

Beneath the prow of the little reed boats slipped the water, as bright as colored glass with the reflection of a cloudless dawn sky. Pearly mist still clung to the tall grasses, like the pristine light of the first morning of creation. Only the ripple of the servants' paddles in the stream and the melodious distant call of a blackbird disturbed the resounding silence of the Great River. Hanı breathed deeply, filling his lungs with the purity of the early hour. If only he were here alone and not in the company of his foreign visitor, who, like most men, loved nothing better than a fowling party. Hanı was maybe unique in Kemet, the Black Land, in that he did *not* like to hunt. Not that he didn't—perhaps hypocritically—relish a succulent roast fowl. And, with his wife a chantress of Amen, he was well enough trained in theology that he understood the power to subdue chaos that a hunt in the marshes represented. But Hanı loved birds. They fascinated him, awed him, evoked his tenderness, tickled his humor. The thought of the admirable and unsuspecting duck sitting out there in a wicker cage on the beach to lure its comrades down to roost filled him with a vague sense of shame.

Hanı could hear the grumpy honking of a pair of storks even before he saw them through the tall marsh grass.

"Not them, my lord," he said quietly to his companion, who had stirred beside him. "We don't hunt them. They aren't good eating. There will be ducks, I promise you."

His guest, the *hapiru* leader Abdi-ashirta, nodded and hefted the throwing stick in his hand. He might look like an old man, but there was a predatory agelessness about the manner in which he weighed his weapon. Hanı suspected that Abdi-ashirta was not so harmless as his gray beard and humor-crinkled eyes might lead one to believe. It was precisely Hanı's duty to watch him and

observe. He couldn't complain; a morning on the River was one of the pleasanter assignments he had served for the living Haru, Neb-ma'at-ra Amen-hotep Heqa-en-waset.

The boats silently breasted the water, nosing between the reeds that grew close together like a kind of curtain wall as the vessels slid nearer to the island. A hubbub of avian voices resounded from ahead. Sure enough: ducks, a great society of them, of all kinds—black and brown and blue-banded, striped and barred and dotted—gabbled and splashed beyond them where the grass opened out again. The islet's sandy little beach was seething with their feathered bodies, and their quacking rose as loud as the streets of Waset on market day as the birds negotiated their places, their mates, their share of the frogs. Others circled overhead like flies.

Without warning, Abdi-ashirta rose on his knees, his lean body arced, and sent his stick slicing into the air. A bird plummeted heavily into the lapping water along the shore. The rest of the ducks ascended, flapping and squawking, awkwardly thundering into flight, betrayed by their cage-bound comrade. From the second boat, Hani's servants hurled their sticks after the stragglers. Victims dropped with thunks onto the sand or splashed into the water.

Hani poled the boat up on the beach of the island with his paddle. "Well done, my lord," he commended his guest. "You're a born fowler. We'll eat well tonight."

The servants splashed through the shallows and scrambled up onto the land, gathering the dead birds before the crocodiles got wind of them, then they held the first boat for Hani and the *hapir* to step ashore. Hani jumped out barefooted and waded up the strand. Abdi-ashirta didn't seem to mind wetting his shoes or the fringed hem of his long tunic; he reached dry land in a few splashing strides. He squinted around at the ducks, flapping their indignant way into the distance or settling out of range on the far bank of the river, and grinned. "You don't hunt, Hani? Seems a shame to waste all this game."

“Oh, it’s not wasted, my lord,” Hani assured him genially. “There are plenty of people to kill them. As for me, I watch these ducks come and go every year until I think of them as friends.”

“You’re an unusual fellow, aren’t you?” said Abdi-ashirta. He shot Hani a sharp glance that seemed friendly enough, but the Egyptian suspected he missed nothing. Hani nodded with a bland, amiable smile. He was a diplomat. This hunting party was an assignment from the vizier; Abdi-ashirta wasn’t Hani’s friend. Hani had no need to reveal anything of himself, and if the *hapiru* saw in this fact a revelation, it was what Hani chose to show him. Around the two men, the servants were loading onto the boats the pathetic carcasses of the dead birds. The caged decoy honked desolately after his flown fellows.

“The sun’s coming up, my lord. It’s going to be getting hotter. Do you want to continue, or shall we head home?”

“We can go back. I just wanted to see this famous River of yours up close.”

“Does it please you?” Hani asked with a smile.

“I think it does, yes. We certainly have nothing like it at home.” Abdi-ashirta nodded thoughtfully, casting his eyes around for a last look. Hani watched him, wondering exactly what might be going through his head.

In the water up to his ankles, Hani held the boat by its upturned prow while a servant steadied Abdi-ashirta with a hand until he had taken his place on the smooth, fat rolls of reed and sunken to his knees once more. Hani stepped on board a little awkwardly, for all that he had grown up on such boats, prowling the marshes in search of birds since his childhood—at forty-one, he was no longer the slim little monkey he had been in his youth. He pushed off with the paddle, and the boat slipped once more into the current, shouldering its way through the reeds.

Off on the east bank of the River, beyond the green fringe of palms and grasses, Hani saw the white cubes of the city drawing closer as the fast water caught their boats and drew them home. Above the houses of men, the walls of Ipet-isut—the mansion of Amen-Ra, the greatest temple in the world—seemed to be swept up into the very radiance of the rising sun, shimmering and unearthly, on a scale more than human. Fishing boats, cargo barges, and elegant barques passed them in increasing numbers as they drew toward the land, borne on the malachite shoulders of the River. Hani noticed the gilded prow of the royal yacht, the Dazzling Sun Disk, moored ahead.

*I'm sorry, friend ducks, he said silently. Your sacrifice will serve the king.*