opened onto a balcony shaded by some ancient vines. On this day the shutters were open, giving a lovely view of the distant mountains and the stonework of the great dam that made the greenness of this valley possible. It was a lovely sight, but it was completely wasted on the queen.

"I'll not have him," Bilqis said as she impatiently snatched the carved ivory comb from her attendant and began pulling it through her thick hair with short quick strokes.

"Your highness," her Egyptian maid wailed, "you'll spoil the effect."

"You're making me look like a silly bride and I am not a bride. I am the ruler of Sheba." With both hands she grabbed up fistfuls of hair and pulled. "I may yet have this all shaved off like the queens of Egypt."

Immediately there were wild shrieks of dismay as all of her ladies fluttered around her pleading that she not do such a thing to her beautiful hair. The Egyptian maid began to cry, and at this crucial moment there was the sound of a door slamming and hurried footsteps along the outer hall.

"What's the trouble? I heard screaming." An old woman dressed in black with a red turban holding her gray hair in place stood like an avenging eagle viewing the scene.

"Now she's threatening to . . . to shave her head . . . cut her hair." The Egyptian beautician had fallen to her knees and tears were coursing down her cheeks while the young maidens were huddled together speechless.

Bilqis turned and smiled at the old woman. "Najja, they are trying to make me beautiful, and I must be like a vulture or no one will obey me." She let go of her hair and made her face as ugly as possible, all the time looking in the clouded brass mirror to see the effect.

The Egyptian turned to old Najja. "It's impossible for her to shave her head. In Egypt the crown is not like this. It fits the head and hair is not necessary."

“Of course the trouble is not the crown or the hair; it’s the bridegroom that’s waiting. Am I right?” Najja’s voice was soft and tender and its effect on Bilqis was to melt her stiff facade.

“Go, all of you. Go and leave me with Najja.” Bilqis said as she patted her hair back in place and held her mirror so it caught the image in the larger, highly polished brass tray now held by Najja.

“I haven’t finished the hair,” the Egyptian wailed, wringing her hands. “It’ll be a disgrace.”

“Don’t worry,” Bilqis said, as she impulsively handed her mirror to the Egyptian and turned to look in the larger mirror. “I’ll pull a lock on each side like this, arrange the gold ornaments on my forehead spilling down the sides, then the crown will fit nicely around the top.” All the time she was talking she was busy twisting, tying, and adjusting. “There, I am ready without all the fuss,” she said finally. “Now go. All of you. I must see Najja for a few moments.”

They backed from her presence, their eyes on the floor until they were a respectful distance, and then they turned and fled through the curtained doorway. They were still not used to a woman’s being both king and queen.

“Go Najja. Follow them and see that no one remains listening at the door.”

Najja pulled the heavy tapestry aside and nodded. Only the usual guards were there.

“Good, then we have a few minutes.”

“You know your uncle is growing impatient. He has been waiting in the formal reception room all morning,” Najja said.

“I’ll not marry my cousin. They can’t force me. I’m the ruler now.”

“But my dear . . .”

“I know. They have all argued and pled. They say I’ve been queen for three years and it’s time I think about a consort and an heir.”

“Well, it is the usual thing.”

“They have tried every argument imaginable. Some say I will anger the old earth gods, others warn that if I have no child, at my death the strongest man will take over. Already they are worrying about my death.” Bilqis pulled back the jewels that dripped from her headdress. “Najja, I need my earrings,” she said laughing.

“These?” Najja held a golden orb on each outstretched palm.

Bilqis nodded and went on explaining. "You should have seen our High Priest; he prophesied before all the wise men and counselors that if I didn't marry, my line would be like a desert well left untended until the sand blew over it and it became as though it had never existed."

"What he says is true. Do you find your cousin so repulsive then?"

"He's a braggart, a proud peacock with no understanding. He wants the throne of Sheba, the gold of her rich mines, the caravans and revenues. He pictures himself sitting on my golden throne wearing my ruby crown. He is no different from all the other kings and ambassadors that have come pledging their love and affection. They don't want me, they want my throne."

"He's handsome and he's from your family."

"If he were like my father it would be different, but he's a fool."

"Come, look through the peephole at him. See how fine he is." Najja went to the wall and pulled back a hanging to reveal a well-placed viewing hole. Bilqis saw her cousin Rydan. He was pacing the floor. Back and forth he went while all the time his jeweled hands held a rolled parchment that he thumped impatiently against his other hand.

It was obvious his turban was of the finest material and his beard carefully trimmed, but his eyes were like hard bits of flint. His mouth was set in a firm, defiant line.

The ornate reception room with its old swords and shields of brave men long dead decorating the wall and gathering dust was now full of the men from her family and tribe. They were all well dressed, perfumed, and sophisticated. Rydan's father, Hammed, was sitting bolt upright in the middle of a divan that stretched along the back wall. His large stomach filled the rich robe he wore and hid his belt completely. His eyes were wide open with that look of alertness that made one think he was very intelligent.

"See how eager they are to get their hands on my throne," Bilqis said as she let the hanging drop. "It must not happen. Another man I could divorce or banish, but a cousin never. He could do as he pleased and I would be at his mercy."

"But he is of your father's blood."

"He is not at all like my father. He is ambitious. I don't trust him."

"Is there anyone you do trust?"

Bilqis smiled and reached out to take the old nurse's hands.

“You. I trust you. You were the first person I remember. I held your finger to take my first step and you always tasted my food to be sure I wouldn’t be poisoned. Then, the priests—I trust them also. They know very well that if a man were king he would insist on the priestly crown as well as the royal crown. All the old kings did.”

Najja began to wring her hands nervously. “Be careful my dear. You are all alone. No father, no mother, and the whole tribe is plotting a marriage to your cousin. How can you stand against them?”

Bilqis motioned for Najja to hold the mirror again. She wet a finger and polished one of the jewels in the crown. “It is a bit big for me, but I’ll wear it as my father would have wished. I’ll be my father’s son.” With both hands she steadied it on her head, and then gathering up her robes, she told Najja to go alert the house guards. “I’ll go surrounded by my own men and the priests. They’ll not disappoint me.”

Hours later she returned to the same room exhausted but with a glow of triumph about her. She had won a partial victory, and it was reflected in the new respect her maidens gave her. Their eyes looked at her with some of the awe usually reserved for images in the temple.

“My jewels, Nimba,” she said holding out her arms and letting her bracelets slide into the girl’s waiting hands. “My headpiece,” she said motioning to the Egyptian as she sat down on the large cushion in the middle of the room. She reached up and took the crown from her head and held it lightly in her arms as the Egyptian removed the gold filigree with the coins.

Later as she lay within the gathered curtains on her bed, Najja came to take any last request. “You still have the crown?” she questioned, as she saw it cradled in her arms.

“The crown will sleep with me tonight. It’s not fickle like a man.”

“You have a very bad impression of men, I’m afraid.”

“Not all men. But it was so obvious what my uncle wanted and what my cousin lusted for—not me. I assure you it was not me. I know that for all his nice talk once he has the agreement signed and I’m his, everything will change. He’ll see that I have breasts and buttocks like any other woman and he’ll set out to dominate me. I’ve been given a little more time and I’m determined to think of something.”

“Then it’s simple. Pick a weak man.”

Bilqis sat up and hugged the crown more tightly. “I’ve heard that even

the weakest sort of man becomes a strutting cock when he's had his way," she said. "Anyway, I'm not one to be taken by a weak man. I must give myself, and I can only give myself to one who's strong."

"Then it's impossible." Najja drew the fine linen sheet over her and backed away.

Bilqis lay in the darkness watching the evening breeze move the curtain that encircled her bed. She could hear the steady breathing of her maidens scattered on pallets in the adjoining room and the soft night noises coming from the garden that lay just outside her latticed window.

She knew this would not be the end. Her uncle was only appeased, not convinced. The priests had backed her but only by agreeing that she didn't have to marry her cousin right away. However, they still insisted she must marry. To escape their plots and plans would take every bit of cunning she possessed. She lay awake going over each aspect of the situation several times and finally turned over and fell into a troubled sleep.

This was not the only problem Bilqis was to face. The next morning as she sat in the council chamber with her wise men, she heard news that deeply disturbed her. "My queen," the young councilman said, bowing to the ground.

"Speak, we'll hear what you have to say," Bilqis said, touching his shoulder with her mace.

"Some moons ago a trader, a Jew from Jericho called Badget, or more often Hopoe, appeared before your highness."

"Yes, I remember the fellow well. He hadn't paid tribute and he tried to distract us by telling some strange story about his king building a fleet of ships on the Red Sea. I remember we laughed at the idea."

"It is no laughing matter, my queen. I sent a group of men down to the coast to spy out the situation, and I have stationed men at the city gate watching for this Jew when he comes this way again. We need to question him further."

"You have done all this without my orders?"

"My queen, you must pardon me. No one took this man seriously. I was afraid . . ."

"Yes, yes, we did laugh. What did you find?"

"I found it was true. This upstart king. This one who rules from the barren heights west of the King's Highway has indeed built a fleet of ships.

He has completely bypassed us.”

There was a deadly silence, then an uproar broke out. Each one of her counselors had an opinion or a question and they all spoke at once.

“An impossible plan.”

“It can’t be true.”

“They aren’t seamen!”

“There’s the monsoon. They can’t have counted on that.”

Bilqis had her chief councilman order their silence. “I can’t imagine,” she said, “that a king who knows nothing of the sea can manage such a thing unless he knows magic and has the Jinn working for him.”

“That’s the most frightening thing about all this,” Tamrin, the queen’s trader said. “This king has somehow tricked Hiram of Phoenicia into building the ships and has gotten the magicians to tell him where the treasures are. Monsoons are nothing to him. He simply orders the Jinn and they do his bidding through their magic.”

Again questions and answers flew back and forth until the chief councilman signaled for silence; the queen had a question.

“How do we know the Jinn work their magic for this king?” she asked in a skeptical tone.

“There are more and more strange reports,” Tamrin said. “For instance, when his father died, the palace was only a warren of old buildings and their temple was covered with badgerskins. Now, in this short time, without the sound of a hammer or tool of any kind, the king has erected the most beautiful temple in the world. It floats among the clouds and the gold of its walls blinds the eyes.”

“And the palace?” Bilqis prodded.

“The palace rises like the temples of Egypt. Incense floats on the air so that one who enters the city gates finds he is greeted with the aroma of jasmine even in winter.”

“And his wives? Does this king have wives?”

“His palace is bulging with wives and children.”

“So the Jinn work their magic for this king and his wives?”

“His wives work a different magic. His queen is from Rabbath Amman. She brought him assured control of the King’s Highway going from the Red Sea up the Jordan Valley to Damascus. His other queen is the sister of Pharaoh Shishak. She brought him the coastal city of Gezer

and with it the trade route that goes from Egypt to Damascus. The rest of his seven hundred wives have other talents.”

“And his favorite? Surely he has a favorite?”

“Ah yes. He had a favorite. I hear she was a simple country maiden from the north. He wrote songs praising her and grieved uncontrollably for her when she died. They say he has married all these women, even added three hundred concubines looking for another like her.”

“Well,” Bilqis said squaring her shoulders and standing, “what do you suggest we do?”

“It is obvious, my queen. We must fight.”

At that all the counselors rose and began shouting and encouraging each other with the exciting prospects of planning a major battle.

“We must call the commanders and the captains.”

“Assess our weapons.”

“Gather our friends from neighboring countries.”

“Send messengers.”

“Buy supplies.”

Bilqis waited until the turmoil died down and then she spoke in a quiet, commanding voice. “We don’t need to fight. There are other ways.”

“What other ways, my queen?” one old counselor dared to ask.

“If he can work magic with the Jinn, so can we,” Bilqis said confidently. “We’ll let the Jinn and their magic do the fighting for us. Undoubtedly our priests can summon stronger Jinn and magic than his can. They can stir up the winds or have his ships wrecked on the rocks. They’ll finish his wonderful idea of a new trade route.” Seeing that her counselors were all busy mulling over what she had said and not wanting to argue her point, she nodded to her attendants and swept from the room.



The next morning Bilqis was wakened in the predawn darkness by one of her maidens. It was the day on which the last dim outline of the dying moon god, Ilumquh, could be seen in the morning sky. Today, as always at such times, there would be special sacrifices at the temple.

She stepped into the waiting palanquin and rode down the avenue of light to the great oval place of meeting. It was her custom to be present with her maidens for the morning ceremonies of incense and chanting. As she was carried through a thicket of oleanders to the marble steps that led up to the temple's entryway, she was conscious of the bubbling, trickling noise made by the water running through the irrigation ditches. "God willing," she thought, "the new moon will come again. But if anything should happen to the dam, this whole area would become desert. This is what we must fear."

That didn't mean that this monthly ceremony wasn't important because when Ilumquh left the sky and it was dark, then all the evil spirits and Jinn had an opportunity to work their mischief. Bilqis had always feared that the Jinn would someday destroy the dam, and at the dark of the moon this was most likely to take place. The dam must be guarded carefully at this dangerous time, and then by sacrifice, incense, and special offerings the moon god would be encouraged to return and they would all be safe.

Already inside the oval place of meeting, the chalk-faced black-robed priestesses, dedicated to the god Ilumquh, were chanting and weeping. Old women, toothless and haggard, sat in the shadowy comers under the sheltering pillars that circled the inner temple, drumming ominous rhythms on the deep-bellied drums of fate. Castanets rattled frantically as the wailing mounted and a band of temple priestesses came through the far door. Their faces were painted into grimaces of pain and they walked with a jerking, dipping motion that made their loose hair and mourning rags shudder with suppressed anguish.

The air reeked with the odor of burned hair and hot blood mingled with stale incense. It was the odor of Ilumquh, a god who could be gentle as moonbeams but fierce as a raging bull when aroused. There had been times in the past when only a human sacrifice calmed his destructive nature. But that had been before the dam had been built. They with their wits had outsmarted Ilumquh, and there were no more droughts.

In the center of the open courtyard, priests could be seen dimly through the rancid smoke stoking the altar fire. From time to time one would come with a golden vessel and pour clotted blood on the altar's horns. This was a signal for the priests to prostrate themselves or circle the altar chanting traditional songs of Ilumquh's death.

Ilumquh's earthly form was that of the bull, and there were carved alabaster bull's heads on the four sides of the massive altar. At the height of the ceremony the golden bull that lived in the small temple beside the pillared hall was brought out into the open court. It was hoped he would protect them with his own special magic while Ilumquh was gone from the night sky.

No marriages took place at this time, no seed was planted, and no business transacted. The moonless night that followed was a night in which the dreaded Jinn worked their worst charms. Witches and ghouls were abroad and evil deeds prospered.

Bilqis sat in the special enclosure reserved for royalty while the people stood in the open courtyard watching the faint wraith of a crescent that the sick moon had become. As it drifted over the edge of the temple wall, a great wailing and beating of breasts, even pulling of hair and loud chanting, erupted. Ilumquh had sickened and was dead.

As the ceremony came to an end, Bilqis moved toward her palanquin. She was eager to leave the stench and depressing air of Ilumquh's temple. Suddenly she noticed her maidens drawing back, even bowing, with a look of awe and fear on their faces. Bilqis turned and in the light of a waxed taper she saw the High Priest himself coming toward her. He made her feel uneasy. He wore the crown of Ilumquh with the dread eagle mask hanging by a cord around his neck. His ornate gold-encrusted robes were stained with blood, and there was the odor of burned flesh and singed hair that was stronger than the incense. His beard was clipped to a point and his eyes were cold.

Now as at other times in the past, it was his hands that bothered her

the most. His fingers were long and tapered, always nervously plucking at things. He seemed to be constantly questioning, probing, and divining the worst in any situation.

Bilqis wished that her father had chosen another one of the priests for this office. Though he made an impressive sight before the great altar and his voice had power to make even brave men tremble, there was something almost sinister about Il Hamd. He was ambitious, even ruthless, where his interests were concerned. However, he needed her support and so she trusted him.

“My queen,” the High Priest said, bowing only slightly and not waiting for her recognition before he continued, “since I am the great Ilumquh’s high priest, it is my duty to warn you. If you don’t choose a consort soon there will be much trouble.”

“Trouble? Who will dare to cause trouble? It’s a private matter.”

“Nothing is private when one is a queen. It’s been three years since you came to the throne and still there is no consort.”

“Why now? Why are you bringing this up now?”

“The stars are in the right position for success. Your tribe demands it and the people are waiting. Who knows what evil will come upon us if there is no heir to the throne. At the time of the new moon, I will come for your answer.”

“What do you mean, my answer?”

“Why, I will expect you to have chosen someone from your tribe or one of the noble sheiks that have come forward with offers of marriage.”

Bilqis tossed her head defiantly. “I’ll have none of them,” she said emphatically.

“But you must not take the matter of the stars and their control so lightly. Think what it would mean to Sheba if there is no heir.”

“The men you’ve mentioned are all greedy vultures plotting to wear the crown of Sheba.”

“But you must understand. All the omens both in the stars and the sheep’s liver, the flying bats, and the drawing of the chances point to this time as being right for your marriage. When the people hear . . .”

“Then tell the people that when someone comes that is not self-seeking and greedy, someone who is strong, someone I can admire, then I’ll give myself, but not before.”

“You are asking the impossible. Only a god would fit that description. Tomorrow I will come for your decision.”

“You will have my decision right now. Until someone suitable is found, I will remain as I am.”

“So you have rejected the son of your uncle and the finest princes of Sheba as well as the neighboring kings. There is no one left but the god himself, Ilumquh.” His words were stern and harsh and Bilqis knew that he meant just what he said.

“And what if I choose the god Ilumquh?”

For a moment he seemed stunned. Then with a quick intake of breath he said, “Then you would come on the night of Ilumquh’s full strength and spend the night in his pillared pavilion. Hopefully you would conceive.”

“I would bring my maidens and . . .”

“You would have to come alone.”

“I don’t understand.”

“I must have your answer at the rising of the new moon. If you want strength, what could be stronger than Ilumquh?” With that he bowed low and disappeared into the shadows as quickly as he had appeared.

Bilqis was first angry and then frustrated. She wondered which of her relatives had thought of this. It was a trick. If she didn’t accept her cousin, then she would have to accept the strange ritual of coming to the temple as the bride of Ilumquh. It was impossible to refuse Ilumquh. The High Priest and her relatives were counting on this very thing. Of course they expected her to become what they called “reasonable” and marry her cousin. She would have to think about it. There must be some way out of this dilemma.

The torches had been extinguished and the great hall was almost clear of people. Only some old hags remained, and they were leisurely sweeping the marble floor with short brooms made of reeds. The fire on the altar was dying down and the golden calf stood gleaming on his pedestal. Bilqis paused to glance in his direction. Suddenly his ruby eyes flashed and glinted, emitting some strange power that seemed to paralyze her.

With a gasp of horror she turned from the fearful sight and hurried out the door and down the marble steps to her palanquin. Once inside she ordered the curtains closed tightly and the bearers to hurry. She had been badly shaken, but by the time she reached the palace she was composed and determined to block the whole episode from her mind.

The next morning when she came to the Hall of Judgment, she noticed it was more crowded than usual. She noticed there were some Egyptians of rank present and she wondered what they would propose. She must remember to save time for them after the usual business of the day.

As she entered, the people fell to the floor in waves, leaving a path down which she walked. Her eunuchs, great black Nubians given her by the Egyptian pharaoh, stood behind her throne while her counselors came and went among the people sorting out the most important cases. With a flourish of standards and the traditional shout of allegiance from the people, she mounted the six steps and seated herself on her throne.

Always at such times she felt the exhilaration of the challenge before her. Her counselors were cultured, learned men who were quick to notice any flaw in her judgment. She could see in their eyes the constant questioning of her ability to hold this exalted position. She could demand nothing of them. She must rule by her wits and she must never take anything for granted.

The morning went quickly and she was satisfied with the judgments she had made. She could see approval in the eyes of some of the older men, and she knew she had not disappointed them. Though her power was absolute and her decisions were final, still she needed this encouragement.

The last case was brought by one of her father's old counselors. He was loyal and helpful to her for her father's sake, but he was known as a man to be feared. The man with him was obviously wealthy. "Saiid Majd comes with a complaint against this young man and his mother," the counselor said.

The counselor had mounted the steps to the throne and was holding his voice to a low level so no one else could hear. "The young man has had the audacity to accuse Saiid Majd of moving the boundary stones at the edge of his property."

"Let the young man or his mother speak," Bilqis ordered.

The young man hung back, but his mother pushed him forward. He fell on his knees while everyone laughed at his confusion. "My father left the land to us," he managed to say before the counselor interrupted.

"You can see, my queen, that this young man is still a child. It's impossible

for him to care for the land, and his mother is incapable of hard labor.”

At this the woman rushed forward and threw herself at the queen’s feet. “Your majesty,” she said, “we are poor people. This piece of land is all my son has as an inheritance. Both of us are willing to work from morning to night.”

“It is better this woman goes back to her father’s house,” the counselor said in clipped tones.

“It is a small parcel of land,” the wealthy man said, shrugging his shoulders.

“It is all my son has from his father. Never will he be able to get more land that is near the dam and well irrigated.”

At this point Bilqis looked at the wealthy man and then at the crowd of her own counselors. It was obvious they cared nothing for the woman’s problem. It had never been expedient to side with the poor. It was settled from the beginning. The woman should never have brought her son. She should never have complained. It was best that she go home to her father.

“It is settled,” Bilqis said. “The marker remains.”

She was pleased to see the instant approval on the faces of her counselors and the gloating look of triumph that passed over the wealthy man’s face. She had made what they all considered a wise decision.

She hardly noticed the woman and her son leaving the hall of judgment as Saiid Hajd knelt before her in gratitude and her chief adviser, Aidel, leaned forward and whispered, “Very wise, my queen. The boy and his mother have no influence or position while this man can be of great service to you. Wisdom means using your power to gain the greatest advantage to yourself.”

Bilqis did not answer but instead ordered her eunuchs to clear the audience chamber of everyone but her chief counselors. The cases that had not been dealt with would have to wait until the next day. She had other, more important business to tend to. It had been whispered that an Egyptian officer of rank waited in the vestibule with urgent news from the pharaoh.

In the confusion and turmoil that followed as the people were led from the hall, she found herself thinking again of her uncle and the tribesmen who were pressuring her to marry. “I’ll never marry that weak, sniveling cousin. It’ll serve them right if I surprise them and choose Iulumquh instead.”

She saw that her uncle and cousin had remained with her counselors.

This was their right, but it irritated her. Her resolve was firming to meet the god himself. To bear a son by that god. What power that would give her son. She couldn't even imagine what such an encounter would be like. She ran her hand over the leopard-skin covering of the cushion she sat on. Here in Sheba their emblem was the leopard, and on festive occasions she wore the skin with the head fitted over one shoulder and the smooth, spotted hide draped down over her back. Leopards weren't afraid of anything, and neither was she. Even the god's lustful, ruby eyes were not going to frighten her.

Slowly she became aware of the silence that filled the room and realized her counselors were all assembled and waiting. With a nod of her head the trumpets were raised and the great doors opened, revealing a group of richly dressed men surrounding a fat, balding dignitary that was obviously the Egyptian ambassador.

As usual they prostrated themselves before the throne and had brought an array of elegant gifts from the pharaoh. Finally, as the pages and slaves moved back, Bilqis invited the ambassador to join her at the throne.

When he was at last settled and had delivered his pharaoh's greetings and small personal messages, he proceeded to pull a scroll of papyrus from an intricately decorated silver case hung on his girdle. With great deliberation he unrolled it and handed it to one of the scribes to read.

The message was more direct and less flowery than usual, and the whole assembly was impressed with the urgency of the pharaoh's concern. "A certain king named Solomon is planning to bypass the old trade routes," the scribe began and proceeded to read at length all that the pharaoh had gleaned from the threatening venture.

When the scribe had finished, Bilqis spoke slowly and deliberately. "I know of this king and have heard rumors of this venture. He is famous for his wisdom and rules in a mountainous area very far from the sea. I would think it impossible for him to find men to build the ships, master the monsoons, and find the merchandise."

"The pharaoh has definite proof that the ships have already been built and have made at least one voyage down the Red Sea."

"May I ask what proof he has?"

Here the ambassador leaned over so the court could not hear him as he whispered, "It is on the best authority. The pharaoh's sister is married to

Solomon and reports everything that happens to her brother.”

“She is a spy.”

“You might say so.”

“Does Solomon know?”

“Of course not. He loves and trusts her.”

“And what does the pharaoh suggest we do?”

“It is quite simple. If all of us along the various trade routes band together and hold firm, we can defeat him and bring his fancy plans to naught.”

“And?”

“If it comes to war we will march together. He cannot stand against us.”

“I would like to think there is a better way.”

The ambassador looked puzzled. “It would be hard to find a better way, but we are always ready to listen.”

“I have no plan right now. Now is the time to gather facts. We must find out all we can about the fleet of ships and even the king that has dared attempt such a thing. Perhaps nothing will come of it.”

“And if no other way can be found?”

For a moment Bilqis was silent, studying his face. When she spoke it was with strength and determination. “Then we will cast our lot with Egypt. We have no other choice.”

With a few other formalities she dismissed the ambassador and his men. They would be well entertained, and in the meantime she was determined to glean more information. Turning to one of the pages, she ordered, “I have been told the camel driver named Badget has again been seen at the gate. Go find him for me. I want to talk to him.” With that she dismissed them with a wave of her hand.

The two sleek, well-groomed leopards were led out by their trainers, the banners were taken from their sockets by eunuchs, and the palace guards lowered their spears as they walked in front of the queen leaving the Nubians to march in formation behind her.

* * *

Late that night Badget was found sitting by the fire at the local inn talking to some of the other traders. He was at first frightened and then pleased to hear that the queen wanted to see him. “She wants to hear cer-

tain news of your king,” he was told by the messenger. Badget was always ready to spread the news he gained on his travels and to be called by the queen would give him more to tell in the future.

The queen had decided to receive him in the informal atmosphere of her outdoor pavilion. Badget found her seated on a dais covered with leopard skins. A taster sipped from a silver goblet and then handed it to the queen.

Bilqis drank slowly from the goblet but kept her eyes on Badget, who had fallen prostrate on the ground before her with his head touching the ground. As she handed the goblet back to the servant, she motioned to Badget. “You may rise,” she said.

Badget scrambled to his feet and took the seat she had prepared for him on the ground before the dais. “I am at your service,” he said in his most contrite manner.

“I see that you are used to appearing before royalty.”

“I’ve had my opportunities,” he said, trying hard to keep from smiling his pleasure.

“Tell me, has this king of yours really sailed ships down the Red Sea?”

“They have made their first trip, your highness.”

“But the storms and winds of the monsoons. Is he not afraid of them?”

Badget’s eyes grew large. Here was an opportunity to brag. “Your highness, this is no problem to one such as Solomon. He controls the rains and keeps the four winds in bags under his throne.”

“Come now. He is certainly a human being and not a god.”

“Aye, he is not a god, but he knows the god’s secrets and that is even better than being a god.”

“Tell me, how does he rule his people?”

“I can’t rightly say. It’s a bit of a mystery. He doesn’t need anyone to taste his food. That I do know.” Badget nodded in the direction of the queen’s taster.

The queen was immediately interested. “How can that be? Is he not afraid of poison? Does he have some medicine that is stronger than the poison?”

“No, it is not that. Though I’m sure he could do that too if he wanted to.”

“Doesn’t he have any enemies?”

“Oh yes. He has enemies, but not the kind your highness has.”

“What do you mean?”

Badget hesitated and then explained. “I was in the palace today and saw the wealthy fellow who had moved the land marker. Solomon wouldn’t have decided it that way.”

Now Bilqis was leaning forward with real interest. “What would this perfect king have done?”

“Why, he would have decided for the boy and his mother. The ones who owned the land.”

“I don’t understand? Why would he have done that?”

“There are laws, rules, even the king has to obey them in my country.”

Bilqis laughed a hearty, ringing laugh. “The king has to obey? I don’t obey anyone.” She ran her hand over the leopard skin and tossed her head defiantly.

“Well, the difference is the law. Some things are right and some wrong and the law tells you which are which.”

Again Bilqis laughed. “How ridiculous. What I say is right. I am the queen.”

“Well, all I can say is that he has no taster. If someone gets angry at a decision he makes, they blame the law not him.”

“What a strange country and what a strange king. He is so powerful he controls the winds in bags under his throne and yet he must obey laws.”

The queen seemed to be deep in thought. Badget shifted uneasily. He was no match for the queen. She spent a few moments with her fingers drumming on the arm of the chair and then stood up. “Badget,” she said, “I believe your name is Badget, don’t return home to your country until I give my permission. I am not through with you yet.”

She left the pavilion trailing the three slaves and five Nubians in her wake. She left the Nubians at the door of her apartments and the slaves followed her to the door of the inner chamber. “Bring Najja to me,” she ordered as she went to the balcony that overlooked the lush gardens of her private grounds.

Just as she had known, Ilumquh was totally gone from the sky. “Where did he go? Why must he always desert them?” She drew her robes tighter around her, a cool breeze had come up quite suddenly. It was the dark of the moon and on just such a breeze as this that the Afreet and Jinn

traveled to work their evil magic on human beings.

With a bang she closed the shuttered doors and leaned against them. Only one lamp burned beside her couch. The corners of the room were dark, but through the open door came rays of light and the soft murmuring of her women. Her hands moved to clutch the jeweled scabbard of the short sword hanging from her girdle. It was made of iron, and the Jinn could not touch her as long as she wore it.

She had ordered a double watch at the dam and the priests would offer sacrifices and pray all night. The golden bull would stand in the midst of the temple and frighten away the evil spirits. "Najja," she called and immediately heard one of the outer doors slam.

"Tomorrow the high priest will come for his answer," she thought. "He wouldn't press me so if it weren't important. I must decide. There's no one who can help me. I must decide what I'll do. Surely it is only the Jinn and Afreet that would harm me, and Ilumquh can protect me from both."