

*How long will this go on? How long will we suffer at the hands of an impious tyrant who thinks of no one but himself?* Hani thought in disgust.

Hemmed in by an enormous crowd, Hani stood between the lion-bodied images of the king that flanked the main street of Akhet-aten. He was waiting—as it seemed he had so often in the last seven years—for the king and his family to make their appearance. This occasion was the opening ceremony of the Great Jubilee of the Aten.

More splendid than even the two previous jubilees Nefer-khepru-ra had held since he had come to the throne alone, this one had been two years in the making. All the ambassadors of foreign lands, all the mayors of Kemet's vassal states to the north, and all the princes of Tanehesy to the south were there to render homage—because Nefer-khepru-ra *was* the Aten. Officially, he was the son and the only priest of the shining Sun Disk, but Hani had realized long ago that, in fact, the king in his person was intended to be the revelation of the Aten.

*One god. One priest. One revelation: him.*

The very thought had Hani grinding his teeth at the havoc the royal decrees had wrought. The Ipet-isut, the Greatest of Shrines, consecrated to Amen-ra, had been closed, the cult statues desecrated, the priests expelled. The Hidden One's estates had been confiscated and tens of thousands of priests and workers had found themselves without jobs. Had the king held his celebration in the old capital, Waset, this crowd would have been dangerously hostile.

But the inhabitants of Akhet-aten were handpicked. They were the bureaucrats and tradespeople for whom the king's continued favor had been more important than conscience, and they would applaud him as he demanded.

*Yet here I am too,* Hani thought, with a twinge of cynicism. *And here is my father, and here are my sons and daughter and my son-in-law.* Only Nub-nefer, his wife, had been obdurate

enough in her faith to refuse to attend. But then, she had been a chantress of Amen, and the king's decrees had come down hard on her and her whole family. Sat-hut-haru, Hani's middle girl, had yielded to her mother's stern orders and declined to participate as well.

Hani mopped his forehead, although, in fact, the temperature wasn't extreme in this second month of the winter season. Still, packed in with a dense crowd of perspiring bodies, he was none too comfortable, sweat dampening his armpits and then chilling. The men around him were, like himself, scribes and emissaries in the king's foreign office. His friend Mane was at his side, bouncing on his tiptoes, trying to see over the taller heads around him.

"I should be like a crocodile," Mane shouted over the rumble of the crowd. "They keep growing as long as they live. I'd be taller than Keliya by now." Keliya was their mutual friend, the ambassador from Naharin.

Hani laughed. He was of average height and still could see nothing more than the white-clad backs of his colleagues all around him, the linen shirts beginning to grow transparent with perspiration. Everyone's big court wigs blocked even more of his view. He wondered if Maya, his son-in-law and secretary, who was a dwarf, could see anything at all.

Hani eyed the bright, clear sky overhead. Blue as turquoise. Soft and smooth as the breast of a heron. *Great Ra*, he prayed silently, *put an end to this madness*.

A hawk sailed overhead far, far into the cloudless azure distance, and Hani followed it admiringly with squinted eyes. Perhaps it was a magnificent bird... or perhaps it was the god Haru, watching the Two Lands with an all-seeing and protective gaze. *Lord Haru, show us the way of truth*. Hani sighed.

He heard a scuffling noise ahead of him, and suddenly two men lurched back into the crowd, one of them looking blanched and unwell, leaning on his anxious companion's arm. They

forced their way through the throng and off, and Hani and Mane found themselves pressed forward into the front rank of the spectators.

“We can breathe at last,” he said to Mane with a grin.

The great processional way stretched off before him in either direction, the crowd of bureaucrats a bright white-and-black fringe along the edges, bordering the tall whitewashed walls of temple and palace and sparkling with festive gold jewelry. Banners rippled lazily in the scant wind. The sun-scorched street had been swept and the dust laid by a sprinkling of water, but still it reflected the glare until it was almost impossible to see without a visoring hand. Somewhere to Hani’s right, toward the palace, were gathered the viziers and upper-level functionaries like his own superior, Lord Ptah-mes, high commissioner of foreign relations. To his left stood the lower-rank royal scribes and military scribes, including his sons and father.

All at once, trumpets began to bray, chiming in one after the other in a joyous, ascending chord. The crowd rustled and murmured excitedly. Around the north wall of the palace, the royal procession came into view: first several army units marching in step to the beat of drums, and then the royal family.

The king and queen—or perhaps he should say now the two kings—were borne high in their golden carrying chairs on the shoulders of stalwarts decked in plumes and leopard skins. Nefer-khepru-ra gazed straight ahead of him, a slight smile on his lips, and so did the beautiful Nefert-iti Nefer-neferu-aten. They were a splendid couple, he had to admit—and things had reached such a pass in Hani’s soul that even that admission was painful. But they were young and good looking, although the king had begun to grow fat like his father. Decked with jewels, their arms crossed over their chests bearing the crook and flail of kingship, they sparkled like the pair of gods they were.

