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Pharaoh's daughter

...I wish I could hear my father sing again.

based on Exodus 2:1-10

by Ralph Milton

from [Is This Your Idea of a Good Time, God?](#)

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I don't think my father wanted to be a Pharaoh. Not if he'd had a choice. He might have been a musician.

Sometimes, when he would give a banquet, father would bring the best musicians in all Egypt to entertain. And I could tell that father loved the music while he disliked the stuffed shirts he invited to the banquet. I remember father singing in the hallways sometimes, years ago when I was just a child, before he was a Pharaoh. Once, he even sang to me, a strong and tender song.

I haven't heard him sing for years. They say the head that wears a crown can never sleep too well, and those who cannot sleep will never sing. Father feels such pressure. I know he does. I can see the tiny muscles just below his ears that move when he's afraid.

Those stuffed shirts who run my father's government are feeling pressure from the hordes of Hebrews. I overheard my father and some other men discuss the problem once.

"Kick the whole bunch out," one man said.

"No," said another. "Who would make our bricks? Who would tend our fields? We need the Hebrews. We just don't need so many. What we need is population control."

Because my father is the Pharaoh, he hardly ever takes his meals with us. He's much too busy. Except every month or two we have a "family time" and we eat a hurried meal together. Father talks to us. We don't talk to father and he hardly looks at us anymore.

"Do you know how strong those Hebrew women are?" he asked us once, not wanting or expecting any answer. "Why, I ordered all the midwives to destroy the male babies just as soon as they are born, but they tell me those Hebrew women just take an hour away from their work, pop out the babies, and go back to work. They just pop them

out, and the midwives aren't even needed." Father laughed dryly at his own humor. "They just pop them out."

I glanced up at my mother then, and she was laughing too, but I could tell it wasn't at my father's humour. "He knows nothing," she said later. "He's never seen a baby born."

"But why would father want those babies killed? Is my own father really such a beast?"

"He is a Pharaoh first and always, and a father only sometimes."

Two weeks later, I was bathing in the Nile, enjoying the cool, fresh water on my body, when Lita, one of my servants pointed to a basket in the reeds nearby.

"Bring it to me!" I said.

"It's a baby!" said Lita as she pushed the basket to me. "It's a beautiful Hebrew baby. My mother is a midwife. She told me soldiers throw the Hebrew baby boys into the river now."

"So *this* is a child my brave father fears." I picked the baby up into my arms and held him close. "My father will not hurt you," I said, not thinking what that huge promise would make in my life.

The baby cried a little. Then it smiled and tried to suck my finger.

"You will start a rumour," I said to Lita. It was a sudden inspiration, and if I'd stopped to think I would not have said it. "You will whisper in the corridors of the palace that I have been seduced by Scrakum, yes Scrakum, the Prime Minister's son. He's such a stuffed shirt. And this is our child."

Lita grinned. "This is against the Pharaoh's law! But I will help you save the child."

"My father's law, to have these babies killed, is wrong, Lita. Women cannot fight the law, but we can resist."

It took a month to get an audience with my own father. "Five minutes. No more," said his secretary, smirking at the child in my arms.

"Yes?" said father in his official Pharaoh voice.

"This baby," I said quietly. "You have heard perhaps that it belongs to Scrakum."

"I have heard. I am making arrangements for you to be part of Scrakum's harem. He doesn't want you for a wife. In fact, he claims the child is not his but he is willing to acknowledge it for my sake. All the palace women say the baby looks like Scrakum."

I looked my father in the eye. "The child is Hebrew," I said firmly.

I could see the fear that ran across my father's face. He sensed immediately the derisive laughter in the corridors if it were known that his own daughter had a baby by a Hebrew slave. The tiny muscles near his ears twitched. He took a long, deep drink of wine.

I had been afraid when I came in the room. Now my fear was gone. "I will tell no one, father. I will go join Scrakum's harem, even though he is a pompous ass. But this is one Hebrew child that I will guard with my whole life, and you will not touch him with your wickedness."

"Get out of here!" He meant it to sound hard and firm, but halfway through his Pharaoh's voice croaked in fear.

And then I pitied him. I pitied him and loved him. And how I wish that I could hear my father sing again.

* In ancient Jewish Midrash, Pharaoh's daughter was named Bithia.

**Ralph Milton has written a number of books,
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