

# Steve's Selection of Short Stories: issue 1

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## Pharaoh's law

The Pharaoh yawned as he flicked nonchalantly at a fly with his ostrich feather fan. The fly, ignorant of the mighty Pharaoh, lazily circled his head before disappearing through the large open window and out into the garden and freedom. The day was baking hot, yet it was only an hour since the sun had risen over the palace wall.

'Continue,' ordered the Pharaoh, staring down at the prisoner lying prostrate on the ground before him.

I tightened the grip on my sword and felt a trickle of sweat drip down my back. I felt sick, I had a headache and my stomach was still raw from too much sour wine I had drunk last night. I glanced over towards my fellow guard, Amun. He stood like a rock; the heat never seemed to faze him.

The high priest whispered into the Pharaoh's ear and I watched as the Pharaoh turned his eyes to a sand timer on a table at his side.

I groaned.

'Guards!' shouted the high priest.

I immediately stepped forward and grabbed hold of the prisoner by the arm, Amun took the other arm. Like a dead weight between us we lifted him up and dragged him out of the palace throne room. The prisoner shook like a leaf as we marched him along palace corridors to the cells deep

below.

'What is happening?' cried our prisoner, looking first to me and then to Amun, the look of terror etched on his face.

Amun laughed, it sounded like the hyena in the hot Egyptian desert. 'It would have been quicker for you if our Pharaoh had ordered your immediate death.' He jabbed an imaginary sword into the prisoner's side. 'Into the courtyard and then my sword slicing open your belly,' he boasted with undisguised relish.

I spoke. 'The mighty Pharaoh has ordered the sand timer to be turned over. When the sand has run its course we will be summoned back to the Pharaoh. Only then will he make his decision what your fate will be.'

The prisoner did not reply, but his wide-open eyes spoke volumes.

Soon we reached the cells and I pointed through an open cell door. 'In,' I ordered, dropping onto a wooden chair and pushing a calloused hand over my bald head. The heat was worse down here and I wished for a cool drink.

After a few moments the prisoner coughed, then spoke. 'My name is Ishaq.'

I glanced at his face as he sat amongst the dirt-filled straw. Why was he telling me his name? Soon he will be dead. 'I do not care of your name,' I said, shrugging my shoulders.

Amun had found some figs left over from a previous meal and threw me some. I wasn't very hungry and dropped them on the table between us.

'What's the matter Sefu, you're as miserable as a Tax Collector with no money to jingle.'

I ignored him.

Outside I could hear the sound of splashing water from a fountain in the courtyard and in the distance, the braying of a donkey. I thought of my home by the Nile that I hadn't seen since I left it all those years ago. 'We are just as much prisoner as this man here,' I said, slowly shaking my head.

Amun was throwing figs up into the air and then catching them in his mouth, but he stopped in mid throw. 'Of course we are free Sefu. We can leave here and go to a tavern if we want to, but he can't.'

Amun was as thick as the walls of this palace and knew no better, but before I could speak again, the prisoner interrupted.

'Has the Pharaoh ever let anyone live?'

'No, never,' Amun cackled, his young muscled body rippling beneath his bronzed skin. He had only been a palace guard for two years whilst I had been a guard for twenty. What did he know?

'Yes, I have seen it happen,' I said wearily.

The prisoner dragged himself forward until he was kneeling close to the open door. We had left it ajar, there was nowhere for him to run to. 'What do I have to do?' he begged.

From the lofty height of my wooden chair I looked down at the prisoner cowering below me. His tunic had a large rip at the shoulder and his hair was tousled and unkempt. I looked into his large brown eyes. They reminded me of a newborn fawn and normally I would ignore the prisoners under my charge, but I felt something for this man. Was it his desperation to live? Had he made it personal by telling me his name?

The sun slowly appeared through a small open window and I felt the passageway turn into an oven as its rays pushed the shadows away. I longed for the Nile and the coolness of the water lapping gently at my feet. 'Ishaq,' I said, running his name over my dry tongue. It felt strange. 'When you are before the great king you must look into his eyes.'

Amun laughed. 'Now you make jokes Sefu. You suggest he look the Great Pharaoh in the eyes?' He pointed a finger at the prisoner. 'That will be a slow death for you, a pity.' He touched the sword by his side. 'If you want a quick death, do not look up. My sword is sharp, you won't feel it slide in, that I guarantee.'

The prisoner shuddered and looked to me again. 'You tell me to look into his eyes? Why do you tease me guard, I mean you no harm.'

I sighed. 'Many years ago when the king was but a boy he allowed a man to live because he stared defiantly back at him. The king was impressed with his courage.'

'So he let him go?'

'He still lives.'

'Well I've never seen it before,' Amun grunted and looked at me. 'So what has this one done?' He threw a fig at the prisoners head and missed.

'Do you never listen?' I said.

Amun shook his head. 'No Sefu, I'm a good guard.'

I looked at the prisoner. 'Tell him,' I ordered, feeling the heat draining what strength I had left. I picked up a leather water skin and shook it only to find it was empty.

'Humble sir,' said the prisoner. 'This morning I burnt the bread in the palace kitchen.'

I turned to look closer at him, but I didn't recognise his face. That wasn't unusual; the Pharaoh had thousands of servants and slaves.

We sat alone with our thoughts; the only sound was Amun chomping on figs.

Suddenly a servant on bare feet entered the cell area, and stopped before me. 'It is time,' he whispered, bowing slightly from the waist.

I stood up and stretched my aching back. 'Come, Ishaq,' I ordered.

He stood up and wiped his hands down the sides of his tunic. Tiny droplets of sweat covered his top lip. He licked them nervously.

Amun grabbed one side of the prisoner whilst I took hold of the other. Quickly we marched him back to the Pharaoh. The great king was still on his throne and he stared at us impassively as we

threw the prisoner down at his feet.

The high priest spoke. 'All will be silent before our great king.'

I watched as the last grain of sand fell to the bottom of the hourglass timer. The only movement in the vast room two servants wafting their large ostrich feather fans behind the Pharaoh's head. In the corner, the scribe with his papyrus waited silently. I could feel the tension and, like a lion ready to pounce, waited for my king's order.

Slowly the prisoner lifted his head and gazed straight back at the Pharaoh.

'How dare you look at our great king!' spluttered the high priest. 'Your eyes will be fed to the vultures, you...'

The Pharaoh raised a hand for silence and glanced at me, did he remember?

The scribe began scratching on his papyrus as events unfolded before him.

'Speak, and I shall feed your tongue to my pet cheetah,' the great king said softly to the prisoner.

The prisoner lay perfectly still, his head upturned, his jaw thrust forward as he stared at the Pharaoh on his throne above him.

'What to do with you?' said the Pharaoh, stroking his long thin chin.

I could see Amun from the corner of my eyes; he was fondling the hilt of his sword.

The tension was becoming unbearable. Did I have it wrong?

Unexpectedly, the great king smiled and then began chuckling. His audience slowly laughed with him, not knowing the joke, but knowing his display of irrational behaviour can hit anyone. 'You are banished from my land forever,' he commanded. 'You have,' he nodded at a slave standing beside the sand timer, 'until the sand runs out to be gone.'

The slave turned the hourglass over and the grains of sand started its return journey.

I reached forward and pulled Ishaq up onto his feet. We had to hold him tight; he would have fallen if we had not done so.

'Go!' ordered the Pharaoh. 'All of Egypt will know of my word.'

Amun and I marched him from the throne room; he was like a rag doll between us. I could hear him sobbing. We soon arrived at the palace entrance. Amun pushed him away in disgust and headed back to the cells.

Ishaq grabbed my arms as I tried to brush him down. 'Thank you,' he cried as tears streamed down his ashen face.

'You are free, now go and collect your family. You have only until the sand has gone to leave Egypt.' I lifted a small bag of coins from my belt and placed it in his hands.

He looked up at me. 'Why?' he asked, a small frown wrinkling his forehead.

'Who knows the will of the mighty Gods,' I said exhaling noisily, suddenly feeling too old and too tired. 'Anyway,' I said before he could ask anymore questions. 'When you get to the Nile, say a small prayer for me. Will you do that?'

He nodded.

'Go, you are free.' I pushed him away.

He began running, but then stopped to turn and face me once more. 'That prisoner was you, wasn't it?'

I nodded and thought of my home beside the Nile that I would never see again.

The End

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This is a collection of random short stories written by me over the years. More issues are to follow

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