

CHAPTER ONE – SHATTER DARK – by R. Graeme Cameron

“You’re too easy to kill. That’s why you are still alive.”

I shifted uncomfortably in my chair. *I know, my dear Buddy-bod. To state the obvious is to state the obvious.*

“Seneferu is in the outer office. He believes you are a pure biologic. He has no fear of you. What if he is an assassin?”

I glanced out the window beside my desk. From my office just below the crest of Grouse Mountain I could see the dull, leaden sea pressed against the base of the slope. Always bugged me that ignorant people claim there used to be a city down there. Obviously not. Nothing but water.

Don’t ask me. Ask Myriad.

Silence. More musings.

“Her mate says his Mate is sweeping. Detects everything. Knows how powerful she is.”

I snorted, almost a laugh. *Then he knows he can’t flee past her once he’s slain me. No chance. Dead man. Any indication he wants to be a martyr?*

“None. A cautious man craves sanity.”

I think we can handle him... unless... does he know I’m fake?

“No. He thinks you’re legit.”

Good. It's more fun conning someone when they don't realize they're being conned.

A tentative knock on the door. It swung open. My secretary Myriad leaned into the room, her golden eyes gleaming bright above her golden breasts. Evidently the colour of the hour was gold. She'd been quite scarlet when I first saw her this morning. I had to admit, her Minoan style dress was most fetching. Showed off her chameleon-algae to best advantage. *Seneferu must be impressed.*

"Actually, I doubt it. He's... different."

"What is it?" I inquired, with a decisive irritation in my voice. Have to set the tone after all. I knew the client was listening.

"A Mr. Wolfgang Seneferu to see you. He's on schedule."

My schedule. "Direct him to enter."

Myriad withdrew, to be replaced by the waddling Seneferu, a man hard to respect on first sight. For one thing, he sidled through the doorway as if afraid he wouldn't fit. Yet he was young and slender, devoid of excess fat. I pointed to the seat before my desk. Seneferu obediently sat, or rather, settled down, patting nonexistent folds of flesh beneath his absurdly large cotton tunic. It hung on his frame like a collapsed tent. *Expensive stuff, cotton.*

"His implant cost a billion."

Then his country doesn't value him. Neither should I.

"The techgrid values YOU. I cost an icy trillion."

You only say that because you love me.

“Rudwulf, sir, pardon me while I catch my breath,” Seneferu pleaded. “My excessive bulk handicaps me. Makes life difficult.”

Has he always been like this?

“Eunuchs are generally obese.”

This one isn’t.

“Why in Shamash don’t you have a sane office?” Seneferu asked, pretending to be annoyed. “My Mate detects no technologic whatever.” He glanced at the bookshelves lining the walls. “Is that genuine wood?”

“Vat grown, not extruded. I like natural things. Nothing but the best biologic for me.”

“My Mate tells me you are Mateless. How is that even possible?”

“I abhor the unnatural. The very idea of an implant upsets my gonads. Besides, I’m *very* rich. The law doesn’t apply to me.”

“But you’re all by yourself inside your skull. Who do you talk to when you’re alone?”

“No one. No one at all.”

Seneferu sat back with an exasperated expression on his face. “You are abnormal beyond all measure.”

“Thank you.”

“He really does believe you are odd. Maybe even insane.”

Is he mentally discomfited? His concern is only useful if I disconcert him.

“No. He has too much contempt for you to be afraid. But he is curious, very curious, and eager to hear what you have to say.”

Then I’ll keep quiet on the important stuff. “My dear Wolfgang, I perceive you love nature as much as I do.”

A brief but brilliant flash of shock distorted Seneferu’s composure. “Really? How disgusting. Whatever do you mean?”

“I may lack a Mate, but even my internal solitude can see you are perspiring enough to drown the Nile. I have rubbing alcohol in my desk if you need it.”

Seneferu laughed lightly, a tinkling sound, almost charming. “Shows how much you know. I sweat on demand. Dark stains a useful distraction in debate. I’ll switch off now.”

Leaning forward, I sniffed loudly. “I have a very good sense of smell. Why is your sweat odourless?”

More laughter. “I’m good at contact tactics. I’m never rude.”

“He thinks he is running laps around you. Getting quite smug.”

Good. I like it when enemies underestimate me.

“How do you know he is your enemy?”

Isn’t everybody?

Seneferu leaned back, his black eyes suddenly intense. It would be intimidating, except it wasn't. Not to me.

"If I may say so," Seneferu stated, knowing full well he was being presumptuous, "your lack of a Mate is a preposterous handicap. It renders you artificially autistic compared to us technologic augments. No context. No environment. No clues."

"Told you he's getting smug, damn near giddy with complacency."

It was my turn to smile. "I find my absence of awareness refreshing and invigorating. Focusing on the superficial requires surprisingly little effort. Consequently, I find reality rather pleasant."

"But Implants shift the burden, freeing everyone to be equally unaware. We're *all* happy."

"I find that hard to believe," I replied. "So much suffering in the world."

Expression of distaste. "You're talking about the poor? They *enjoy* suffering. Everyone knows that."

"The hunted enjoy the hunt? Interesting idea. I must mention that to my PR hacks."

Seneferu actually had the gall to point at me. "But you... your reality offends me. No implant. Like a man deliberately cutting his own balls off. Not natural. Against the will of the Gods."

"He's getting flustered. His mate adjusting hormones to calm him."

Let's hope it sedates him insensible.

"That would be amusing."

I adopt a serious tone. "Don't let me keep you, Wolfgang, if you find my presence uncomfortable. But if you find you can tolerate me, stay, and let's get down to business."

Regaining his equilibrium, Seneferu pressed his fingers together beneath his chin in a futile effort to appear competent and confident. I had the impression he thought he had multiple chins.

"I expect you've read the contract?" he asked.

"Of course not. I refuse to focus my eyes on technologic displays if I can avoid it. I've been *told* what the contract says. But I suppose I should read it nonetheless."

By the way, is his copy correct?

"His Mate is under the impression it is identical to what was negotiated."

That'll do.

Seneferu grunted as he reached within his tunic to pull out a scroll that he'd tucked under his belt. "Please excuse the fact I kept it pressed between folds of my belly fat. Gross, I know, but as secure as a safe."

"The only gross thing about this idiot is his obsession. He weighs less than you do."

Why is he like this?

“Something to do with his father, maybe. Said to be quite the authority figure.”

The whitish-yellow scroll, only six inches long, and a mere inch in diameter were it uncompressed, lay on the desk like something dead.

“Cost a fortune, stupid thing,” Seneferu muttered. “First one manufactured in centuries.”

I felt my lips curling. “Manufactured?”

“Handmade. Handmade of course!”

“Paper?”

“No. Papyrus.”

“Thought that was extinct.”

“Of course it is. Till they brought it back in our labs. Hence the expense.”

My hand hovered over the scroll. Continued to hover. “Lab grown?”

Seneferu shrugged. “Don’t know details. First one maybe. This from a second-generation plant grown in the vats on my father’s delta estate.” He smiled.

“I’m perfectly aware your father is enormously wealthy. No need to boast. The whole delta his private estate?”

“The whole country. Anything and everything he owns, he owns entirely. Habit of his.”

I popped the scroll back into cylindrical form, then slowly drew it past my nose, my nostrils lightly scraping the fabric. “Divine.”

“I told you my sweat doesn’t smell. What are you talking about?”

“The Papyrus. Subtle, yet noticeable. I like it.”

“I expect it’s the ink you detect. Made from cuttlefish and ash, or the ash of a cuttlefish, or something. Also expensive.”

“He’s very impatient.”

I don’t care.

Unrolled, the scroll displayed tiny script composed in an unsteady, shaky hand by a scribe who hadn’t know what he was doing. “Not very professional.”

“There are *no* professionals, not for something as archaic as this. My Mate told me how to form the letters, guided my hand. I did good. My father was pleased. That squiggly line at the bottom is his signature, by the way.”

I glanced down the length of the scroll, a mere 16 inches or so, in less than two seconds, my eyes taking in nothing. “Done. Acceptable.”

“Nobody reads that fast,” Seneferu protested.

“It’s called speed reading. An ancient tradition I’ve mastered.”

“Nobody reads that fast.”

“His mate advised him to insult you.”

Testing me? Pathetic. Can’t come up with something more virulent?

“His Mate doesn’t think so, but it is tired of feeding him lines.”

Oh really? Heading for a divorce, are they? Delightful.

“Unlike us. I never know what you’re going to say next. Saves me a lot of bother.”

Yes, made for each other. Both of us crazy. I love it.

“Communing with your imaginary Mate?” Seneferu inquired.

I laid the open scroll before the Egyptian. “You can sign this without any further insults. I’m too proud of my celibacy to care what you say.”

Seneferu reached back into the folds of his tunic as if thrusting his hand deep into his flesh. The man genuinely thought he was immensely obese. And now he looked puzzled. Withdrawing his hand, he stared at a black smear darkening his fingers. “Ugh. Must have broken.”

“Your hand?”

“No. The stick of charcoal he was carrying.”

“Just let me sign the damn thing.” Seneferu muttered, pushing the nub of the charcoal twice across the paper. “There’s my X.” He swung the scroll about and shoved it toward me. “What are you going to utilise, some pen out of a museum?”

“Don’t be silly. Just because I don’t normally use technologic doesn’t mean I never take advantage of it.” I stuck the index finger of my right hand in my mouth and swirled my tongue around it. This made Seneferu blink and lean away from the desk, pressing hard against the back of his chair.

“His mate is assuring him you’re not being homoerotic, that you’re not coming on to him. That you are most likely simply trying to intimidate him. He will respond accordingly.”

I drew out my wet finger and rubbed its moisture-gleamed tip across the surface of the scroll next to the charcoal mark. “Now my DNA is on record.”

“Not yet it isn’t. On record I mean.”

“Nor yet *your* DNA.”

Seneferu smiled, rather enthusiastically. “How’s this?” He grabbed the scroll back, spat a glob of thick saliva on top his charcoal X, then pressed the oddly green-tinted goop into the papyrus with the palm of his hand. “Good enough?”

“Excellent. You may transmit.”

Seneferu glanced at the scroll, his eyes intent and focused. He blinked. “My Mate copied it to the Alexandria library, DNA and all.”

“So you say. I’ll have my secretary check on that.” I swept the scroll into an open drawer. A slight hum from the chem lab inside. Really superb shielding, as there was no reaction from my visitor. My technologic top notch, completely undetectable. “I’ll keep the scroll. A souvenir.”

“Fine,” Seneferu said. “I don’t care. Nobody cares.”

“Now that we are on a friendly basis, may I ask you a personal question?”

“Ask my Mate... oh right, you can’t. Okay. Ask me.”

“You mentioned Shamash. Your personal God?”

“No. Nergal,” Seneferu declared, looking bored. “But I accept the whole Neo-Babylonian pantheon. The Great King of Assyria converted me. Ashurbanipal and I, we’re pals.”

“Yet your father is Pharaoh? Shouldn’t you worship Ra or somebody?”

“He’s getting irritated.”

“My father forgives his children one vice apiece. Makes for an interesting family.”

“Remind him what his father did to him.”

“According to the endlessly repeated revelations in the tabvids, your father made you a eunuch,” I commented, trying not to smirk.

“You think you can make me sweat again? I remain switched off.”

“No such intent. Just curious.”

“But it’s common knowledge. The good Pharaoh Hermann Horemheb caught me wallowing in my preferred vice.”

“And that was?”

“A torrid love affair with my sister, my one true love, the mother of my son.”

I laughed. “Seems in keeping with the hoary traditions of the Royal House. Perfectly patriotic. Why should he mind?”

“He was married to her at the time.”

“Oh.” *Why didn’t you tell me this in the briefing?*

“I didn’t think it was important.”

Seneferu sighed. “You know how it is. Our bloodline being German, the security of the throne in Thebes is fragile, subject to the volatile whims of the fellaheen. The Securitas claims the peasants would prefer a Brazilian Emperor to a German Pharaoh. Damned if I know why. Something they saw in the soapvids, I suspect.”

“Plausible.”

“At any rate, Pharaoh cannot be seen to be disrespected by his own son and brother-in-law. Hence my punishment.”

“I’m sorry for you. Genuinely sorry, all business aside.”

“Me too.”

Stop showing off your false empathy.

“You do the same.”

Shut up.

“Rudwulf, sir, it was kind of you to step out of business for a moment,” Seneferu said, bracing to rest his imaginary multiple chins on his chest. He looked almost benign. “Allow me to return the favour. They intend to kill you.”

“Who does?”

“The Mayan Druids, or so my father informs me.”

Buddy-bod, why didn’t you inform me?

“I can only scan what his Mate is thinking. Not what he has buried in the recesses of his shallow mind. Comes as a revelation to me too.”

“Mayan *Druids?*” I spluttered. “Not the Mayan *Mormons?*”

“It’s a new sect, Quetzalcoatl Reform Druid. Beedlewood is their prophet. He’s English.”

“What am I to him? What has he got against me?”

“Nothing personal,” Seneferu said, smiling, patting his hands together as if he wanted to rub them gleefully. “You’re the last living Smiter on Earth. The perfect sacrifice.”

“Then I should avoid visiting Quintana Roo. That Kingdom is lousy with English Mayans.”

“That would be my recommendation.”

“What’s his game, I wonder? His Mate doesn’t know. Seems astonished.”

“And Wolfgang,” I went on, “you are generously warning me because?”

Seneferu grimaced. “I may have deserved to have my balls cut off, but my father knows I am no traitor. He and I both want you to live long enough to crush the armies of Assyria. I hope to be installed as Governor in the palace at Nineveh. My future depends on you.”

“And you already worshipping the Gods of the people you hope to rule. That’s handy.”

“Yes, ensures I will be welcome. And now, may I ask you the name of *your* personal God? Allah? Yaweh? Yewah? Jehovah? Bert?”

“Loki.”

“What?” Great shock. “My Mate told me you were Christian!”

I chuckled. “I may be old-fashioned, but I’m not *that* obscurantist. Besides, Christianity is too fixated on divine punishment for my taste.”

“But the Norse Gods? Why them?”

“Let me put it this way... Christian attitude: ‘Damned to Hell.’ Norse attitude: ‘Oh, what the Hell.’ See the difference?”

Seneferu pursed his lips. “Not really. I prefer the Chaldean setup. It’s very contractual. Once you’ve performed the appropriate rituals, the Gods do what you command.”

Again, I laughed. Getting to be a habit. Creating a bad impression? “A good religion for accountants. Mine is suitable for berserkers.”

“Hmm?” A respondent chuckle, a nervous chuckle. “That makes sense. You do like to kill. You are well-suited to your profession.”

Good! He’s fallen for our publicity hype.

“But, Wolfgang, my friend,” I said, “I have need of your opinion. Speaking of Pharaohs and Assyrian Great Kings and such, don’t you think the modern fad of reviving ancient cultures is utterly absurd? It complicates planning for the future. You’ll note we have none of that here in Vancouver. We’re far too progressive.”

“The Reality-Revisionists insist on it. After all, the techgrid is on the verge of collapse and the only way we can survive is to embrace the stone age.”

“And you believe this pseudo-scientific, pseudo-religious crap? This folly? This proof that the average person is a moron? When the vats produce wonderful things like Watermelon Bourbon? You want to give that up?”

Seneferu managed to look both uncomfortable and sheepish at the same time. “My father embraces it... reluctantly. He relishes being Pharaoh, but also modern weapons. Me? I do like wonderful

vat stuff. Especially food. But I tell you, frankly and sincerely, it is even more wonderful to be the son of a Pharaoh and a friend of our enemy the Great King of Assyria. That's what the past offers in abundance: prestige and power. I'm all for it."

"Yeah? What if the techgrid *does* go down? How are you going to hang on to your prestige? By waving a stone dagger at people? Think that'll work?"

"He's worried. You've set him on edge."

Excellent. "You may go, Wolfgang. Good living."

Seneferu struggled to his feet, as if the oscillations of his pretend-flesh threatened his centre of gravity, causing him to wobble from side to side, in risk of toppling. Slowly, he steadied. He stuck out his hand.

I stared at the man's glistening palm. "Still wet."

"Oh." The offending palm was drawn across Seneferu's close-cropped scalp. "Dry now."

We shook hands. It felt like I was shaking hands with an oyster.

The Egyptian turned to leave, paused, then looked back coyly. "Now I know why you're so chatty. Just occurred to me."

"I'm not aware of any confession on my part."

"I've learned more about you than you suspect."

"Suspect? I don't care enough to suspect."

An oddly triumphant smile played about Seneferu's lips.

"Because you're alone when you're alone," he said. "So, when you meet someone apart from yourself you blurt out the first thing that comes to mind. Bad character trait. No self-discipline. No business sense at all. It's almost embarrassing to joust with you. Like taking candy from a crèche."

"The generosity of your perception overwhelms me." *What an idiot.*

"His Mate is thinking the same thing about you."

Buddy-bod, are you positive his Mate doesn't detect you? Hasn't scanned you?

"It isn't capable of that. No technologic is."

Because you don't exist? Figment of my imagination?

"We've argued this too many times. Whatever I am, I'm useful, no? Leave it at that."

Seneferu looked smug. "Stunned you, have I? Should I be pleased with myself?

"Sure. Why not? Good living. *Good Liv... ing.*"

Seneferu shrugged. He ponderously drifted to the door, fumbled at its unfamiliar opening device, finally figured out how to turn the glass knob, paused. "This contract... it's a good one, yes? The biggest yet? Profitable?"

"Like candy from a crèche."

The expression on Seneferu's face was wistful, haunted, even envious. "How *do* you plan to exterminate Ashurbanipal's armies?"

"I don't know... I'll think of something. I always do. Never let a client down yet."

"Normally, you just cull civilians."

"True. I may have to kill a few, to stay in practice."

"Won't include me, will it?"

I just smiled.