

Part 1

The mighty north winds had been tossing us around in a terrible storm for three days and had thrown us on death's doorstep in the raging chaos of our blasted sails, when they suddenly stopped. As the sea slowly calmed and the waves, which seemed to want to smash our ship to pieces, started dying down, we recovered our courage that had been wrested away by our uncertain fate. We made a sacrifice to the god Serapis on the upper deck and sprinkled the ship with precious liquor to purify it of the impurity of our tears. Everyone congratulated one another for escaping what seemed an inevitable death. The fear of danger, which had kept us from minding our natural needs, had vanished and we ran to the food and drink that beguiles care. The present made us forget the horrors of the past—pleasure is never as intense as when it follows woe. The whole crew took part and after the feast, where Bacchus held sway, all of them, even the helmsmen, were charmed into a deep sleep.

I was the only one who did not give myself up to either debauchery or rest. After a light meal I sat on the poop and looked out over the vastness of the sea with my head full of cruel notions about the harsh fate that persecuted me. I was sunk in these sad thoughts when Sinouis roused me.

"What am I seeing?" he said to me. "Lamekis is shedding tears and I don't know why! His great soul is not prone to the fear of death. It's too lofty to stoop so low. Oh Lamekis! Will my friendship for you ever get to the bottom of your heart? Will you always fend off my thoughtfulness? Since I've known you, since melancholy has tainted your thoughts, I haven't been able to earn your trust. If my devotion is worth anything to you, tell me your secrets. Whatever they are, they will be safe in the bosom of a friend who is not only discreet and sympathetic, but who is also willing to lose his life to prove to you his mettle."

"Oh Sinouis!" I sighed, "You don't know what you're asking. How can I give an account of such an extraordinary life? Aren't you afraid that I will make you part of my constant misfortune?"

"No, No," my true friend continued, "nothing could ever sever me from you. It is by following your destiny that I can prove to you the strength of my feelings. Real friends are proven only in adversity. We shouldn't rely on their assurances of zeal until they've been purified in the fire of disaster."

He said a few other things like that and I was so touched that I could not refuse his insistence. For myself I assured him that I appreciated his zeal and to prove it I began to tell him the story of my life as follows.

Lamekis the Elder, High Priest of Egypt, and Semiramis the Queen

My father, Lamekis, was the High Priest of the god whom they worship in Egypt. Everyone respected him for his honesty, his religion and his kindness. The grandeur of all his actions seemed, if I may say so, to be the very image of the divinity they worshipped in the temple. When he pronounced the oracles, they were spoken so honorably that everyone who heard them felt the holiest of emotions. The veneration they had for this minister made him almost as powerful in the state as Semiramis, who was on the throne at the time. The Queen was very attached to my father and nothing could be decided in the counsels without calling him.

One day she summoned him to her chamber. It was the first time that she was alone with him. She had been attracted to him for a long time and the wisdom of his advice had always made less of an impression on her than his handsome face did.

"Lamekis," she said, "I know the laws of the inner temple, but my way of thinking is above vulgar fears. For many years now I have desired to be initiated in the mysteries of Serapis. You have to satisfy me: any opposition to my resolution will be useless. I want the entrance to the catacombs opened for me. I am Queen and in my realm only my sovereign power commands."

"Oh Princess!" the High Priest cried. "What are you asking of me? Do you know the price you will have to pay?"

“It doesn’t matter,” the impetuous Queen replied. “I want it to happen in three days. Tomorrow I will wait for you to prepare me as you need. Go now and don’t answer. Just consider that Semiramis must really appreciate you to honor you with such a grace.”

The High Priest was upset by this command. He knew the fury of the Princess when she was hampered in her desires. His predecessor became food for the Sacred Leopard¹ when he refused to let her take part in the feast of the golden horn.² It is true that she got revenge for what had got in the way of her desire, but she did not disturb the mysteries by showing up; or maybe also she had heard some of the rumors caused by the death and she did not want to worsen them by being stubborn. But it was no less certain that her power had increased lately and nothing could oppose it.

The High Priest was bewildered and upset. So, being the devoted minister, he ran to his divinity. He invoked it, but was surprised to find it deaf to his voice. “Oh Heavens!” he cried, “Apis refuses to give his eternal orders to his slave! What am I to do? Shall I open the fateful flank?³ Oh Queen, what have you asked? And you, God, whom I have served for so long, does your silence smile or frown upon an order that is so contrary to the laws of the temple? Semiramis represents your supreme power; she is its image. But does this extend all the way to your sanctuary?”

He spoke, but the adamant statue made no sign. He opened the sacred flank, took out the golden key and went down into the catacombs where they kept the eternal fire. The flame, which usually rose up in his presence, remained still. He was flabbergasted. He wanted to speak to the minister of the divine worship who was under his authority, but the law of silence, which had been imposed since the creation of the mysteries, forbade it. He groaned inside. The priests were surprised at his visit and shuddered at the danger it foretold. They knew that their superior should not descend into the catacombs except with the King, only for his consecration, and (except for this) he should not appear unless there was a revolution in the state or some unimaginable event. Lamekis bowed down before the sacred tripod and was purified by the fire. His confidence and strength came back to him and when he went back to the upper temple, he was resolved to defend the integrity of the mysteries. He spent the night at the foot of the altar. The vaults trembled; at the break of day thunder roared. The statue groaned. The horns of the divine bull turned black and from its holy mouth these words came out clearly: “Semiramis is Queen and you are her subject.”

Lamekis, who was used to explaining the oracles, had a hard time finding the meaning of this one. He spent the rest of the day trying to fathom the sovereign will. It seemed to him that on the one hand it was declaring to him the authority of the ruler and on the other the obedience of a subject. He worshipped the divinity, prayed that it would inspire him and, filled with an inner comfort, he went to see Semiramis.

“Well now!” she said when she saw him. “Is the statue of Serapis open to me? Am I going to penetrate at last into the heart of the mysteries?”

“Semiramis is Queen and Lamekis is her subject,” the High Priest replied. “It is for me to obey, but I have to tell you and warn you of the consequences of your dangerous curiosity. Ah, Madame,” he continued, “master this desire that can only result in great harm. What risks will you not run? Your days are too precious for me not to do all I can to dissuade you. Let me explain it to you, that’s my duty, and then you can command your fate and mine.

“Serapis is the greatest of gods. It is he whom we owe for the creation of the Universe and us. With a single breath he can destroy everything that lives and with a single breath he can bring it all back to life. Before he enlightened the Egyptians, they lived in gross ignorance. Crude, savage nature made all their laws. They devoured one another. From his throne on high Serapis took pity on their blindness and decided to make them what they are today. But he wanted to put their wild hearts to the test and know if they were worthy of his favors. He took the form of a bull, unknown to them before then, and appeared one day in the middle of a field speckled with a thousand flowers. He started grazing in front of the people who were gathered for a feast that was being held for a victory over a neighboring enemy, a feast that was celebrated by eating their prisoners. Depending on how this barbarous people welcomed him, Serapis would either heap upon them all the goods of the world or wipe them out to the last one.

¹ The Leopard was highly venerated. It had traveled with the bull Apis and kept him from danger. It was held in a Catacomb and fed on the bodies of criminals.

² This mysterious feast took place on the 1st of Cubai, i.e. May.

³ The belly of the statue contained the key to the underground.

“The Egyptians cried out in astonishment and joy at the sight of this new thing. They ran together toward the sacred bull. His presence inspired them with respect and love. They held each other’s hands and danced around in his honor. Others were fired up by a more reckless passion, which stirred their crude hearts in spite of themselves, and ran to get the severed limbs of their prisoners. They presented them to the god, but he was horrified by the gift and bellowed so loudly that the people got scared. The sky clouded over, lightning flashed and the Heavens caught on fire. The divine bull rose up into the clouds and disappeared in furious thunder after pronouncing these words: ‘Serapis wants to live with the Egyptians. Let them build a temple, but he does not want any sacrifice of human blood.’

“The people were astonished by this prodigy and welcomed the oracle with a thousand signs of joy. At the same time a holy man appeared in the crowd: it was Serapis himself, dressed as a man. He showed the Egyptians a map, put himself in charge and built the temple that still exists today.

“That, great Queen,” Lamekis continued, “was the famous time of the building of the temple, but he kept for himself the mystic underground, built by his own hand. In the catacombs he put the great book in which his laws are written, where it is said that the eternal fire will be sustained by pure men who are born underground where, to preserve the human species and people like today, two official ministers of his worship and three pure virgins⁴ will go down and be placed in the hands of the eldest. The male children were destined to guard the brazier, and the girls, who could never number more than three, were shut up in the Vestasia⁵ Catacomb under the supervision of the eldest priest, who on the first of Kail⁶ handed them over to the ministers reserved for the mysteries. After the ceremony they had to lead them to the okoukais, the doctor of the underground, who was careful to purify their fruit when they conceived.

“But it is said in the same laws that the worship will remain secret and that no mortal will go down into the mystic caves except for the King, and only once—at his coronation to be touched by the divine fire. He will be led by the High Priest and anyone else who enters there, in any way imaginable, will be thrown into the pit of Assoa.⁷ I, Princess, who tell you this, have the right to enter only three times in the course of my ministry. May Serapis and you preserve me from the third, because it will be for my eternal rest. Oh Queen, it is useless to pretend, if you do not take my sage advice, you will never see the light of day again.”

Semiramis trembled at his speech, which was pronounced with such grandeur that it seemed at that moment that the god was speaking through his mouth. Her mind wandered for a few minutes, but her heart (though warned) set her above all fear. “Ah!” she sighed, “what does it matter if I die, as long as I’m with the one I love! Yes, Lamekis,” she saw him shrink back from her declaration, “I love you. I am carried away by an invincible power. The crown cannot protect my heart from the weakness of love. I fought against this relentless flame in vain—nothing will ever be able to extinguish it. My only hope is to invoke Apis in the heart of the mysteries. There I will be healed or find relief for my pain. It’s no use scaring me or opposing my will. I have to go into the sacred caves and bury my passion and shame in their silence. Go!” She did not want to give him time to answer. “At sunrise I will be at the temple gate. And remember, if you resist, I will raze it to the ground.”

Lamекis still tried to use all the eloquence at his disposal to bring the impetuous Princess back to her senses. He argued in vain because she was used to following no law but her own will. Resistance only inflamed her more; nothing could change her final decision.

The High Priest left with a deep sorrow in his heart, which was a bad omen. After purifying himself he went back inside the temple and spent the rest of the day and night kneeling before the statue and watering it with his tears.

Lamекis the Elder and Semiramis enter the catacombs

The Sun had barely lit the azure vaults of the temple with its golden rays when music struck the ears of Lamекis. He had dozed off, weary and troubled, and awoke with a start. He knew only too well

⁴ When the underground was built, Larmis, the first minister of the god, chose three of the most beautiful girls in the capital in the name of Serapis. They held a general assembly and honored the prize so much that the girls continually argued over who should be favored.

⁵ Pure or without stain.

⁶ The month of March.

⁷ At the bottom of which was the sacred leopard.

that they were announcing the arrival of the Queen. She entered the temple alone and after bowing she went to the gate of the sanctuary. Lamekis repeated his sage advice and explained that there was still time to turn back, but her decision was made. She was wearing the crown and her beauty and majesty joined together made her commands so absolute that it was impossible to resist them. The sanctuary was opened and he respectfully presented her with a headband that the Kings used in the coronation ceremony to cover their eyes so they would not know the secret entrance to the catacombs. Semiramis let herself be veiled.

“I am in your hands,” she told him, “but I was smart enough to take all necessary precautions for the dangers you warned me about. I know your honesty and the respect you have for the blood of your Kings. I can see them in the details you gave me, the language of your priesthood, and the idea you must have of my power. But watch out, Lamekis, if you abuse my kindness. I have given orders that will be faithfully carried out. If I am not back in front of my guards and my people in three hours, the temple will be leveled and they will avenge the attack on the ruler of these lands by destroying everyone within.”

The Queen’s determination surprised the High Priest. He had hoped that the fears he tried to instill in her would sway her desire, which was so contrary to the Laws. There was no precedent that the laws had ever been violated; and the death penalty for those who transgressed them should not include the Sovereign, of course. On the other hand, this very penalty would be inflicted on the High Priest because he alone is the secret master of the entrance and the mysteries could not be profaned without his involvement.

Lamekis was so surprised at the Queen’s final words that he stood there without moving. Finally he threw himself on his knees and said to her, “Oh Queen, since you want to be faithfully obeyed, you have to know how to act in order to avoid a certain death. The spirit within these men who are going to be honored by your presence down there differs in every way from normal sentiments. Born in the heart of the earth and in ignorance, they know nothing but Serapis and his laws. I will be the first victim of their fury if I give them any reason to suspect that I have sinned against their eternal rules. Like people living in the woods they are brutal and it would be useless for me to vaunt your superiority and the power of the crown, respect and dependency. Even the power you have over their lives means nothing; nothing will calm them. Their prejudice and the law will make them angry and both of us will become victims of their anger.

“I tell you this, Princess, to protect your precious life. You have to wear the mantle in exactly the same way as our Kings during their initiation when they go down into the mystic catacombs where they stay for a day. Like that, the ministers of our revered god, who don’t know very much about what happens above them, will take you for their master and pay no attention.”

His arguments were too logical to go unheeded. The Queen agreed to be transformed and she changed her orders about when she would come back. When all was done, the High Priest opened the secret trapdoor and led the way holding a torch.

She had to rest several times. The number of steps, already around 2,000, began to frighten her. She thought she was going down into the realm of the dead. But she kept her thoughts to herself. The harder it got, the more curious she became. At the last step a corridor led into a large gallery lit at regular distances by lamps that never went out. The wall was covered with marble inscribed with hieroglyphs showing the mysteries of Serapis. The vast hall was more than 100 measures long and ended in a portico through which could be seen four wide paths lit by an infinite number of lanterns. It was teeming with people who seemed to be doing business like in any big city.

As soon as the High Priest was recognized, a general cry was raised that shook the vaults and the sound of a mournful instrument announced his arrival. When the people heard it, a deep silence followed, the streets were deserted and a thousand new lights appeared, which could have rivaled the brightness of the sunniest day. 12 priests dressed in long cassocks of the finest leather came up and kneeled at their feet. 12 others followed bearing a stretcher with two seats on which the Queen and Lamekis were placed. They walked with a great crowd of people all around them. Semiramis was surprised at this and at that moment she formed a plan that when she got back to her palace she would round up this nursery, which was a feeding ground of rebellion, as she saw it, to make them ordinary subjects.

After walking for about a mile like this, they came to a large square where there was a temple supported by 40 marble columns. An image of Serapis was set on the marble altar and the steps they

went up were sculptured with the latest, most delicate and the most exquisite workmanship. The roof of the temple seemed to come straight out of the vaulting, which here was as high as the eye could see. There were 40 triumphal arches through which they entered the building, each with a door carved with the mysterious history of the divinity.

The stretcher stopped before the temple. The High Priest got the Queen down and they clothed her in a bull-skin coat⁸ whose tail was held by Lamekis. The 24 ministers followed them up the stairs and to the altar. After Semiramis knelt down at the feet of the divine bull, they passed it three times between her legs, an honor reserved only for the master of Egypt.⁹

After this blessing was made, they put her back up on the throne carried by the 12 priests. Lamekis walked in front with his head now decorated: with a great deal of ceremony he was dressed in a very tall cap with four horns driven in lower down and four others with their points out above. A cow's tail came out of the middle tied with golden ribbons, the god's favorite color. Each subordinate minister had on the same hat, but with only one row of horns and the tail was shorter and without ribbons.

The procession went down a broad street that ended in a gate guarded by 25 priests in short coats. They had wide belts from which hung a bull's leg¹⁰ and in their hands they held a kind of pizzle whip. They were all dressed alike: rough black leather with big horn buttons, finely crafted. Their caps had only one horn, but with a crest made from cow ears, very well carved and easy on the eyes. When the procession appeared the ministers were armed and to honor the Queen they held the bull's foot in their hands. The captain of the troop, noticeable by the huge beef tongue he wore as a collar, the sign of his rank, approached Semiramis respectfully, put a finger to his lips and a seal over his heart. With a nod from the High Priest the Queen kissed his head, which was the customary vow not to reveal the mysteries.

The Princess got down from the stretcher and four men brought forth a huge, brass instrument¹¹ with four pipes, which they put to their mouths. The instrument made a raucous, frightening sound that was used to warn the people to go back home and if any were found in the streets by the guards they would be food for the great leopard.

After the ministers sounded their instrument four times, the gate was opened. The High Priest went past the guards first, followed by Semiramis. When they got to the end of the hallway, Lamekis knocked three times on the door and it opened. An old man wearing a hat, which was a lantern with a hanging light, cracked open a window and the High Priest stuck his head through the opening. Four old men came up, recognized him and whispered in his ear.¹² The Queen had to stick her head through too and they changed her sacred headband for a leather one. After this they let her into a hallway that ended in four galleries, each closed by a door with a window.

The High Priest knocked on one and an old man appeared wearing a bull's head that he respectfully took off at the sight of Semiramis. The High Priest was recognized and the door opened. The old man with the bull's head threw himself at the feet of the Queen and after this homage he led the way, prancing and jumping every ten steps.

This gallery was called Koroika¹³ and ended in the catacomb Lesmikis where the book of law was kept. No hieroglyphs decorated it. The walls and the vault were all covered with black marble. When the old man got to the end of the gallery he stamped his foot. Three other ministers of the same age knelt at the entrance holding a finger to their lips.

The Queen was frightened by their looks. They had long beards that hung down to their feet and at the end of every strand was tied a bull's tooth; they clicked and rattled at the slightest movement. But what made their sight hideous was that the weight of all the teeth pried the old men's mouths open

⁸ When a bull died they embalmed his entrails and his whole skin was carefully preserved to be used only by the ministers of the divinity.

⁹ The author is mistaken. The High Priest had the same honor when he was sanctified.

¹⁰ In the 35th article of the Bosoë law, it is said that the priests of Serapis who guard the underground will carry a bull's foot instead of weapons.

¹¹ Called Bursoan. The Egyptians used it when they went into battle.

¹² In spite of much research, what they said has never been discovered.

¹³ According to a famous author this gallery was covered in hieroglyphs that told the story of Serapis. They say that after an earthquake in Egypt in 1504, out of this buried chamber, as we will see, came a surprising number of bas-reliefs, many of which were carried away to different courts in Europe. Among these was a statue of a high priest with a finger touching his lips and a book in his hand with a cover inscribed with Coroïca or the law.

into the most grisly scowl you could imagine. They were bald and half nude and their withered skin was slashed in so many places and so close together that the scars stuck out like the spines of a hedgehog.

In the middle of the mystic catacomb was the great book¹⁴ whose pages were made of bronze. The High Priest opened it and the sound of the pages falling upon each other was worse than the slamming doors of the most dreadful prison. The three old men helped Lamekis turn the pages and when they found the passage with the King's vow, they all knelt down and swore-in Semiramis.

After this ceremony, they left the catacomb and went back through Koroïka. Lamekis knocked on the door of Buraïkos,¹⁵ which led to the sacred fire. At this door appeared a man around 40 years old who looked wild: he rolled his eyes in rage and scowled so frightfully at the High Priest that Semiramis recoiled. Lamekis reassured her. There was no reason to ask the name of this gallery—its heat gave it away as that of the fire kept in the catacombs. They saw it at a distance raised on a massive, iron tripod behind a gate of the same metal. The whole hallway was full of the bones of the dead, carefully piled on top of each other, which made them look very graceful. Two young men walked over them barefoot carrying a watering can that they used to sprinkle human skin oil over the mass grave. The Queen urged Lamekis to leave the place because the smell was really appalling. In consideration he cut the ceremony short: they brought her into the catacomb (where she could barely stand the heat), took off her headband, sprinkled it with the sacred oil and put it in the sacred fire. A small flame burned it slightly. Lamekis put it back, scalding hot, on the Queen's delicate forehead. The pain she felt was so bad that she let out an awful scream. And the vault echoed so that it could be heard everywhere around. Angry howls answered and the noise grew so loud that it seemed like the ceiling was going to collapse.

"Ah, Princess, what have you done?" the High Priest cried out. "I warned you that your voice would betray you. If they find out you're a woman, we're lost. This noise I hear coming from all quarters makes me fear for your life. What help do we have to save us from rebellion? You yourself saw how carefully they guard this place. How are we going to escape the rage they think is justified?"

He did not have time to say anything else. The gallery doors opened and the underground ministers showed up all together, followed by the people. The High Priest in this emergency resorted to a ploy—make the divinity speak. He went toward them in the grandeur he always assumed and broke the silence for the first time.¹⁶ He asked them arrogantly the reason for their turbulent arrival and their lack of respect.

"Don't you know," he pretended to be inspired from on high, "that Serapis is ready to crush you? I see the foundations of his temple shaken. Oh people, what have you done? They are going to crumble, to punish you for your recklessness. Oh Heavens, stop! Your ministers repent and kneel at your feet for mercy."

He spoke foaming at the mouth with his hands over his head as if to hold up the ceiling about to fall. The ministers, who first appeared ready for rebellion, trembled at his words. They threw themselves on the ground and humbly asked forgiveness.

"If you leave," Lamekis raised his voice, "I will intercede with the god and calm his anger, which I see is at its peak."

He had barely finished speaking before they left and silence fell. The High Priest wanted to take advantage of the fear that the Queen must have felt at what just happened in order to get her out of the catacombs and away from the secret mysteries. But the Princess had a heart that was stronger than most of her sex and her policies of love were in tune with her policies of the state. She wanted to probe the mysteries and go down into the underground Vestasia¹⁷ where they kept the three virgins. The High Priest obeyed reluctantly; he could not disobey her sovereign orders. He led the Queen to the trapdoor Luroë¹⁸ [...] ¹⁹

¹⁴ They still have this book in Tauris, [Tabriz], and they claim that Thamas Koulikan, [Nader Shah], owns it.

¹⁵ Buraïkos or the burning. This place was so holy that for the priests to be allowed to guard the fire they had to be chosen by the god himself. The fire was kept burning with nothing but human bones, which they made combustible by sprinkling them with human skin oil.

¹⁶ The first law was Kroustia or Sitao, i.e. perpetual silence or death.

¹⁷ The most remote underground chamber.

¹⁸ Luroë or the last secret, according to the rites of Semiramis, opened a very narrow marble staircase at the bottom of which was the chamber of Vestasia. There was a mysterious room inside where, after going so far just to enter, it was necessary to give real proof of the difference of sexes. The High Priest was apparently prohibited from entering with Semiramis, which, as

Semiramis was furious at the High Priest's denial, but covered it up and asked to go back up. She went back the same way she had come and after a hard and tiring walk, they were in the upper temple again. It was full of the Queen's guards; the officers in charge had surrounded the sanctuary. She ordered Lamekis to bring the officers in and spoke to the chief.

"Open the doors," she shouted. "Put them all under arrest and tell the people to listen to me."

Lamекis was distraught by the Queen's orders and threw himself at her feet.

"What are you planning to do?" he pleaded respectfully.

"To utterly destroy a rebellious swarm," she replied, "and tell my subjects about the abyss they're digging for them."

"Ah! Princess," the High Priest cried. "Stop! Shudder at the thought of this idea. You're going to put all of Egypt to fire and sword and the Earth will vomit out entire armies to punish you for your attack."

"Understand, Lamekis," the Queen spoke softly in his ear, "you are dear to me and I will take care of you. But I do not want the power of my hidden enemies to grow any stronger. I have found out their plans: under the veil of religion and on the pretext of putting Serapis on my throne, they will place themselves there and sooner or later the dark caves will vomit out a tyrant and usurp the lawful power. The time has come to destroy their criminal designs."

She got up on the platform with Lamekis and revealed to the people the secrets of the catacombs and told them how dangerous it was to let the enemies keep growing in number and lying in wait to attack. She pointed out how many of them there were and finished her rant citing the kingdoms that were destroyed by such scheming sites. The end of her speech had the effect she expected. The Princess was loved and her words swayed them heavily because of her gracious character. Shouts rang out demanding the destruction of the underground. And only the respect they had for the Queen saved Lamekis from their fury. She arrested him only when they insisted that she had to get to the bottom of the matter. The people demanded that he be held under guard until the next day, when the powerful underground would be destroyed. She gave the High Priest to the guards to lead him to the palace so that he might be close at hand to help in the destruction, or so the Queen said, when really she just wanted to talk to him about her love that was as crucial to her as the action she set in motion.

"Lamекis," she said when she was alone with him in her room, "I have had eyes for you for a long time. In spite of what happened, you are priceless and my feelings for you keep you close to my heart. I don't have to say any more. You can guess the rest. You will share the supreme power with me and in spite of my people's fury I will save you and change their hatred into respect. Answer me. Don't let my rank worry you. You know me and you should know that when a Queen confesses a weakness, she anticipates everything that can happen."

Semiramis waited a long time for Lamekis' response. He was troubled by her words and was battling in the inner depths of his soul. His natural generosity made him feel like a caring father for the people about to be destroyed, which stirred up infinite pity in him and made his soul tremble in fear. But whatever choice he made, he could not avoid the loss of what was most precious to him: Lamekis was a husband and father, but the Queen did not know that. Once the secret was revealed it would give rise to such jealousy in Semiramis, learning why he could not give his love to her, that she would not hesitate to kill all his loved ones. However, knowing that indecision on his part could not stop all these evils, he would rather die in virtue than live in crime and defile his ministry. He spoke to her with this mind. Semiramis tried her charms and tears to seduce him. Like a rock beaten by the waves, Lamekis' virtue upheld him in this dangerous confrontation. He kept to his decision and did not surrender to any hope. Hatred followed upon love and the result of the battle was a command to deliver the High Priest to the people's fury, which was urgently demanding his head.

He was barely out of Semiramis' sight when she repented and sent a counter-order, but it was too late. The people had got hold of him and all the Queen's power could not take him out of their hands. The most furious wanted to chop him to pieces then and there. So, with a saintly tranquility he waited

simple as it seemed, according to the same rites, was the cause of the ruin of the famous temple of Serapis, which will be talked about until the end of days. I am not knowledgeable enough to describe this temple or the variety of mysteries. I leave it to the scholars to enrich us of these treasures.

¹⁹ Here is a lacuna of several pages in the manuscript. I could describe the place, but I have too much respect for antiquity. As well described as the room might be, it would always be an obvious addition. I would rather be faithful than prolific.

in irons for the end of his life—his virtue gave him a serenity that put him above even the cruelest events.

A Council was held and it decided that he would be burned alive. The stake was set up, they attached him to the post and the ready torches were set on fire. But the righteous Heavens, protector of innocence, burst forth. Thunder roared and the people were astonished. The sky was lit up everywhere by lightning flashes. It looked like the Universe was about to collapse and return to eternal night. Everyone cried out that Serapis was avenging the outrage to his minister. They ran to the stake, untied Lamekis and led him in triumph to the temple. They sacrificed to the divinity, and the Heavens eased up. Calm followed the fury.

But the Queen herself had trembled in fear and then buried herself in terrible grief when the High Priest was swept away from her anger. And her desire for revenge revived. She sent some guards to seize Lamekis, but he was too clever to be exposed to such a danger a second time. He went down into the catacombs, sowing chaos and confusion. Holding nothing back, he aroused in them the desire to defend themselves and to carry out the plans that the ministers had been working on for so long; they said that they wanted to destroy the monarchy, make Serapis the everlasting King and rule under his name and auspices. The undertaking was bold and would have succeeded, but the Queen's policies and determination foiled their criminal project.

The officer in charge of arresting Lamekis reported that he could not be found and had probably gone back to the underground. She led them to the temple and searched it so carefully that the trapdoor to the catacombs was found. Troops were brought in to go down, but were surprised to find it walled up. Workers were ordered to break it down. For eight days in a row they worked at it without being able to get through. As much as they demolished one side, they rebuilt the other. It was an endless labor and they were forced to stop and find another means of access.

The more difficulties they faced, the more determined Semiramis became. The resistance troubled her and she tried every way imaginable to get underground. She brought in countless workers to dig an entrance, but no matter how hard they worked or how deep they dug, they found no trace of what they were looking for. The people began to whisper that it was a fruitless task and believed they should abandon it. But finally after six months they hit a vault. They informed the Queen who wanted to be present when they broke through. They people armed themselves, the vault was broken and a detachment was ordered to go down into the underground. They found a whole city, as big as the capital, but deserted. Semiramis trembled at the news and sent twice as many guards to make a thorough search.

That's what the hidden enemy wanted. They had set up an ambush in the confusing maze that hacked the Queen's troops to pieces. Only one soldier, who was in charge of watching the device they used to descend, escaped. He gave the signal, was brought back up and reported the fatal news, telling them that the number of conspirators was so great and their hideout was so well defended that it was hopeless to take them by force. They held a council after this news and found a very easy method of destroying the rebellious swarm. It was decided that they would write to the High Priest on behalf of the Queen and warn him that if his ministers and the enemy population did not put down their arms and surrender to the mercy of the Queen, they would destroy them without a single person escaping the dreadful fate awaiting them.

Lamekis believed it was an empty threat just to intimidate them. He answered that he and his people were ready to die rather than give up their arms; they were determined to defend themselves; it was kill or be killed. The Queen was informed of their stubborn response and had a ditch dug from the Nile to the buried vault. When they got four measures deep, she had a second letter written to the rebels in which they warned them of the means they had to destroy every last one of them. To prove her threat she wanted them to send four representatives to verify it and she would send four of her people as hostages. The offer was accepted. The envoys saw the arm of the Nile dangerously close to their dwelling and admitted that there was no way to escape being drowned. They asked for six hours to give an answer and then reported the sad news to the underground city. At the end of the period, one of them showed up at the bottom of the device and handed a letter to the guard, who immediately sent it to the Queen. And she read the following dispatch:

To Semiramis from Lamekis, High Priest:

The kindness you honored me with, Madame, deserves my sincere gratitude and now I am ready to bid you an eternal farewell. The least I owe you is a picture of the real situation and of my true feelings.

The cult of Serapis is destroyed. The god's predictions are accomplished, but his temple is eternal and will survive as long as the Earth turns on its axis. The waters of the Nile can destroy his ministers' refuge, but they will never put out the sacred fires that burn in their hearts. His supreme bounty, while suffering the destruction of the temple, long ago prepared a place to shelter us from all powers. Before this letter is read, the people persecuted by your hatred will be in a safe place, a secret underground passage will lead them to the shores of an unknown sea where ships are always ready to take them to the land where Serapis reigns. I thought I should tell you this so that your calm life will not be disturbed and you will have nothing to fear from these men who never offended you for the simple reason that they never knew you.

On reading the letter the Queen was rattled and made them go down into the underground. They searched everywhere, but this time reported that it was deserted and it even seemed that they had taken supplies to survive for awhile, but the maze was so full of twists and turns that it was impossible to know which way the people had fled. The Queen sent down her cleverest officers and they said the same thing. But the Princess was defiant and suspected new stratagems, so she sent down even more guards than before and ordered them to leave no stone unturned to find out how the rebels got away.

The officer she put in charge of this project was the avowed enemy of the ministers of Serapis and did his duty with zeal. The orders were so strict and he himself examined the place so carefully that he finally discovered the escape route. Lamekis thought he could fool them by building a wall behind them as they slipped away, not imagining that they would search the remote corner, but he had not figured on such a clever man as the one the Queen had dispatched. The Commandant recognized that the wall was new and had it knocked down. Two hours later he found that it led to the coast. He sent word to the Queen and he himself was so dutiful that by the middle of the night he had stopped the ship on which Lamekis was about to be saved, since he was the last to leave, putting, like any good citizen, his country's safety before his own. He was caught completely off guard when he was arrested along with two women and three children.

Imagine the joy that Semiramis felt when she heard the news. She celebrated by destroying the catacombs—she drowned them in the waters of the Nile. To top off her vengeance she knocked down the temple razing it to the ground.

When the Queen found out that one of the women arrested on the boat was Lamekis' wife, she was furious. She had recovered from the High Priest's denial of her desires by believing that since he was born in the worship of the gods his heart was love-proof, but if she kept at him, he would eventually succumb to her charms. So this news magnified her anger and revived her passion. She summoned him and her eyes and love tried over and over again to latch onto him. But Lamekis' fidelity withstood her efforts while using all his wisdom to put out Semiramis' fires. His virtuous speeches were of no use; his resistance frustrated her. Her hatred regained the upper hand and she was ready twenty times over to revenge her outraged passion by sacrificing the High Priest and his wife to her fury. But her canny rage, not satisfied with a death that would free them from her tyranny, came up with new and untried ways to drag out the punishment. She had a raft built on which she fastened Lamekis and those with him and she cast them onto the sea without food, water, masts or sails.