

# I

When Huy was an old man, looking into his extraordinary past with awe and a measure of resignation, he admitted to himself that the time spent with Ishat on the small but entrancing estate Pharaoh Amunhotep the Second had deeded to him had been the happiest of his life. He knew that, in accepting the King's generosity, he had become a virtual prisoner of the Horus Throne, and it was true that he was obliged to See for any court official requesting the use of his peculiar gifts, but between their visits he continued to help whoever came to his gate. Although Ishat had pointed out that allowing an indiscriminate number of townfolk to wander through the garden and mill about the fountain was dangerous, Huy was reluctant to put any limit on the numbers slipping past Kar, his gate guard. After all, the walk from Hut-herib itself to the privacy of his arouras was long. Those in need arrived hot, tired, and thirsty, and many were ill. Some came on behalf of relatives too sick to leave their houses, begging Huy to return to the town with them and place his hands on their loved ones.

They began to gather before dawn. Huy would wake to the murmur of their voices rising to his bedchamber upstairs. He would hurry through the fresh bread, milk, and fruit his body servant Tetiankh set beside him on the gilded couch, take a cursory wash in the bathhouse downstairs, and carry a stool outside to be faced with the eager horde of petitioners. Usually Ishat would be waiting for him in her capacity as his scribe, her palette held loosely in her arms, her sleep-swollen eyes travelling the motley crowd with disapproval. Each case was documented by her—name, malady, and whatever cure Huy’s vision demanded—and the scrolls were filed in Huy’s office. By late afternoon the crowd would have thinned, those still waiting would be told to return the next day, and Huy and Ishat would escape into the house, themselves hot, tired, and thirsty, Ishat to stand in the bathhouse while her own body servant, Iput, scrubbed and then oiled her, and Huy to take a draft of poppy and lie on his couch until the drug took effect against the inevitable stabbing in his head and he felt able to go down to the reception hall for the evening meal.

This went on for several months, until both Ishat and Merenra, their chief steward, protested.

“I do pity them, Huy,” Ishat said one evening as they sat picking over a meal of ox stew and cold lentil salad they were too exhausted to finish. “But they will never stop coming. There will always be disease and accidents, let alone the people who just want you to tell them about their future.” She took a gulp of her palm wine, then set the goblet back on her table with a click. “We talked about getting a skiff and perhaps a

barge with a cabin. The litter Merenra bought for us sits idle beside the house, and the bearers sleep all day and gamble all night out of boredom. Shouldn't we be the ones at leisure?" Lifting the long black hair away from her ears, she flicked at her lobes. "You were going to order jewellery for me—and what about you? You are still wearing the same earring day after day, and you make poor Tetiankh launder and starch your one spare kilt that is falling apart. You'll soon find yourself reduced to Seeing in nothing but your loincloth unless you take a little time to at least meet your need for new linen. Besides, the townsfolk trample on Seshemnefer's flowers and vegetables. They urinate against the outer wall and defecate behind the grain silo. We can't keep doing this!"

Behind her, Merenra stepped into the soft light of the alabaster lamps. "May I speak, Master?"

Huy nodded uncomfortably. He did not think he would ever become used to the care of servants who not only kept the house clean and cooked the food, as Hapzefa, Ishat's mother, still did for his parents and his brother, Heby, but who were responsible as well for making his life as easy and free as possible.

"Your scribe speaks good sense," the steward went on. "Khnit cannot continue to provide water and juices to the multitudes, let alone the bread and honey they demand. The King sends you gold every month, but even his coffers in Mennofer could not feed the whole of Hut-herib indefinitely. Your gate guard, Kar, has been jostled and threatened. It is time to seek a solution to this problem."

Huy did not want to agree with them. Did he not have a duty to the god who had given him this onerous gift, to use it to the limit of his strength? Both Ishat and Merenra were watching him expectantly.

“The first thing we need is a contingent of soldiers stationed in front of the gate,” Ishat pressed him. “The second is some sort of restriction on the days you will be available and the numbers of people you will allow to come. Huy, I have not seen my mother since we moved in here!” she burst out. “And you need to visit your family. What good are you to anyone if you are dead from all this confusion?”

Huy knew rebellion when he saw it, and indeed he was secretly relieved that this decision had been taken from him. “Very well,” he said. “Let us reorganize our life. Merenra, is there any more wine?”

He remembered Anhur, the soldier who had guarded and befriended him on his visits to the temple of Thoth at Khmun, where he had read the portions of the Book of Thoth stored there. Anhur now served in the King’s army; he had become one of the elite Shock Troops. *But perhaps Pharaoh would release him into my service,* Huy reflected as the golden palm wine cascaded into his cup and Merenra stood back. *Amunhotep values my gifts. Already I have Seen for his Vizier and namesake, Amunhotep, and his chief scribe, Seti-en. We would all be safe if Anhur came here with a small detachment. I will petition High Priest Ramose for the release of Amunmose also. He came with me to Khmun carrying scrolls for Thoth’s High Priest. He was cheerful and begged me to remember him if I ever needed a good cook. At the time I could not imagine the turn my fortunes have taken, not*

*in my wildest dreams of success and vindication, yet here we are, Ishat and I, living like the aristocrats we are not.* He smiled and raised the silver cup to his mouth, knowing that the flavour of palms would bring to mind a picture of the river in spring and the faint aroma of damp foliage along its banks. He had given up hoping for inebriation a very long time before.

He dictated a respectful request to Wesersatet, the King's Commander-in-Chief, and to his old guide and overseer High Priest Ramose at Iunu, his eyes on Ishat, sitting cross-legged at his feet, her pink tongue caught between her teeth as she laboured to produce the neatest hieroglyphs she could. Then he took each scroll from her and wrote his own name, *Huy son of Hapu, Seer*. "Give them to Merenra. He can go into Hut-herib and find a herald," he told Ishat as she stoppered her ink and scrambled up. "I think that until we receive replies, we will close and chain the gates, and you and I will take the litter into town, to the finest jeweller Merenra can recommend. It's time we used some of Amunhotep's gold on ourselves. Merenra can find us a barge and a few sailors as well."

Dropping her palette on Huy's desk, she flung her arms around him, hugging him tightly. "Thank you, my dearest brother, thank you!" she breathed. "Oh, Huy, I love this house and my big bedchamber and the glorious food I don't have to cook myself and seeing our laundry come in from the tubs outside while my hands get softer every day! Am I becoming shallow, do you think?"

Enveloped in the combination of myrrh, cassia, and henna flowers Ishat had taken to wearing, reaching up

to smooth the strands of her hair away from his face, Huy was filled with a familiar sadness. *I wish with all my heart that I could love you as you deserve, my Ishat*, he thought. Aloud he said, “Yes, you are becoming the most shallow, spoiled, demanding princess Egypt has ever seen. Soon you will refuse to rise from your couch until the noon meal and make Merenra serve you only wine of year one of the King, four times good.”

She laughed and withdrew, her eyes shining. “I want my mother and father to come and see me here when the jeweller has finished making my hair ornaments and bracelets and anklets and rings and necklaces and . . . Huy, shall you invite Thothmes to stay soon? After all, he’s been your close friend since you and he were at school together. He’ll rejoice at your good fortune.” She had wept with shame and embarrassment when Thothmes, whose aristocratic father was a Governor, had arrived with the King but chose not to accompany Amunhotep on his way to war. Instead, he stayed moored close to Hut-herib and invited both Ishat and Huy to dine aboard his barge. Then she had possessed no jewellery or face paint, and one spare coarse sheath. She had never been a guest before, never been waited on by servants—who were in reality her equals—and she had been afraid of what they might think. But the evening had run smoothly thanks to the tact of Thothmes’ steward Ptahhotep and Thothmes himself, who had fallen in love with Ishat before the week was out.

Huy understood her question perfectly. “As soon as you are ready, I will write to him myself,” he promised. “Now, let us discuss the other matter, Ishat. How many people should be admitted, on how many days?”

It was some weeks before a reply to Huy's request came from Wesersatet, and during that time the flood of Hut-herib's needy was forcibly slowed to a trickle of no more than ten petitioners on four days of the week. True to his word, Huy took Ishat to the jeweller, and, leaving her inside the small workshop that smelled of hot metal and faience dust, he lowered himself to the pavement outside, his back against the warm mud-brick wall, and contentedly watched the bustle of the street. In spite of the happiness his new estate brought him, he sometimes missed the noisy life of the district where he and Ishat had lived in three dark, tiny rooms next to a beer house. Times had been hard, but he had felt a sense of accomplishment in his close connection with the suffering denizens of the town, a connection that had become more formalized and somehow less personal now that he was no longer on an equal social footing with them.

Ishat's voice drifted to him through the open door, her tone authoritative, her laugh spontaneous. She was quickly finding the self-assurance and poise that grew with the acquisition of wealth, Huy observed, yet he knew her peasant heart, sturdy and immovable in its ability to see through any posturing, critical of anything that smacked of a certain arrogant dishonesty. She would order whatever pretty baubles she wanted, but not to excess. She would order jewellery for him also, earrings, bracelets, and necklaces, all bearing the stamp of her innate good taste, simple yet beautifully harmonious.

But she would not buy him rings. Stretching out his fingers, Huy examined the amulet rings the Rekhnet had made for him: the Soul Protector with its hawk body and man's head, and the Frog of Resurrection,

its deep blue lapis eyes gleaming dully in the strong sunlight. He had never removed them from his hand. Thinking of the old woman and her powerful magic gave him a twinge of guilt. He had not written to her since leaving the town, yet he loved her for her wisdom. She and Ramose, High Priest of Ra, were related. Both were Huy's mentors, but the Rekhbet brought to him a tolerance and understanding that had been largely lacking in Ramose's advice to Huy, who saw that the Priest was torn between his ambition for Huy and his obvious affection for his unique pupil. Huy had not written to him either. The thought gave him a moment of physical agitation. At once his litter-bearers, sprawled in the shade a polite distance from him, sat up and glanced at him expectantly, but he waved them down again, drawing up his knees and resting his chin on them.

*Obligations, he thought dismally. To the Rekhbet and Ramose, to my parents, to Thothmes and his family—all of them waiting to receive an invitation from me to stay in my house, exclaim over my good fortune, when all I really want is an occasional visit from Methen. He would lay aside the formality of his position as priest to Hut-herib's totem, Khenti-kheti, and talk to me with the ease of a friendship begun when he found me naked outside the House of the Dead and carried me home. His presence ought to remind me of that miserable time, but when I am with him I remember only his warmth and kindness. I do not want the past brought to life on my estate by the people who determined it. Except for Thothmes, of course, but even he would bring a threat with him. What if he is still in love with Ishat? What if*

*he still wants her for his wife, and her decision to remain with me becomes weakened in his presence?*

As if his thought had summoned her, Ishat came out of the doorway and stood smiling down at him. "He will send the pieces as he finishes them," she said. "All will be in our boxes two months from now. You look pensive, Huy. What were you thinking?"

Huy swung to his feet, disliking the question. "I was feeling the lack of regular exercise and wondering when Anhur might arrive," he lied.

Ishat snorted. "No, you weren't." She straightened the sa amulet hanging from its gold chain on his naked chest, then laid a hot palm against his skin. "You were remembering with nostalgia the hovel we used to inhabit, because this street reminds you of it." She waved at the bearers, who rose reluctantly and picked up the litter. "Let's go home, Huy. May we stop on the way and buy some hot date pastries? I'm hungry."

He tugged at her hair, his good humour restored, as they scrambled onto the cushions of the litter. "Of course." He called the order to the bearers, then pulled the curtains closed. "Now, tell me what adornments His Majesty's gold is paying for," he teased her. "How many circlets will be cluttering up your cosmetics table?"

She grinned across at him. "Only three. One to keep for when the aristocrats come to consult you, one for everyday wear, and one to fill our less illustrious guests with awe when we give the parties I'm sure you will allow me to plan."

Huy turned to her anxiously. "But Ishat, we have work to do. I don't intend—"

She put a finger to his mouth. She often touched him with what appeared to be unselfconsciousness. Huy could always sense the need behind her gestures and had learned to harden himself against the compassion welling up in him. They had grown up together, both of them peasant children, the long days of childhood forming a bond between them that even Huy's years away at the temple school in Iunu had not severed. Huy loved her deeply as his lifelong friend, but Ishat desired him with all the fervour of her passionate nature. It was not in her character to dissemble the matter, to hide her feelings behind a wall of feminine guile or attempt to win him by subtle manipulation. She had openly and frankly declared herself. The knowledge of her pain was often hard for Huy to bear.

"I'm not serious," she said. "Or at least, not really. I look forward to entertaining our families. I want to show off our good fortune, Huy. You have been vindicated in the face of your uncle Ker and your father, and Thothmes will be delighted to see you living without worry about the future. Invite his father as well—Nakht must have his nose rubbed in the glory of your success after refusing to help you gain a position as a scribe. A scribe! You are far above such a humble station now."

"Scribes need not be humble," Huy responded swiftly. "Their skills are vital to the efficient administration of every aspect of Egypt's life." Privately, he was thinking that his future depended on a continuation of the King's generosity, and that the King's open hand would swiftly close if his gift deserted him. He sometimes wished it would. Then perhaps he would be

free to get happily drunk on hot summer nights like everyone else, and free to throw off the burden of enforced virginity the god Atum had laid upon him and experience the final intimacy he had only been able to imagine. If he was able to make love to Ishat, would that love become something rounded, more complete, turning his desire from Thothmes' sister Anuket to the young woman sitting so cheerfully beside him now, the folds of her scarlet sheath resting lightly on his thigh, her perfume filling the stuffy, enclosed space of the litter? He knew that such thoughts only led to anger and sadness, and he was glad when the litter was lowered and the aroma of hot pastries edged out the scent of Ishat's fragrance.

Huy grew to value the precious three days when his garden lay empty of strangers and the house remained quiet but for the polite comings and goings of the few servants. During that time his headaches began to ease, although he still dosed himself with the poppy against the fourth day, when they returned as he went about the business of Seeing for those lucky enough to be admitted.

For a month the new routine ran its course. Pieces of jewellery began to arrive from the craftsman, each wrapped in white linen and placed in a soft leather bag with drawstrings. Ishat withdrew them reverently. Huy shared her admiration. They were both delicate and bold, each creation seeming to Huy to reflect a combination of the facets of Ishat's personality. The man had done his work well, with intuition and skill.

"This one," Ishat said, holding up a thick gold circlet from which a single large red jasper hung to rest in the

centre of her forehead, with smaller orbs of the stone set around its upper rim, “this one I shall save for meeting the King’s ministers. Look, Huy! A net of golden threads is attached to its back, to hold my hair. How very elegant. But I like the silver one too. So simple. A thin band hung with tiny silver ankhs. I shall wear it every day.”

“But silver is much more rare and expensive than gold,” Huy told her, amused. “The King’s ministers would be far more impressed by the silver band than by the gold and jasper one.”

“Perhaps. Do you like the earrings he made for you, Huy? Three tiny scarabs of green turquoise hanging onto each other? And the one of Ra-Harakhti, Ra at the dawn, the hawk’s feathers inlaid with blue faience, and the Disc of the sun on his head done in pale yellow chalcedony so smooth that the light flows over it? The gold talons of the bird almost brush your shoulder.”

“Yes, I do like them, and the belts of gold links and the decorated sandals. The servants are more pleased than you are, have you noticed, Ishat? I suppose that now they can feel we are worthy of their ministrations. They are even more snobbish than you!”

“May the gods grant that I never develop the arrogance of riches!” she said fervently. “My rings, bracelets, and necklets are to come.” She lifted the silver circlet and placed it on her head. “Let’s go on the river in our new barge at sunset and drink wine and watch Ra being swallowed up by Nut. You can fish. Your head is better today, is it not? And I can lean on the railing while the sandbars glide by. Oh, Huy! What a dream I am living!”

But before they walked up the ramp and onto the cedar deck of the barge that still smelled of sweet wood and paint lacquer, Huy dictated an invitation to his family and to Ishat's; one to Thothmes, Nakht, and Nasha; one to High Priest Ramose; and one to the Rekhnet. Ishat, in her role as his scribe, looked up at him from her perch on the floor as she capped her ink and flexed stiff fingers. "I hope they don't all come at once," she said.

They ate their evening meal aboard their boat while the litter-bearers, learning to double as sailors under the sharp eye of Ibi, a captain Merenra had hired permanently, rowed them clumsily upstream and back to their watersteps as the river turned from brown to gold to red and the long shafts of the sun's last rays began to shred over its rippled surface. Dust motes danced in the pink light. The evening breeze sprang up. Ishat took Huy's arm as they stood contentedly side by side, her long black hair lifting with the moving air, her eyes closed with pleasure against the glare of Ra's final burst. Neither of them spoke. Huy too allowed himself a moment of unadulterated serenity. His head was free of pain, his mind calm. The captain's peremptory commands began to echo against the riverbanks as the sun's rim disappeared, and suddenly the sky opened up above, a new presence of pale blue and weakly blinking stars.

Ishat opened her eyes and sighed. "I will not think of Ra's twelve transformings as he battles through the womb of Nut," she murmured. "I will concentrate on lamplight and a bath and then a quiet night on my couch. We are approaching the watersteps, Huy. Now who is

that, standing just outside the gate with Kar beside him? Your scrolls of invitation haven't left the house yet."

Huy's heart sank. He was not expecting a visit from a court official, but doubtless many of them felt they possessed the right to demand his attention whenever they chose. The watersteps drew nearer. At Ibi's shout, the oars were shipped and the ramp lifted from its resting place against the railing. Huy peered through the gathering gloom at the tall figure now striding onto the topmost stone step, and recognition struck him in a burst of gladness.

"Anhur! It is Anhur, Ishat!" He waved and the man waved back. The boat bumped the foot of the watersteps, the ramp was run out, and Huy hurried to embrace his old friend. "We did not expect you so soon!" he breathed as they pulled apart. "There has been no word from Commander Wesersatet! He must have petitioned the One and then released you from the army very quickly."

"He did." Anhur took Huy's shoulders and stood back, surveying him critically. "It seems that whatever the Seer wants, the Seer gets, particularly now, when the Queen has presented the country with a Hawk-in-the-Nest and His Majesty is happily scattering favours to all and sundry like chaff in the wind. I barely remembered you until the King ordered Wesersatet to replace me in the Shock Troops and send me to guard you. Gods, young Huy, look at you! How old were you when I saw you last? Thirteen? You've become a handsome man, but I'd still recognize those eyes. Is there anything to eat? It's been a long march and we're starving."

"We?"

Anhur waved towards the house. "I've brought ten soldiers with me. The King didn't know how much protection you needed. Neither do I. Is ten enough? What are we supposed to be protecting you from? Demons and angry priests?"

Huy laughed. "I'll explain while Merenra finds you all some food. Anhur, this is my companion and scribe, Ishat."

Anhur turned to Ishat, waiting patiently at Huy's elbow. He bowed. Ishat extended a hand.

"Welcome to our home," she said formally. "Huy has told me all about the time you spent together at Thoth's temple in Khmun."

Anhur enfolded her fingers in his own large paw, then he bent and retrieved the spear and shield leaning against the still-open gate. Behind the three of them, the boat was being moored to its post and the ramp run in. The crew dropped into the water and, wading to the steps, bowed briefly before disappearing into the strengthening darkness. Kar had ambled back to his hut just inside the gate.

"Thank you, Lady Ishat," Anhur responded.

Ishat shook her head. "I'm no noblewoman, Anhur. Call me Mistress, or Ishat. Now I suppose I had better find Merenra and he had better drag Khnit away from her stool and back to the kitchen. How many men must she feed?" At a nod from Huy, she turned towards the house.

Anhur watched her go. "You are wedded to her, Huy?" he wanted to know as he and Huy followed more slowly. "She is your wife? Well, good for you. She's very beautiful."

“Ishat is not my wife,” Huy replied swiftly. “She’s my oldest friend and a partner in my work.”

“And you can resist that loveliness? What’s wrong with you? What work are you engaged in?”

“Later.” Huy smiled across at the blunt features he remembered so well. Already he felt more secure, as though with Anhur’s arrival a cloak of protection had been cast invisibly over the estate and everyone in it. This was the man who had refused to leave his side during his difficult days in Khmun, who had stepped between him and an enraged Sennefer, who as a boy had attacked him with a throwing stick, precipitating his death and miraculous resurrection, and who had been banished to the temple school at Khmun, where he had again attempted to harm Huy. “Now we must fill your belly. Has my steward found accommodation for your men?”

“Your steward,” Anhur said heavily. “The gods have certainly smiled on you, haven’t they? No, there aren’t enough cells in your servants’ quarters, but it will only take a week or two to buy mud bricks and erect another row. My soldiers can pitch their tents and sleep in their blankets until then. They’ll be content as long as there’s plenty of food and beer.”

Together they entered the house. Tetiankh and Iput were moving quietly about, lighting the standing lamps in the reception hall. They bowed briefly to both men, curiosity in their gaze.

Anhur blew out his breath. “What do you have to do for the King to earn all this? I thought you’d end up serving the priests of Ra at his temple in Iunu when you finished school. I never imagined something like

this for you, and of course when we spoke briefly to each other during Pharaoh's visit to Hut-herib, there wasn't time to exchange any news."

"I'll tell you everything while you eat," Huy repeated. "Afterwards I'll take you over the house and grounds. The estate is small and will be easy to patrol. The disposition of the soldiers will be all yours, Anhur. I see that Merenra has already set out a table and cushions for you. Sit down."

Anhur dropped his equipment on the tiled floor with a clatter. "I'll see to the feeding of my men first. May I go through to the kitchen? I presume it's outside at the rear."

"Of course. I'll come with you and meet them. I'm so glad you're here!"

Later, Huy and Ishat sat with him as he folded himself behind the low table laden with the meal Khnit had provided; Merenra stood a short distance away, holding the beer jug ready to serve him. The elegant room was quiet, full of a peaceful, soft light from the steady glow of the alabaster lamps placed around the painted walls. Anhur pulled off his crumpled linen helmet, ran a hand through greying hair, and began to eat, swiftly and methodically. While he did so, Huy related the events of his life since they had parted. Anhur listened carefully, glancing up from his emptying platters occasionally to nod or raise his thick eyebrows in surprise.

When Huy fell silent, Anhur drained his goblet and, holding it out to Merenra for more beer, said, "And what about that magic Book you were reading at Khmun, Huy? Did you finish it? Weren't you supposed

to interpret it for High Priest Ramose? I remember that the Chief Librarian, Khanun, at Khmun's House of Life, was eager to hear the results when you were done."

"I finished it," Huy answered reluctantly. "I have yet to understand its secrets fully. I do not think about it much anymore, Anhur. I am stretched thin with the exercise of healing and Seeing. One day perhaps I shall have enough time to ponder it anew."

He did not add that the thought of the Book of Toth plunged him into sadness and a sourceless guilt when its words crept unbidden into his mind, and that he deliberately turned away from any thought of it, and of the sacred Ished Tree under whose branches he had first unrolled it. It was all there in his consciousness, ready to scroll through his thoughts like some portentous spell full of power whose meaning eluded him. He had agreed to read it while his body lay cold and lifeless in Hut-herib's House of the Dead and his ka stood before the great Imhotep, who had offered the boy Huy the choice. Huy, drenched in the sunlight of Paradise while the Judgment Hall lay dim and forbidding behind him, had agreed to the will of the creator-god Atum. At twelve years old, he had not considered the cost, had not been warned that in doing so he would become Atum's property and tool. As long as he did not think about the Book, he need not be angry. As long as he moved from day to day through the tasks set before him by the acquisition of his peculiar gift, he need not look into his own future and that one duty he had been unable to fulfill.

Anhur swallowed his last mouthful, emptied his goblet yet again, and pushed the table away. "Luckily,

I don't have to worry about such mysterious things. Give me a practical task that has a practical solution and I'm happy. Well, I'd better order a guard for the house and gate tonight, see that the men are comfortable, and set up my cot somewhere." He grinned. "I won't miss being a member of His Majesty's Shock Troops, but I hope I won't be bored, trudging up and down your passages."

"You can sleep in the guest room until your men have built you a suitable home," Ishat said. They were the first words she had spoken all evening.

Anhur shook his head and rose, snatching up his wilted headdress as he did so. "If I'm to keep discipline among my ten, I must be with them, but thank you, Mistress," he replied. "I wish you both a safe rest. If you hear footsteps in the night, don't be alarmed—it will be one of the soldiers patrolling inside the house." He bowed and quickly vanished into the shadows.

Merenra began to clear away the debris of the meal and Ishat turned to Huy. "I like him and you obviously trust him," she said. "But extra cells to have built, extra mouths to feed, means too much work for Khnit and Merenra. We must hire an under steward, Huy, and another cook, and perhaps a couple more house servants." She sighed. "Is this the negative side of how rich people live?"

"Yes." Huy got to his feet and held a hand down to her, fighting a sudden sense of suffocation. "You're right, Ishat. Merenra can see to it as soon as he has the time. We will adapt to this as we have bent to every gust of fate that has blown at us." He kissed her lightly on the cheek and called for Tetiankh and Iput. When they

came, lighted tapers in their hands, he followed them and Ishat up the stairs, bade her sleep well, and went into his own bedchamber.

Tetiankh put the taper to the lamp beside the couch, and as a glow of light began to diffuse through the large room, he bowed to Huy. "Master, if you will wait until I have drawn fresh water from the barrel downstairs to put on your table, I can then prepare you for sleep. Do you need an infusion of poppy tonight?"

Huy considered. *Well, do I? I have no pain, but the drug does give me a deep and dreamless sleep. Without it, I am afraid of the visions the god might send me. Yet I am doing his will to the best of my ability, so why would he accuse me? Nevertheless, my work is arduous. I must have a good rest.* He knew that he was edging his thoughts towards a justification for taking the poppy, knew that the desire for it existed apart from any rationalization he might conjure, and stopped trying to deceive himself.

"Bring me an infusion, Tetiankh, but make it a weak one," he said heavily. "I shall undress myself. Is there no hot water for my wash?"

"I'm sorry, Master," Tetiankh answered. "Khnit asked Iput and me to help her in the kitchen. Seshemnefer prepared the vegetables, but then he left. He was tired from digging over so much ground today. At least you will have a flourishing garden when he is done."

Huy sighed. Ishat was right, more staff were needed. "I'll go down to the bathhouse," he decided. "I must clean the kohl from my eyes. I don't need your help, Tetiankh. I took care of my own bodily needs for years. Go and mix the poppy."

Tetiankh looked distressed. “It is not right that you should perform such tasks for yourself,” he retorted as he left.

Huy stripped off his kilt, laid his new belt carefully over the back of one of the cedar and ivory inlaid chairs, and, pulling a sleeping robe over his head, padded barefoot along the dusky passage and down the narrow stairs at the rear of the house to the little bathhouse below. As always, the damp interior smelled of Ishat’s perfume blend—myrrh, cassia, and henna flowers. Huy inhaled it with pleasure. The water for their ablutions was often left just outside, to be heated by the sun. Huy found a jug in which some warmth remained and quickly washed his face, scrubbing it with a little natron and wiping it over with ben oil. He would have liked to clean his long hair of sweat and dust, but he needed Ishat for that. *No, not Ishat*, he corrected himself as he dragged a comb through the thick tresses. *I must be tired. My mind is playing me tricks. Ishat used to do it, but it’s Tetiankh’s job now. I remember the evenings in our miserable little hovel, when she would kneel before me with a basin full of the water in which we would both have to wash, and she would lift my filthy, swollen feet into it. While they soaked, she would wash my face, my neck and chest, my legs, and then with the basin on the table she washed my hair. Only then would she banish me, while she took off her one serviceable sheath and cleansed herself. She is the one who deserves this sudden change in our fortunes, not I. I will begrudge her nothing.*

Tetiankh was waiting when Huy returned to his bedchamber, the small clay pot of white liquid in his

hand. Thanking him, Huy took it and drank. As always, the taste was so bitter that his throat tried to constrict against it. Tetiankh was ready with water. Huy sluiced his mouth clear and swallowed so as not to waste a drop of the precious drug. The sheet on the couch had already been turned down, the doors of the shrine beside the bed opened to reveal the little statue of Khenti-kheti, totem of the town and surrounding district. A mat lay before it.

Once more, Tetiankh bowed. "Do you need anything else, Master?"

Huy shook his head. "No. Bring my first meal at dawn tomorrow, Tetiankh. Tell Khnit I will be hiring help for her. Good night."

After the servant had gone, Huy prostrated himself on the mat before the crocodile god and began his prayers. He had vowed long ago that he would not address Atum because of the grudge he held against the Omnipotent One, but it often seemed to him that the divine ears open to his words were not those of Huterib's protector. Khenti-kheti had been rendered deaf by Atum's superior power, and in spite of Huy's hubris, it was Atum who heard him. Always Atum. Everything reverted to the god who had brought him back from the dead and laid such burdens upon him.

Huy was seldom able to finish his petitions, and tonight was no exception. The poppy coursing through his veins was already making him sleepy and euphoric. Rising clumsily, he rolled onto his couch and into unconsciousness almost simultaneously.

He woke in the night with a start, already listening for the sound that had disturbed him. His lamp had

gone out. Faint moonlight was filtering through the reed slats of the window hanging, casting bands of blurred grey on the floor. Footsteps were passing his closed door. After a moment Huy realized that they belonged to Anhur or one of his soldiers. He lay down again and turned on his side, but he did not fall asleep at once.

Suddenly he remembered a comment Anhur had made regarding the speed with which Huy's request for a guard had been answered. The Queen had given birth to a son. Egypt had an heir. What was his name? Anhur had not said. The news had been swallowed up in the excitement of their meeting. But with a pang of anxiety it came to Huy that Pharaoh had sent no summons to him to travel to Mennofer and See for the child. There had not even been a scroll announcing the boy's arrival and warning Huy that he would be called upon at a later date. *Why not?* Huy asked himself uneasily. *Surely the future of this Prince will be of vital interest to Amunhotep. Is the King afraid to know it, and if so, why?*

As if he had posed the question aloud to someone in the room, an answer came right away. All the wealth that now surrounded him, all the generosity of a grateful King, had been bestowed because Amunhotep had stopped outside Hut-herib on his way to do battle against the rebellious chieftains of the east, and Huy, being granted the privilege of actually touching the royal hand, had Seen the most vivid and detailed visions he had ever experienced. The King had later returned to Egypt triumphant, laden with all the gifts and booty Huy had predicted, and His Majesty had

shown his appreciation by deeding this pretty little estate to Huy.

But with the promise of victory had come a message for Pharaoh from Atum himself. The words rang in Huy's head with perfect clarity as he lay tensely on his couch. "Tell my son Amunhotep the things I shall show you, and give him this warning," the god had said to Huy, deep in the revelations opening out before him. "He must not depart from the balance of Ma'at I have established. Already he is tempted to do so." *How is the King tempted to disturb the balance of cosmic truth and earthly justice Atum decreed for Egypt?* Huy wondered. He sat up and, swinging his legs over the edge of the couch, gazed unseeing into the calm dimness. "He must not depart . . ." It was a caution, implying that Amunhotep had not yet begun to upset Ma'at but was thinking of doing so. *With full knowledge of what he was doing? How can a King make Ma'at tremble?*

Huy rubbed his forehead and reached for the water beside him, all at once thirsty. *He can do so in a hundred different ways. By subverting the cosmic laws. By ignoring justice for his subjects. By refusing allegiance to our gods, becoming ungrateful to them, setting himself above them.* Huy drank and sat holding the cup in both hands. *Supposing the King has succumbed to the temptation Atum was implying, his thoughts tumbled on. Supposing he remembers very well the words the god spoke to him through me but he does not care, he has set his face towards some evil believing it to be good, believing he knows better than the gods. Now his son is born. Egypt's heir. The King does not want the child's future revealed for fear I may see more than Amunhotep wishes. Or more*

*than he himself desires to know. What course has Pharaoh embarked upon that will bring Atum's disapproval? I can think of no other explanation for the King's silence with regard to his son, and if I am right, then I will never be invited to See for the Hawk-in-the-Nest. Is there any evidence at court, in the affairs of the administration, that Ma'at's laws are being subverted? I must ask Anhur tomorrow, but carefully; and in any case, there is nothing a Seer can do in such a situation. He must wait to prophesy until Atum provides an opportunity to do so.*

Huy lay back but could not sleep again for some time. He heard the patrol outside his door pass and repass twice more before drowsiness overcame him.

Tetiankh woke him at dawn as he had requested, tidied the room as he ate, then accompanied him to the bathhouse, where hot water steamed. Huy stood on the bathing slab to be washed and then lay on the bench just outside, hidden from the rest of the garden by a wall and many shrubs, to be shaved, plucked, and oiled. By the time he sought out Ishat on the grass at the front of the house, there was an orderly queue of petitioners waiting quietly, their eyes flicking from the two soldiers who watched them to the empty stool with Ishat cross-legged beside it.

She smiled at him as he took the stool. True to her word, she was wearing the silver circllet. Its ankhs trembled against her forehead as she picked up her burnisher and began to apply it vigorously to the sheet of papyrus on her palette. "There was a large crowd outside the gate this morning," she told Huy. "Anhur was ready for them. He counted in ten of them and sent the rest away. Kar is most relieved." Laying down the scraper, she ran a hand

over the smooth surface of the papyrus, uncapped the ink, and selected a brush. “Merenra has gone into the town to send our invitations and to find more servants,” she went on. “He will also go to the straw pits and order bricks for the new cells. Are you ready to work?”

Huy nodded. No plants would be trampled today. No disgruntled Seshemnefer would have to clean up human feces from behind the grain silo. Each person would be escorted back to the gate by a guard when Huy had finished caring for his or her need. Ishat whispered the scribes’ prayer to Thoth as Huy beckoned the first patient forward and took her hand. The day’s labour had begun.

By the middle of the afternoon, the courtyard was empty. Huy wiped the sweat from his neck with the linen Tetiankh had stood ready to offer him, and Ishat rose from the grass, flexing her shoulders and yawning. “We will have to take the litter into the town tomorrow,” she remarked. “The list of those too ill to come here is growing. I must eat and then lie on my couch for a while, Huy, and there is no sign of Merenra yet. I hope he’s having some success.” She kissed him briefly on the cheek and hurried into the shade cast by the entrance pillars.

Huy left the stool more slowly. Any swift movement would increase the pounding in his head. He debated whether or not to order poppy from Tetiankh, who had retired a short distance and was waiting for his summons, but decided to try to see if the usual hour of sleep everyone took in the heat of the afternoon would calm the pain. He was about to follow Ishat into the house when he saw Anhur approaching through

the glare of full sunlight. He waited, eyes screwed half shut and beginning to water, and when Anhur came up to him, he took the man's arm and drew him into the coolness of the portico. At once Tetiankh brought in the stool. Huy sank onto it.

"You look terrible, young Huy," Anhur said, bending to peer into Huy's face. "Are you sick? Is there a physician in your house?"

"Besides me and the god?" Huy managed with a grin. "It's just a headache, Anhur. The visions seem to leave it behind, like dross from the refining of metal. I heard you in the house last night. How are your men today? Will they be content here?"

Anhur squatted in front of him. "They will. They like being close enough to the river to swim when they are not on duty. So do I. Now that your peasants have gone home, I've relieved the two guards, placed only one at the gate and one at the rear of the house, and told the rest they are free to sleep or gamble. What about the bricks? I'm anxious to begin building something permanent for them as soon as possible, before the Inundation comes and the nights grow cool."

They talked for a while, then Huy said, "It must have been wonderful to be in the palace when the Prince was born. What has he been named?"

Anhur shrugged. "If you can call a lot of cheering and shrieking and wine-drinking wonderful. We members of the Shock Troops, being household guards as well, didn't get much sleep. Drunk courtiers kept trying to stagger into the royal apartments at all hours, and the common well-wishers kept trying to push their way onto the palace grounds with gifts. A week's holiday was

declared, of course, which didn't make things any easier. Our Prince has been named Amunhotep after his father."

"Pharaoh must be pleased."

Anhur frowned. "I don't think so. The One in his divinity is the Incarnation of Amun, and the Prince will also become Amun's power on earth when he succeeds to the Horus Throne, and naturally it is Amun's priests and astrologers who have the privilege of choosing his name. I was on guard in the reception hall when Amun's High Priest arrived all the way from Weset to give the King the good news. Amunhotep was angry, I could tell. He raised his voice to the High Priest. He demanded that the stars be read again, insisted that the astrologers had made a mistake. The High Priest stood firm. It was his right to name the Hawk-in-the-Nest. He was very offended when he left."

Huy felt the anxiety that had descended on him in the night suddenly return. "How strange," he said slowly. "What name would the King have preferred? Did he say?"

"I was stationed behind the Queen, on the dais. I heard Amunhotep mutter to her that Thothmes his father was a mighty warrior and a great god and his own son should bear that name. The Queen objected that it was an honour to bear the name of Egypt's saviour god, the one who had helped Pharaoh's ancestors drive out the occupying Setiu many hentis ago. At that, the King got up and left the hall." He laughed. "I thank the gods I am not married. There is no woman to nag at me or contradict me."

"Would you rather be back among the delights of the palace, Anhur? Is serving my estate a demotion for you?"

Anhur shot him a sly glance. “Everyone at court knows your power, Huy. Everyone believes you will rise in authority and influence. Everyone wants to come here to your house to meet you, to have their fortunes told, but the King allows no one but those he chooses to come near you. The spoiled little noblemen’s daughters natter together about your healthy body and your famously long hair.” He opened his arms in a wide gesture. “When you rise, so shall I. I want to be a general. As a commoner among the Shock Troops, my promotion would have been no higher than a captain of fifty. One day you will make me a general.”

Huy was astounded, but he had not missed Anhur’s revelation regarding Amunhotep’s control. It explained why he himself was not deluged with petitioners from Mennofer. Something made him ask, “Anhur, what god does Pharaoh worship?”

“Amun, of course, in spite of his annoyance with Weset,” Anhur replied promptly. “Still, he does have friends among the priests of Ra, particularly your old mentor High Priest Ramose at the temple of Ra in Iunu, and right after Amun’s High Priest had left Mennofer to return to Weset, Amunhotep took Kenamun and Miny and went to make an offering at the temple to the Aten in the centre of the city.”

“Ra and the Aten, the gods of the sun,” Huy said. All at once he was very tired.

“I don’t like Kenamun.” Anhur stood up and stretched. “Miny, the King’s weapons instructor, is a good man, but Kenamun sneers at everyone he considers to be below him. Amunhotep should choose his best friend more carefully. He has given Kenamun

the stewardship of his Mennofer Estates. Now the idiot crows louder than ever, but the King doesn't hear it. All he sees is his Foster Brother, son of his wet nurse Amenemopet. Ah, well . . . time for a swim and a sleep." He placed a gentle hand on Huy's head. "Forgive my earlier use of your name, Master. I am still seeing you as that boy for whom I developed a large affection."

"Call me whatever you like, Anhur." Huy rose also. "You are expected to dine with Ishat and me every evening. Now I must lie down and get Tetiankh to put a cool, wet cloth over my eyes."

They parted, Anhur to the gate and Huy up to his room. The window hanging was down and the air a little cooler than the furnace outside. Huy put his head on his pillow with a vast relief. He did not open his eyes when Tetiankh entered. He heard the sudden rush of water as the servant wrung out the cloth, then felt it settle over his face. The action was repeated.

Huy drowsed, but at the back of his mind was a picture of Amunhotep walking across the outer court of the temple to the Aten, the Visible Disc of the sun. Huy did not know why the image disturbed him. The worship of the Disc had gone on for many hentis. The Aten was not popular with the common people; its representations were too starkly simple. It had no face, animal or human, to receive the prayers. It enjoyed a constant but small following among well-educated aristocrats, who revered it for its rays of light that struck the earth and became lions. "The Aten makes the actual physical rays of Amun, who is also Amun-Ra." Huy could hear the voice of his teacher

during the time the class had been taught the intricacies of the various forms the gods took, and their modes of worship. “Lions are the physical representations of the rays of Amun-Ra. *Representations*. Do you see the difference, boys? Aten and its rays belong to the sun. When the rays strike the earth and become lions, they are representations, without the power of the rays themselves. Every sphinx with its lion’s body is, however, revered for what it *represents*.” Huy remembered being supremely bored with this nitpicking. Now he wished he had paid more attention to his teacher.

The cult of the Aten was a solar cult. The rays of the Aten were superior to Amun until they touched the earth, where they became impotent, imprisoned in lions both real and stone. It was not a concept designed to appeal to the unlettered peasant, who brought his gifts and his pleas to the local totem of his town. *Why is this important?* Huy asked himself. *Why am I puzzling over it when all I want to do is sleep away this damnable pain until the evening?* Nevertheless, the vision of Pharaoh striding towards the inner court where the Disc filled the sanctuary made him afraid, and he could not rest.