

## CHAPTER 1

*Already the third month of the summer season is upon us,* Hani thought as he gazed about his garden. The Black Land had begun to pray for a successful Inundation—for high waters and their rich forerunners, the red and green waves, to fecundate the fields.

Once, the people of Kemet had prayed to Amen-Ra and Hapy, god of the flood. Now Hani wasn't sure to whom they were officially expected to offer their prayers and gifts. To the Aten, he supposed, the only god formally recognized by their king, Nefer-khepru-ra. Certainly not to Amen-Ra, the Hidden One, whose name and cult had become anathema. Hani's beloved city of Waset, once the capital of the Upper Kingdom and home of the world's greatest temple, had emptied as the bureaucrats had departed for the new City of the Horizon, and the tens of thousands of priests and lay employees of

the god, left without occupation or income, had grown more and more restless. More and more dangerous.

“That I should have lived to see such a thing,” Hani said, shaking his head.

Much had changed in the four years Nefer-khepru-ra had ruled alone after the death of his father, Neb-ma’at-ra the Magnificent, and Hani, for one, would have said none of those changes were good. His family tomb had been desecrated. His wife, a chantress of the Hidden One, had been locked out of the Ipet-isut, great temple of Amen-Ra, along with all the other clergy. Hani had been forced by his conscience to drop out of active service in the diplomatic corps, no longer able to enforce a foreign policy he neither understood nor respected. But no one had seized his property, at least, so he still had his garden—his retreat, his hidden place of safety, his little slice of the Field of Reeds on earth.

Drawing a deep breath, Hani let his eyes flow fondly over his garden—the trees he and his brother had planted thirty years before, the flowers, the long pool where his beloved ducks played, and the cool whitewashed house set in the middle, where he and Pipi had played as children and now Hani’s own children lived happy lives, as they would until they grew up and moved off to their adult homes.

Dawn had just begun to spread its sweet pale light over the walled garden. The birds awakened, twittering and calling. Qenyt, his pet heron, stalked silently around the perimeter of the pool in search of unwary frogs, lifting her burnished legs with angular grace. In the sycomores, the crickets were falling silent, and the cicadas had not yet begun their roar. Hani drew a deep breath until the farthest corners of his lungs filled with the pure, fragrant air of morning. This was his favorite hour. Despite the disturbing news that every new day inevitably brought, dawn restored his sense of balance, of *ma’at*, and his certitude that everything would be all right in the end.

Having mentally sung his little song of joyful greeting to the rising sun, like the baboons of Ra, Hani made his way back through the mat that hung over the door of the house to keep out the flies. No

one else was up yet except for some of the servants; he could hear the splash of water in the kitchen and a small thunder of wood for the oven dropped on the earthen floor. No longer did Pa-kiki, his second son, have to get up at dawn to go to school at the House of Life—the Per-ankh was closed, along with the temple that housed it. Hani and his father, both scribes, were putting the finishing touches to the boy's education. Soon Pa-kiki would go to Akhet-aten to live with his brother and work at some low-level job in the Hall of the Royal Correspondence, beginning his rise through the ranks.

Hani planted himself in front of the little shrine in his salon, where a small statue of the Hidden One, and homely images of Ta-weret, the Great One, and the dwarf god Bes—protectors of women and children—were honored with flowers and bowls of grain. These days, every shrine was supposed to feature some stele of the Sun Disk and the royal family, even in private devotions, but he didn't feel that kindly toward his ruler and his ruler's god. If he brought an Aten stele home, Hani could imagine what his wife, Nub-nefer, would say, she whose father and brother had each served as Third Prophet of Amen-Ra. Yet Hani was uneasy about giving some officious visitor an opening to carry dangerous tales about his lack of loyalty. He had enough against him already. *Perhaps I ought to get at least a small one...*