

Three Jewels

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Chris Kalyta

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Prologue

In our modern culture Imhotep has been given the role of a villain in two light-hearted adventure films. While I enjoyed those two movies, Imhotep was a real man who was so respected for the things that he accomplished that he was worshipped as a demigod a short time after he died. Yet, so little is know about the man and his life because he existed over 4500 years ago. Please recall that at the beginning of the 3rd Dynasty mankind was barely out of the Stone Age and some of our ancestors were taking their first tentative steps to what would result in our civilization.

1 Stone

Sweat ran down the dark skin on his back as Abuna swung his stone-tipped hoe into the thick, black mud. It was another day of tiresome labour in his field, but in the end the crops that would spring up from this fertile earth would mean life for him and his family. The primitive implement caught in a particularly tangled mass of weeds and roots, and Abuna paused in thought before making the effort to free it. It was his only hoe and it would take time to create a replacement.

He glanced around at this small patch of land. This land was his! His wife gave him a flirtatious smile before bending her back to her own labours, a short distance away from him. Her belly was a little rounder than it had been a couple of months before. Soon they would have a child, and Abuna looked forward to expanding the farm to ensure he could feed any extra mouths. After all, one day those extra mouths would help him expand the farm again, ensuring an extra harvest that could be traded for other goods.

Life was good and, Khum willing, it was just going to get better.

As he paused from his work for a second time, his wife stared at him strangely. Moonafret called to her husband but, uncharacteristically for such a usually attentive husband, he did not respond. Just as she decided to walk over to him to stir him from his daydream, her face slackened and her arms dropped to her sides.

It was several minutes later that an unusual man, leading a score of Abuna's blank-faced neighbours, walked up to the edge of their farm. He stared at the young couple, considering their worth to him. They looked fit enough, although a little underfed, and the life within the female's womb was not so far along that it would limit her usefulness to him.

"Come to me. Come with me. We have much work to do," he said in Nubian so perfect that from the sound of it the locals

would have been sure this stranger had been born among them; yet his appearance, with his pale reddish-brown skin, bald head, and cream-white kilt, indicated he was from very far away. To Nubian eyes the stranger appeared much like an Egyptian, but with a somewhat lighter complexion. Abuna and Moonafret now had no free will to give voice to that observation.

Everyone the stranger encountered followed him with no complaint, neither spoken nor unspoken. It was just as he wanted, and that should have put a smile upon his face but he was as incapable of smiling as he was of showing consideration for his newest human slaves.

2 Gold

Imhotep, dressed in the white robes of his office as king's vizier and high priest, frowned at his underling. The apprentice scribe had kept him away from his appointment at the palace, on what now appeared to be a mere pretence. The younger man stammered and refused to meet Imhotep's eyes, lost in his lies and unable to outthink his superior.

"Thintekhep! Why have you had me here so long when you knew that King Netjerikhet had ordered me to the palace?" Imhotep tried to use his most imperious tone, but in his twenty-six years he had never been able to master the art of giving commands in such a way that they were automatically obeyed. He wondered if it were his lack of an impressive physique that prevented other men from seeing him as a natural leader; all too often he had observed men follow others simply because they had bulging muscles, or what women described as a handsome face.

Imhotep shook his head and forced himself to deal with the current situation. His mind raced. Could there be some legitimate reason as to why Thintekhep would want him here? Nothing came to mind. Those that worked at the temple were busy at their own tasks, or already at the palace waiting on Imhotep's arrival at the king's court. With a sinking feeling Imhotep recalled Hetephernebti and her clear dislike for her husband's vizier. His shoulders drooped.

"Did Queen Hetephernebti order you to keep me distracted here?"

The scribe nodded meekly.

Imhotep turned and was running by the time he left the chamber, the hem of his robes flapping behind him. His mind mused on what the queen might be playing at as he hurtled down hastily-emptied corridors, drawing curious stares from priests who otherwise should have been concentrating upon their appointed tasks. She had shown him veiled hostility many

times, but had never attempted a subterfuge such as this before. And, try as he might, he could not calculate what offence he had given the woman that she might maintain such an enmity.

With his heart pounding at the uncharacteristic exercise, he flew from the temple and ran down the main thoroughfare of Memphis, under the merciless Egyptian sun. Sand was flying into the air behind him, and shouts ahead of him were alerting others to the careless pace at which he ran towards the palace. After running up the stone steps he stopped and caught his breath before the palace guards. One of these guards approached him, and Imhotep waved a greeting at the man. The strange thought occurred to him that large, stone statues stationed appropriately in front of the palace entrance would make the building seem much more impressive.

“You’re late, Lord Imhotep,” chided a man with a deep voice.

With his hands on his knees, and while struggling to breathe in great gasps of air, the vizier looked up to see Captain Horu-temp smiling down at him. The physically imposing commander of the palace guard motioned to two of his men, and they helped Imhotep to stand up straight and offered him some water. As a thankful Imhotep quenched his thirst, the officer wiped the vizier’s sweat-covered face with a dry cloth.

“I — I was delayed.”

The captain gently brushed some dust off Imhotep’s robe with his hand. “Someone as important as you being tardy does not give the appearance of an orderly kingdom, Lord Imhotep.” The man scrutinized the vizier carefully. “Are you ready to go in now?”

Imhotep nodded, and compelled his heartbeat to slow. He took a step forward, and was surprised to see that the captain planned to escort him in. The officer merely shrugged at the vizier’s quizzical glance.

As they marched past the somewhat familiar faces of the royal court and the noble families, Imhotep was glad for the man’s company. It had been he who had suggested Horu-temp

for this position, and the grateful captain had openly acknowledged that he owed the vizier a debt for the promotion. The two men were very different in so many ways, and from very different social circles, but Imhotep was glad to have a friendly face beside him as he walked along the long hall and approached the ruler of the Red and Black Lands. The Horus King sat upon his large bejewelled throne, resplendent in his fine clothing, make-up, golden necklaces, and rings. His Great Royal Wife, Queen Hetephernebti, sat beside her husband upon a smaller and less ornate throne, but she had a regal bearing that outshone her raiment and she stared at Imhotep with a trace of contempt.

“Keep marching,” whispered Horu-temp as the captain came to a stop halfway toward the monarchs and then bowed respectfully.

Imhotep stumbled, then recomposed himself and resumed the long march through the near-silent hall, his sandals slapping too noisily upon the stone floor. There must have been over one hundred people assembled in the chamber and he knew every scrutinizing eye was upon him. These were the wealthiest and most powerful men of Egypt, accompanied by their families. The clothing, cosmetics, and jewellery they wore were a painful reminder to the vizier of his own humble beginnings. Despite how high he'd risen in society, he had learned very quickly that he would never be accepted as one of the true nobility. Not by everyone, he thought with no small amount of frustration.

At last he stood before their majesties. He bowed low, and part of him felt as if he had never been so alone before. He raised his face to gaze up at King Netjerikhet and Queen Hetephernebti, as the two sat upon their thrones with similar looks of general disinterest in the events around them. The vizier's eyes darted off to the right, where the pair of lesser queens lounged amongst pillows and silks. These two watched Imhotep with as keen an interest as did almost everyone else in the hall.

“Good Imhotep,” began the king, “you have taken your time in coming to my halls. I have had need of you and your wisdom.”

Imhotep released his breath. He and his sovereign had been friends for several years and it looked as if that had over-ruled any perceived slight. He had now been gently reminded of his impoliteness and then complimented by the half-god who was his ruler.

“But, husband,” countered the black-eyed queen, “what of his rudeness? Surely your subjects should not be allowed to take your commands so lightly.”

“I meant no disrespect, my king. I am always your loyal servant.” Imhotep bowed low again, far lower than courtesy demanded.

The king leaned forward. “My queen seems to take some umbrage at your behaviour, Imhotep.” The vizier’s eyes opened wide as he thought that over, his mind raced over possible reasons Hetephernebti might have wished to have him arrive late on this particular day but he could come up with nothing concrete. Yes, the queen did not like him and possibly resented his close ties to the king but she was the queen and must know she had no reason to fear him.

“He has slighted you twice, my love.” Imhotep struggled to recall a previous slight against his liege. “I think it is time that he paid the price for his disloyalty,” she purred. “Even your Imhotep is not above the order of things, else the raging chaos that whirls about outside our beloved Egypt will threaten us all.”

“What have you to say for yourself, Imhotep?” demanded the king.

The vizier rose from his bow slowly. He eyes went from the king to the queen, and then back. “I am loyal to you, King Netjerikhet. I can recall no time that I have offered insult to either of you, and seek your guidance on how I may make amends for my slight.”

“What would you be willing to do to make things right, Imhotep?” Hetephernebti asked, with the beginnings of a smile upon her lips. He had never seen her smile at him before.

“Anything, my queen. I would do nothing to risk the order that King Netjerikhet blesses the Black and Red Lands with. Egypt is perfect, and all else is chaos,” he repeated dutifully.

Imhotep’s eyes darted away from the lovely monarch as he risked a glance at the two lesser Queens. These regal ladies were watching these events with great curiosity, but no hidden knowledge as far as Imhotep could tell. He returned his gaze to the queen’s and was embarrassed to see she had followed his gaze. When she looked back at him her smile grew even wider, but her eyes remained cold.

“Know, Imhotep,” stated the King, “that what is to follow is the queen’s command. You are as bound by it as you would be if it had come from my own lips.”

Queen Hetephernebti rose from her throne. “Bring them in!” she commanded in a loud voice.

Imhotep watched as several guards left the throne room and then returned within a few seconds. With them came three women. One was a common woman, perhaps a farmer’s daughter, or so her rough clothing, lack of facial make-up, and poorly bound tresses indicated. The second was a young noblewoman, judging by the ornate order of her hair, the fine colouring around her eyes, the softness of her skirt, and the sheer material across her breasts. Imhotep did not recognize her by name but he was fairly confident that she had been among one of the flocks of young ladies who visited the royal court in the hopes of finding a rising husband. The third was a finely, although oddly dressed, young woman who glared at all around her. She was Nubian by her look; and her clothing, which consisted of a wrap about her hips and another about her breasts, indicated that she was of very high birth.

“Imhotep!” He turned to find the queen pointing her finger at him. Her smile had vanished. “You have been very disloyal to your king. You have performed many vital services in his name,

but you have avoided the most important of services that a man of your abilities and position is required to submit to.”

Imhotep glanced at the king, lost, and spied his old friend struggling to keep his face emotionless. He knew the couple well enough to recognize that what was going on was something that both had planned out, and he no longer had any fear that his status or life might be in jeopardy.

“Imhotep!” He fixed his eyes back upon Queen Hetephernebti. “You have not provided any offspring to serve your king, his children, or his children’s children!”

As the queen turned about, murmurs were heard from those assembled. She sat down upon her throne and stared at individuals in the crowd until they silenced themselves.

“Imhotep! From among these three women you will select a wife. I know you have previously avoided the company of women, finding little of interest in the fairer sex.” She let that statement hang in the air for a while, long enough for Imhotep to wonder if that was the reason for her dislike of him. “I command that you must spend a month with each woman. After three months you will present yourself at court and announce your choice for wife.”

Murmuring began in the crowd once again. Imhotep could not hear exactly what was being said, nor was he really listening to it. Instead, his mind reeled at the prospect of finding a wife. While the queen had been correct that he avoided woman, he had not done so out of disrespect for them or out of a lack of interest in them. He merely had no time for them, nor did he meet any, aside from female slaves, while performing his duties. He did not even know how females thought, although he suspected their hearts were not too different from those of men.

“I didn’t offer my daughter up for the likes of him!” called out a man in the crowd.

“I would rather marry a jackal than a pig of an Egyptian!” shouted out a woman from somewhere behind the vizier. Her strong accent marked her as the Nubian.

Imhotep's cheeks grew hot. He hated being the centre of attention, and now he was being insulted for the entire court's enjoyment.

"SILENCE!" roared King Netjerikhet.

The entire hall went quiet instantly. A faint echo of the king's voice passed around the columned chamber.

"To ensure that everyone involved is properly motivated," said the queen, in a preternaturally calm voice, "those who resist my commands will be executed. If Imhotep does not spend a month with each girl then all three will be executed." Two of the young ladies gasped in fright. "And to ensure that the women do their utmost to ensure that Imhotep chooses them, those not chosen by him will be executed."

The hall was silent. Imhotep wondered how this could be possible. He had known the king for years, long before his friend had inherited the throne from his uncle. Then he recalled that his monarch was responsible for maintaining all of Egypt. King Netjerikhet and Queen Hetephernebti regularly sent people out on tasks that could mean their deaths, and they both had the ability to stay executions of criminals but Imhotep could not recall either of them ever having saved the life of a condemned man. If Queen Hetephernebti felt it was important to Egypt, she would see it done. Imhotep also considered that the queen suspected he would not want any of these women harmed needlessly, and he thought it likely that both the threat of their executions and the deaths of two of the women were deliberately meant to cause him anguish.

The king rose from his throne, breaking Imhotep out of his sour thoughts, gave his vizier a brief nod and then stalked out of the chamber, followed by a small retinue of guardsmen. Imhotep glanced at the queen who almost imperceptibly tilted her head after her departing husband, although there was a flash of contempt upon her face as she did so. He bowed respectfully to the queen, and then left through the same door that his liege had just used. The sounds of conversation began behind him as he left the throne room.

Imhotep found King Netjerikhet in one of the royal apartments, waiting for his arrival. The guards posted outside allowed him entry without any visible sign of having noticed him.

“Give me your reasons,” said the king in a tired voice, handing Imhotep a goblet of wine.

“I have and continue to be very busy in your service, Djoser,” Imhotep began, addressing the king by his pre-royal name. “This search for a wife will distract me from several projects that...”

“Imhotep, can you not see that Nebti is determined in this? She is correct, and it is high time you found a wife.”

“I’m only twenty-six.”

“And I was but twenty-one when you suggested to me that a certain slim, black-eyed beauty would make a good wife for the ruler of Egypt.”

“And she hates me, despite the fact that I suggested she should be Queen of Egypt.”

“She’s not doing this because she hates you, my friend. And she doesn’t hate you; she simply thinks you are too close to me. There are whispers that you could one day decide to upset the order that I — that we have provided for Egypt. Nebti feels a wife and children would give you new drive and a new connection to me and to our children. She also pointed out that having a brood of Imhoteps serving my successors would ensure a lasting legacy for our children, and for Egypt as a whole.”

“But this whole nonsense about killing the poor girls...”

“I wouldn’t worry about that, Imhotep, you don’t even know any of them. Any or all of them could have perished before you even saw them and how much thought would you have given it? The peasant girl is just another peasant girl. The noble girl is a little more rare, but do you have any idea how many of them pass through these halls hoping to catch the eye of a powerful future husband? And as for the Nubian...well, she’s a barbarian.”

“I just don’t have the time for this...”

“Meaning that you’re scared. Look, women aren’t as frightening as you think. They’re actually as attracted to us as we are to them, strange as that sounds.”

“They didn’t sound too eager...”

“You underestimate yourself. You have wealth and power. You have the ear of the king. Don’t worry about the comments of that idiotic nobleman; Nebti has assured me that fig has fallen far from that particular tree. I think you’ll find that she’s selected young women that suit you well. They’re lovely, pure, and at the very least you are going to be well-entertained for three months.”

“If she’s doing this for my benefit as much as for yours, then why does your first wife always seem so hostile to me?”

King Netjerikhet laughed suddenly. Imhotep waited, although he was more than a little impatient for an explanation. “My friend, you know so many things but you just don’t know people. Let’s leave this as an exercise, and you can report back to me when you have an answer. The first of the girls will be brought to you tomorrow.”

The vizier chuckled, remembering all the times that he had said the same thing to the king when they were students and had studied together. Often Imhotep had outstripped their instructors, and Djoser had spent most of his time listening to his friend’s lessons rather than those of the official tutors. However, those few moments of shared humour between these two friends did not change Imhotep’s underlying sense of dread over the fates of two of these girls.

3 Obsidian

The structure sat before him, atop an earthen slope. The wisdom in building this fort in this place was elegant. Those on the wall could see quite a distance, spotting invaders or an attacking army and sounding an alarm long before the threat reached the mud-brick walls. Attackers would have to rush up the embankment and then somehow ascend the wall while being constantly bombarded by rocks and spears from above. It was a formidable defensive structure.

The bald stranger in the cream-white kilt led his mindless followers right up to the wooden gate of the fort. “Open up!” he called out.

The entryway was unbarred and opened wide for him. He walked in calmly, looking about with mild curiosity. Soldiers stood idle. The man who now controlled this place could hear someone yelling a short distance away, and this troubled him greatly. He went toward the fracas.