

**WILBUR  
SMITH**

WITH  
**MARK CHADBOURN**

**THE NEW  
KINGDOM**

**ZAFFRE**

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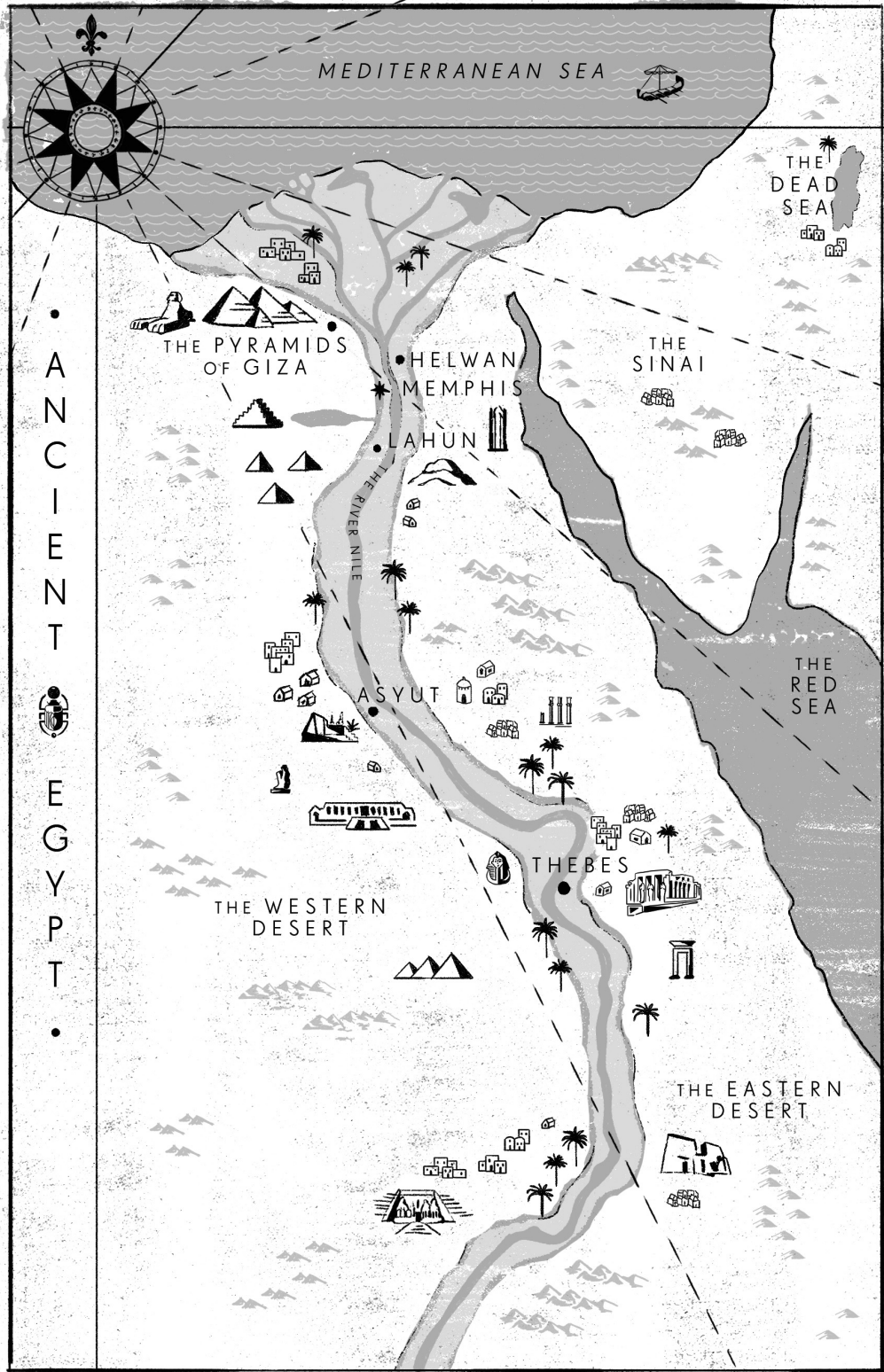
*For Mokhiniso*

*You mended my heart and gave me the strength of an army*

*Thank you for pushing me to be the best writer I can be*











Dear Reader,

One of the most satisfying surprises of my career was the success of *River God* and the novels that followed in the Ancient Egyptian Series: *The Seventh Scroll*, *Warlock*, *The Quest*, *Desert God* and *Pharaoh*. When a publisher first expressed interest in working with me and co-authors to explore untold Taita yarns, I was excited by their interest and the ensuing publicity, and was ready to revisit my own Ancient Egypt. I re-read the series and discovered a gap and saw vividly in my imagination what Taita was up to. It was in this space between *River God* and *Warlock* where *Desert God* and *Pharaoh* now stand. It was a good feeling to spend more time with Taita. Some claim he is my alter-ego (but that is a matter between Taita and myself).

Egypt had always fascinated me, it was the crossroads of the continents, the foundation of the history of civilization – it all happened there. The Hyksos invasion was a time of confusion and chaos, which was why I was able to indulge my imagination by filling in the gaps of that period.

One of the pleasures of communicating with my fans is the questions they ask me on social media. They want to know so much more about the world of *River God*. When I finished re-reading the Egyptian Series, I realised that in all six novels I was so totally focused on Taita's first person narrative and his quest to protect the Two Kingdoms that I had totally missed a secondary character who earned a stage of his own and could offer another view of that extraordinary time.

You may recall Hui, the young bandit who becomes the Pharaoh's best charioteer, training an army to regain the throne against Hui's own people. Hui's story runs parallel to the world of *River God* and I hope you will find the cameo from Taita



satisfying. It's a story of vengeance, as Hui plots against his brother Qen. Keep an eye out for another personal favourite of mine from *River God*. The Easter eggs are there to be found and savoured for my old and new readers. I hope you enjoy this new series as much as I did plotting it and co-writing it.

As ever,  
Wilbur Smith





The two men clambered across the high ground under the watchful eye of the gods. At the summit, the barren landscape rolled out, silvered by moonlight and carved by shadow. A cool breeze blew from the east, ripe with the earthy aromas of the lush vegetation swelling around the Nile.

They were friends from their earliest days. Of the two, Hui was the braver. He wore no more than a linen kilt, wrapped around him and knotted at the waist, showing off limbs that were hard and strong. In Lahun, the home they had crept away from at sunset, many still thought of him as a child. Hui blamed his youthful features, which still glowed with innocence – cheeks a little too plump, no worry lines around his mouth or on his forehead. A child! Seventeen, he was! He wrinkled his nose. Those detractors would be proved wrong soon enough.

‘Do you see it?’ Kyky said in a tremulous voice.

His nickname meant ‘monkey’, for that was what he resembled, with thin arms that seemed to reach almost to his knees, and a small face with big dark eyes.

Hui pressed a finger to his lips. Crouching, he craned his neck to stare at the stars flowing across the sky. Yes, the gods were always watching, every fool knew that. He trembled under the weight of those glittering eyes.

A grand destiny lay ahead of him, if those higher powers were willing, and tonight he would take his first step along that road to glory.

The eerie barking they had heard on the climb echoed again, closer this time, and his heart hammered.

Hui looked around the jagged teeth of the rocks on the hills where he had followed the old desert wanderers' tracks, to the undulating waves of the desert sands to the west. Squinting towards the east, he could make out the faintest glimmer of the Great River mirroring that sweep of twinkling stars overhead.

That otherworldly yowling rang out again, almost at his elbow this time, and Hui jumped to his feet.

'What is that?' Kyky whined. He grabbed Hui's shoulder, his eyes widening.

Hui let out what he hoped was a comforting laugh. 'Stay strong, my friend.'

'You dragged us to this lonely place, far from the safety of our homes, and now you tell me not to be afraid?' Kyky jabbered. 'The old men on the benches by the walls say the hills are haunted. Demons walk here.'

Hui choked back his scorn as Kyky reached out a trembling finger. A silhouette was rising behind a rib of brown rock. Twin horns stabbed up from the head. Coldly glimmering eyes stared at them. That mournful barking rolled out again.

Kyky clutched his face and whimpered, 'Oh, Hui, you have doomed us.'

Hui stiffened. He would stand his ground, even though his legs were shaking, for that is what great leaders did.

The silhouette eased up further until the moonlight burned the darkness from it, and Hui sagged with relief. Those horns were long, pointed ears, the narrow face and almond eyes feline. It was a desert cat. He'd seen one only once before, but he'd heard they barked like dogs instead of purring or hissing.

Slapping his hands on his thighs, Hui convulsed with laughter, then hurled a stone to frighten the cat away.

'We are jumping at shadows,' he chuckled.

‘And can you blame us?’

‘This is a night for momentous things—’

‘A night where fools get their comeuppance, more like.’ Kyky kicked up a whirl of sand in defiance. ‘We are more likely to get our throats slit and be left as a feast for the vultures.’

Hui couldn’t argue with that. But he showed a cheerful face for his friend’s sake.

‘You’ll sing a different song when we return with a gift from the gods.’

‘*If* we return.’

‘Courage, little monkey!’ Hui said, clapping an arm around his friend’s shoulders. ‘Let the fire in your belly roar! This night your life will change.’ When he saw Kyky screw up his nose, he added with haste, ‘For the better, of course. Girls will fall to their knees before you, begging you to take them. The bullies who’ve tormented you all your life will bow their heads in deference. You will be a king amongst men. Embrace this moment.’

Kyky shook his head. ‘It is too dangerous. We should turn back.’

Hui smiled to hide his frustration. He had more persuading to do.

‘And lose a prize beyond all value?’ He scrambled onto a boulder and pointed towards the stars. “A fire blazing across the sky” – that’s what the old desert wanderer said. Where it crashed upon the earth, the sand was turned to glass and at the centre of a wide crater was a black stone. The Ka Stone, the desert wanderer called it. Not the Ka Stones that are left in the tombs, no. One filled with the essence of the gods. Why, he told me himself it had magical powers. Some say it could make a man fly with the birds, if he utters the right prayers.

Others that it raises the phantoms of those denied a place in the afterlife—’

‘Some say, some say.’ Kyky paced impatiently. ‘And why did that old desert wanderer not benefit from this magic himself? Because it was stolen from him – dragged from dead fingers when every man who walked beside him was slaughtered.’ Kyky threw his hands into the air. ‘Stolen by the Shrikes! The most bloodthirsty bandits in all Egypt. And now you want to steal the stone back from them. Madness. Why did I ever listen to you?’

Hui turned away, pretending to search for the track through the jumble of rock and dust. Kyky was tired and irritable from the trek, but there was truth in his words. Hui couldn’t deny he’d been swallowing his own apprehension that now fluttered in his belly like a small bird. For all his bravado, he knew the risks. To rob a robber, that was one thing. To sneak into the camp of the Shrikes and steal their most prized possession . . . well, Kyky was right for once. That was lunacy.

*Stay calm, Hui thought. You are brave.*

Hui raised his eyes to the heavens again and searched the constellations until he found the Four Sons of Horus – there, just as his father had pointed out to him when he was a boy. His guide. His destiny. He felt comforted.

He thought back to the white walls of Lahun, when he had met the lone desert wanderer begging for bread to fill his empty stomach. Wrapped in black robes, with a scarf tied around his head, the man had a face as wind-blasted and sunburned as the wastes through which those *habiru* travelled. In exchange for a dry crust, he’d told Hui of the Ka Stone and the attack on his caravan. Hui’s eyes had lit up when he heard the potential in the story. It could be nothing, of course. Those tribes of wanderers loved their tales. But if true, the gods had presented

Hui with a chance to seize something greater than he had ever known – for himself, for his father and family, for Lahun.

He didn't dare speak of it widely. His father, Khawy, would have banished him to his room – the dangers were too great. The bandits had left trails of blood across all of Egypt. Yet he imagined the Shrikes' camp in the hills, swollen by captured girls to be sold into slavery, and vast tents filled with unimaginable booty from their raids along the Nile's fringe south of Dahshur. The bandits would no doubt be drunk, celebrating their great success and basking in the certainty that they were the ones who would be blessed by the gods. Drunk, and sleeping it off, and too stupefied to notice little rats scurrying amongst their tents to relieve them of their great prize.

Hui leaped from his rock. 'Nothing great was ever gained by timid hearts. But if you wish to turn back, I cannot stand in your way.'

Kyky looked down the hillside to the empty wastes.

'Alone?'

'Or you could follow me towards a great destiny. Think – a gift from the gods themselves. What eminence would be heaped upon the man who brought that back to Lahun? Why, even Pharaoh himself would shine his magnificence upon such a hero. Or heroes.'

Kyky bowed his head, undecided. 'I am content with my lot. Hero sounds like a dangerous title. No, tell me once more what we stand to gain by risking our necks? Something I can hold in my hands.'

'Riches beyond your wildest imaginings. Something so blessed, so rare, will be coveted by great and powerful men everywhere. They will pay anything to possess it. That is why the desert wanderers first took it. That is why the Shrikes stole

it from them. Seize this moment, Kyky, and we will be the wealthiest, most honourable men in all Lahun. You will never want for anything again. There is no prize more valuable in all the world.'

Before Kyky could make his choice, Hui heard footsteps crunching towards them. He whipped out his short-bladed knife from the folds of his kilt. He had no idea how to use it to defend himself, had never been in a fight in his life. He prayed the glint of moonlight on the copper would be enough of a deterrent.

Kyky let out a quavering moan.

A figure loomed out of the night, and with a shudder of relief, Hui saw that it was Qen.

'Brother!' he hailed. 'Are you trying to frighten the ghost out of us both?'

'Keep your voice down,' Qen snapped.

When the new arrival skidded to a halt in front of them, Hui saw his elder brother's eyes were darting around, wide with fear. He'd been scouting the path ahead now that they were closing on the bandit camp.

'What is it?' Hui asked.

Qen gripped his arm. 'We must turn back.'

'Are the Shrikes coming? Do they know of our plan? Are they going to gut us and leave us out for the vultures?' Kyky's panic edged his words.

'Come with me.'

Qen spun on his heel and raced back across the stones, this time keeping low.

Hui felt that knot of apprehension inside him grow tighter. Qen was taller than he was, and as thin as a needle, with hollow cheeks that made him look as if he hadn't eaten a good meal in

days. But when he grinned, his face lit up and everyone around him felt bathed in joy. They had the same father, but different mothers. Khawy had taken Qen's mother Isetnofret first, an arrangement for political reasons, and she had also provided him with a daughter, Ipwet. Hui loved her dearly. But Khawy had fallen in love with Kiya, Hui's mother, who had died giving birth to him. That explained why the two brothers looked so unlike. But they were different in character, too. Qen was as hard as the jutting rocks on that hillside, unyielding when he desired something. And his slim frame hid a powerful strength. When they were younger, Hui had witnessed him beat two bullies, smashing one of the youths' heads repeatedly into the wall of their father's house until the nose was broken, the lips turned to pulp and half the teeth were knocked out. Qen had courage, too. Whatever troubled him, it would be wise to take heed.

Hui and Kyky set off after Qen, the three of them running together as they had done since they were boys. These were the ones Hui trusted more than any in the world, the only men he'd been prepared to tell about this great adventure. They'd barely spent a day apart all their lives. Once they'd raced through the streets of the Upper City with their whip-tops, and bickered over skittles. Now they were would-be thieves and heroes. How right it felt that they were here together this night.

Ahead, Qen slowed his pace and came to a halt at the beginning of a track along a gully between two towering rocks. He looked up.

Hui followed Qen's gaze. Silhouetted against that starry sky, shapes hovered, six of them, seemingly floating above the ground. They fluttered in the wind blasting across the high land.

At first, Hui struggled to understand what he was seeing. Kyky, though, released another strangled moan. He glanced up

at that sight, as if praying he had been mistaken, before wrenching his head away in horror.

Hui edged forward beside his brother. Bonded in silence, they stared.

Six bodies hung on a rope strung between the two rocks. The buzzards and kites had already feasted on the soft flesh of the faces. Picked clean, the cheekbones and jaws gleamed in the moonlight, and rows of yellowing teeth grimaced. But it was those hollow sockets, deep and black as the pits of *Duat*, looking down upon them, judging them unworthy, that filled them with dread.

Kyky slumped to his knees and wrung his hands.

‘The Shrikes have little regard for the souls of their victims,’ Qen muttered.

He was staring into the shadowed sockets of the nearest vision of torment.

‘A warning,’ Hui replied.

And the message was clear. For strangers, only death lay ahead.



**G**olden sparks swirled towards the twinkling constellations in the sky. Though the night wind whipped up the campfire in one final roar, the flames were beginning to die down, the embers glowing red in waves of grey ash. In the wavering amber light, a jumble of tall, square tents billowed. Sobbing was heard from amongst them, no doubt from one of the girl captives, stifled as suddenly as it began.

Under the lamp of the full moon, the camp of the Shrikes was slumbering.

Hui’s eyes watered from a stray wisp of smoke. He could taste the sweet fragrance of the sheep dung and straw that provided



the fire's fuel. How long had he been lying on his belly on this slab of rock, scrutinizing the bandit camp, with Kyky and Qen barely daring to breathe beside him? An age, it seemed. But the time had to be right, even though his ribs were sore, and his knees and elbows ached from sliding across the hard ground like vipers to avoid being picked out by the moonlight.

Egypt had once been the greatest empire on earth, Hui had overheard his father, the governor, telling one of the visiting dignitaries. But now it was besieged by jackals on all sides, and the good folk lived in constant fear. Their king lacked an heir and the strength to hold the Great House of Egypt together, and in the chaos, a false pharaoh had arisen as challenger in the lower reaches of the Nile. His soldiers dominated there. In the west, the Libyans held sway along with the desert wanderers, the *habiru*, rogues and cut-throats all. Foreigners, not Egyptians. They had no standing in this land and never would. And in the east the barbarians, the Hyksos, tested the resolve of Egypt's defenders with their bloody war bands. Hui had heard many stories of those terrifying warriors. He prayed he would never meet one.

But it seemed, listening to his father, that it was the Shrikes who invoked the greatest fear.

These robber gangs, each led by their own chieftain, terrorized the length and breadth of the Nile. They would attack in broad daylight, even striking within the shadow of the city walls, cutting down any man, woman or child who stood in their way. They took what they wanted with impunity, disappearing into the wilderness to plan their next raid. Khawy had bemoaned the weakness of the palace officials who seemed incapable of doing anything to bring the Shrikes to justice.

'The Shrikes are a force in the land to rival the state itself. No one would dare challenge them,' Khawy had whispered.

‘They have no kindness, no compassion. Those murderous bandits would slit the throats of their own mothers if they saw gain in it.’

And here Hui was, daring to challenge them. Perhaps Kyky had been right to call him a fool. And yet the thought of the wealth that would tumble into his hands once he’d returned with the Ka Stone – the grand house he could own, larger even than his father’s, the army of slaves, the land, the adoration . . . A life like that was worth any risk.

One tent was larger than the others. It was set close to the fire so the flames would keep the occupant warm throughout the watches of the night. Though it appeared grey in the moonlight, Hui imagined it a sumptuous purple, a residence befitting whichever man was powerful enough to lead these scourges of the desert. A banner fluttered above it. Black stripes slashed across a field of colour. Blood red? That’s what he would have chosen.

Beside the leader’s tent was a smaller one, though still larger than the resting places of the fighting men. Surely that must be where the Shrikes kept their booty, close enough so the chieftain would be aware if any of his men tried to steal something for themselves. Then that was where they needed to go. Hui extended a finger, tracing a path to it amongst the smaller tents.

‘Please,’ Kyky hissed, ‘let us think again.’

‘You are free to return to your mother,’ Qen said in a voice as icy as deep river water. ‘Let her wipe away your baby tears.’

Hui rested a hand on his friend’s shoulder.

‘This is not the time to back out, Little Monkey,’ he whispered. ‘Not when the most glorious of prizes is almost within our grasp.’

Kyky's face was ashen in the moonlight, his stare fixed. Would he be able to overcome his terror and do what would be expected of him? Hui wasn't sure.

He thought back to that grisly display of the Shrikes' hanging victims, and once again he was choking on the stink of rot.

Hui could feel his heart thundering inside him, and that queasy knot in his stomach. His plan had seemed infallible when they sat in the shade of a canopy on the roof of his father's house in Lahun.

'We are not fighters,' Kyky blurted. 'We are fools who laugh too much and fall over when we're drunk and always say the wrong things to the girls.'

*He is right*, Hui thought. But this was their one chance to become something else.

Poor, oft-bullied Kyky. Hui's heart ached for him. How could he put his friend through any more misery than what he had already experienced in his short life? As they sprawled in the dust, Hui glanced at Qen.

Qen eased himself onto his elbows, his face burning with defiance.

'Mother told me that the gods have a plan for all men,' he said, his words emphatic and hard. 'They reveal it, not with a clap of thunder, but with the slowness of the wind uncovering a gold plate buried in the sand. It is easy to miss that message, and that is how the gods wish it, for they want men to pay attention to their presence at all times. We stand at a fork in the road. One way leads to our destiny. One way leads to a path where the gods will punish us for being blind. On that path, we have nothing but toil and suffering until the day we die.'

Hui felt the hairs on his neck prickle. Yes, this was how he felt, though he would never have been able to express it so eloquently, nor to frame it in the wisdom of Qen's birth-mother, Isetnofret.

Qen looked at both of them. 'This is our moment.'

Hui nodded. 'Our choice. A life of toil or a life of joy.'

Kyky said, 'You promise me this is the right decision?'

'I have no doubt,' Hui replied.

Yet, with the camp so close, it was impossible to deny the reality of what lay ahead.

The campfire crackled.

*The fork in the road. The path to destiny.*

Squinting against the smoke, Hui saw a guard hunched beside a rolling dune. Just the one, by the look of it. And why would there be more? No one in their right mind would attack this band of throat-slitters.

The guard was as unmoving as one of those hillside rocks, his legs tucked up, his forehead resting on his knees. Asleep. The gods smiled upon them.

Qen glanced at the moon. 'Too bright. We might as well have danced in there at noon.'

'At noon, our hosts would not be sleeping, drunk,' Hui replied. 'It was this night or not at all.'

They had come too far to turn back. Soon they would know what plan the gods had for them.

Hui glanced from one face to the other, and then, with a nod, he crawled forward, keeping one eye on the slumbering sentry. He sensed Qen and Kyky follow him.

Though his elbows and knees burned, he dragged himself along at a slow pace, as silent as a tomb. Drunk the Shrikes might be, but rogues like that would always sleep with one ear cocked and a hand on a sword.

Crawling into a strip of moon-shadow along the edge of the camp, Hui steadied himself and waited for Qen and Kyky to join him. From inside the nearest tent, snoring rumbled.

He cupped his hand against his ear. They had to be alert for the slightest sound of stirring.

Now was the time of greatest danger.

Blood thundered in his temples as he crept around the edge of the tent, keeping low. At the end of a maze of guy ropes and pegs, the campfire flickered lower and the circle of orange light receded. No one stirred.

Soon Hui was crouching in front of what he was sure was the booty tent. When he was certain he could hear only silence within, he touched the three leather thongs that tied the tent flaps shut, and with deft movements plucked each knot loose.

He could feel the eyes of Qen and Kyky upon him. Steeling himself, he eased the flap aside.

A blade of light from the dying fire carved through the dark in the tent. Waist-high baskets made from tightly bound reeds were stacked against a multitude of clay pots. One basket was overflowing with silver amulets and copper plate, gleaming necklaces embedded with lapis lazuli, and gem-studded headbands ripped from the wealthiest female victims of these raiders. One of the lids of the clay pots had slipped, and inside it Hui glimpsed grain. The rich scent of oil hung in the air. The bandits could barter everything here for whatever their hearts desired.

Hui slipped inside. Qen and Kyky followed.

Hui left the flap slightly open so the glow from the fire would illuminate their search, and he crept amongst the plunder. Qen moved steadily from basket to basket, lifting each lid and peering inside.

Kyky lingered by the entrance to the tent, ignoring Hui's frantic beckoning. The Little Monkey pointed to one basket. It was caught in the shaft of amber light breaking through the gap in the tent flaps, almost as if the gods had illuminated it for them. The pannier stood alone with a space around it, an odd sight in the jumble of spoils.

Hui saw what Kyky had noticed. The basket had been placed there with care, and a path left to it so the contents could be easily inspected. Hui grinned at his friend. Kyky had always been the clever one.

Hui's heart thumped as his hand hovered over the lid of the basket. It might have been his superstitious mind, but he felt a cold force radiating from the vessel. The skin on his forearms prickled into gooseflesh, and for a moment he dreaded the thought of lifting the lid and staring at something that had had contact with the gods themselves.

He carefully lifted the lid.

There was no flash of light, nor a crack of thunder. But as Hui stared into the shadows, he sensed whispers licking in his head, strange voices speaking in a language he didn't recognize but which seemed weighted with terrible meaning. This was the right place.

Whispering a prayer, he reached a trembling hand inside. His fingers brushed something hard, wrapped in what felt like the softest linen.

Suddenly Hui sensed movement in the corner of his eye in the depths of the basket. With a muted cry, he threw himself backwards.

A sinuous shape lashed out of the dark interior. The hooded head of a cobra swayed before him, jewelled black and silver, glinting in the firelight. A forked tongue flickered from a mouth gaping wide, those venom-filled fangs a gleam.

Hui stiffened in fear, mesmerized by the serpent's supple undulation. He'd seen a man die in slow agony from one bite of those clamping jaws.

Kyky hissed a warning, flapping his hands towards the tent's entrance. His involuntary cry! He'd been too confident, and now he'd doomed them all.

Lunging back, Hui dropped low. The cobra lashed, but those savage jaws snapped thin air. Hui kicked out and the creaking basket spun away. The snake flew with it. His last vision was of its coiled tail gleaming like molten metal as it thrashed into the shadowed recesses.

Digging deep into the basket, Hui wrenched the prize from the depths. He had to be sure. Peeling back the linen, he raised up a pitted black rock with jagged edges, about the size of a man's head. The boy's eyes shone with wonder and they gaped as they stared at it, but only for a fleeting moment. Wrapping up the Ka Stone and clutching it against his chest, Hui scrambled towards the tent flaps. Outside he could hear cries echo, and whistles ringing from the camp's edge. The moment they stepped out and revealed themselves, the Shrikes would fall upon them. But nor could they wait there. The booty tent would be the first place the rogues searched.

'You jolt-head,' Qen spat. 'You've killed us all.'

'Away,' Hui exhorted. 'The gods will watch over us.'

He barged past the other two and crashed into the smoky night.

With one glance, the blood in his veins turned to ice-water. All around, heads were pushing their way out of tents, the last vestiges of sleep being blinked away in an instant. A few Shrikes lumbered here and there, searching for the cause of the noise that had disturbed them.

Another already had his bronze sword in his hand and was marching towards the tent where their plunder was stored. When he saw Hui and the Ka Stone, his face lit up with shock, twisting into fury. A cry of alarm ripped from his mouth, soaring up to the heavens. And then the camp erupted into wild life, like a teeming anthill that had been disturbed.

Hui hurled himself on. Their path through the camp looked clear. A chance, then, if only a slim one.

Hui leaped over the guy ropes as he raced. His feet danced past pegs, instinct keeping him moving forward.

Someone was shouting that they'd been robbed, that the Ka Stone had been stolen. A further outpouring of rage boomed.

Behind him, Kyky was whining like steam escaping from a covered pot bubbling on the hearth.

As he darted past the edge of the camp, Hui heard a crash and a yell. He whirled, only to see it wasn't the Little Monkey, but Qen who had fallen. Kyky was ahead of his brother, and he skidded to a halt and half-turned.

Silhouetted against the campfire, a storm of Shrikes gathered. Glinting swords flashed. Their roar merged into one single bellow, like a giant beast hungry to fill its belly.

Qen was struggling to pull himself to his feet as the horde surged forward.

Hui's brother! His brother, whom he loved more than anything!

Before Hui could move, Kyky threw himself back over those treacherous guy ropes, grasped Qen by the wrist and wrenched the fallen man to his feet. Qen came up hard, staggering into the Little Monkey's arms.

But it was too late. The Shrikes were almost upon them.

For the briefest instant, Qen and Kyky stared into each other's eyes. Hui couldn't tell what silent communication was



travelling between them – perhaps a prayer of thanks for the friendship they had shared, perhaps a recognition that they would meet death together, brothers in all but blood.

Qen gripped Kyky's shoulders, in what must have been one final embrace . . . and then spun him around and heaved him towards the mob.

Hui was astounded. Qen had never shown cowardice before, nor a disregard for any other life, certainly not that of a friend as close as any kin.

'Brother, what have you done?' Hui whispered to himself, struggling to comprehend what was unfolding before his eyes. He'd always looked up to Qen, for his bravery, and his strength. But this was not the brother he knew!

Kyky spun backwards, arms flailing. Hui watched his friend's features crumple with horror when he realized his fate.

Hui half-stepped forward to help, and then caught himself. What could he do? It was hopeless.

The Little Monkey snagged his foot on a guy rope and fell onto his back. The Shrikes pounced on him, howling.

As he scrambled away, Hui felt a spasm of revulsion. His friend's screams sliced through the victorious baying. Kyky had been hauled to his feet. A muscular arm snaked around his throat, ready to snap his neck. His wrists were grabbed and yanked back, and the tips of swords stabbed against his chest to run him through in an instant when the moment came.

Qen bounded to Hui's side. He couldn't bring himself to look at his brother. And when Qen grabbed his arm to drag him away, Hui threw the hand off. He was frozen, unable to flee and leave his friend to his fate, knowing he would surely die if he stayed.

The Shrikes seemed to sense his torment. Grins flickered across faces and they slowed their step now they knew they had the upper hand, edging forward with Kyky in their midst. Taunting. Urging Hui and Qen to come to them.

‘Stand your ground!’

The voice boomed across the camp and every man fell silent. The Shrikes stumbled to a halt, a spear’s throw away from where Hui and Qen stood.

A path opened amongst the horde of Shrikes. Hui watched a figure striding along it. Tall and lean, his skin was burned to mahogany by the desert sun. Hui took in those black eyes and beaked nose and saw *babiru* blood in him. The man grinned, his white teeth shining amongst the black bristles of his thick, curled beard.

When the man came to a halt beside the quavering Kyky, he said, ‘Do you know who you have challenged?’ The voice rang with arrogance. Here was a man who was *never* challenged. ‘My name is Basti the Cruel, and I bear that title for good reason.’

Hui felt the blood drain from him. He knew that name, and the reputation that went with it. Who in Lahun didn’t? Basti had the blood of a thousand men staining his hands. For more than five seasons, this leader of the raptors had destroyed caravan after caravan bringing trade from the east. Basti, who had raided the copper mines and put every engineer to the sword, and who had slaughtered so many slaves in the fertile estates along the Nile that the fields themselves had turned red. And once he had killed those workers, he had burned the crops for no reason but torment. Only weeds grew there now; that’s what the merchants had said when they arrived in Lahun.

‘The Cruel.’ A fitting title.

‘Let my friend go,’ Hui called. His voice was unsteady.

‘Leave him,’ Qen whispered. ‘He is already dead. But we can still save our own necks. We are faster by far than those lumbering Shrikes and they know it. Younger and filled with more fire than them. If we run away now, they will never catch us.’

How cold his brother sounded. Hui had never heard him talk like this before.

Basti uttered an order and the arm around Kyky’s throat fell away. Basti replaced it with his curved knife. The blade dug into the skin, a bubble of blood forming. Kyky began to sob.

‘Give me the object you hold in your hands and I will be generous,’ the raptor lord continued.

Hui was still carrying the cloth-covered bundle.

The leader of the Shrikes was wise enough to know the two young thieves had the upper hand here. Qen was right; their youth gave them speed that these raiders no longer possessed. They could easily disappear into the dark of the desert night and Basti might never see his prize again. And so he was prepared to bargain.

‘I will let you all live, and you will be free to walk away from here. That is not a gift I have offered to any other enemy,’ Basti continued. ‘And I will allow you each to take with you a purse of silver, so all will know that cruelty can be tempered with kindness.’ His lips curled into a tight smile that contained no warmth.

Hui’s mouth was as dry as the sands around them. He didn’t trust this bloodthirsty bandit for an instant. But what could he do? He watched tears glistening in the moonlight on his friend’s cheeks, and he tried to imagine what terrible thoughts would be swirling in Kyky’s head at that moment.

Hui held out the bundle, feeling the weight of the Ka Stone inside it.

Basti grinned. He nodded, and two men stepped forward to reclaim their gift from the gods. Hui mouthed a silent prayer to the gods to save them. He should run, he knew, but he couldn't tear his gaze away from Kyky's terrified face.

Beside him, he could sense his brother shifting, perhaps feeling guilt at the cowardly act he had committed.

'I have no choice but to hand over the Ka Stone,' Hui murmured.

When Qen didn't answer, Hui flashed him a glance. A strange, unfocused look hovered in his brother's eyes.

Suddenly, like the uncoiling of a vast serpent, Qen lunged. He grasped the Ka Stone and wrenched it from Hui's grip. Hui thought his brother was going to offer the prize back to the Shrikes in return for their freedom. Instead Qen swung about, launching himself away from the camp.

'Fools!' Basti bellowed. 'This is not a game.'

With a whisk of his hand, he raked the edge of his blade across Kyky's throat. Blood gushed. Hui's friend gurgled, his legs crumpled, and he fell back into the mass of raiders, sparing Hui the horror of seeing his final moment.

Hui felt a rush of despair that he thought might drive him mad. But Basti raised his hand and jerked it forward, and the Shrikes surged like a pack of dogs released by their master, snapping and yowling and filled with bloodlust.

Spinning on his heel, Hui hurled himself away. He could just make out the grey shape of Qen vanishing across the wasteland and he sprinted after him.

All that Hui could think in the whirlpool of his grief was that Kyky was the bravest of them all. And Hui, in his cowardice, had killed him.

But then the desperate urge to survive swept through him and he was running as fast as he could, his thoughts dashed away by the madness of his fear. The wild sounds of the hunting party thundered at his back, raiders who would never rest until he was dead.



**A** crimson line slashed across the horizon ahead of the two running men. Hui's chest burned and his legs shook as if he had a fever. Qen stumbled like a drunken man. How much longer could they flee before exhaustion brought them to their knees and death swiftly followed?

Behind them, the Shrikes pounded in pursuit, as relentless as death. Hui could hear their battle cries. He knew they would never turn back. The Ka Stone was too great a prize to give up. Basti the Cruel would have demanded the head of any man who failed in his mission. Fear and untold rewards, the two great forces that spurred men on to their destinies.

The bandits were closing. They were hard men, used to the privations of the road, made iron-strong by long marches under the hot sun, hearts turned to stone by the women they had raped, the children they had killed.

When Hui and Qen had fled the camp, the gods had smiled on them. The dark had swallowed them quickly. They'd plunged down into clefts in the rock, disappearing from view, and then switched direction back and forth using boulders for cover. It had bought them a little time while the Shrikes searched for a trail. Then they'd scrambled over scree in the direction of Lahun, although they knew their home was too far to reach before the sun burned them to a crisp and they were driven

to their knees by weariness. But Hui felt the breeze stinging his skin, growing harder by the moment, and he formulated a scheme. The outcome would be risky, but it was all they had.

‘I have a plan,’ Hui said.

The wind began to howl and soon a dust storm was whipping across the waste. When the sand drove hot needles into their faces, they wrapped the folds of cloth they always carried at their waists across their mouths and noses and bowed their heads to protect their eyes.

Staggering into the gale, Hui waved a hand to direct Qen. The roar of the storm would have swallowed any words. Qen obeyed. Hui pushed on as hard as they could endure in the buffeting wind. The dust storm clouded out the moon, turning it into the darkest of nights, and the wind wiped away their footprints.

Moving by instinct, Hui led the way towards a row of rocks protruding from the ground like the fangs of some buried beast. When they pulled themselves around the other side of the outcropping, they used the line of boulders to guide them towards the east. The Nile and the civilization that throbbed along its banks were closer than their home. Hui calculated they could lose themselves in the settlements that edged the winding river until they could find their way back to their home.

That was now their only hope.

The ploy had at least bought them some time. As the dust storm swept ahead of them, and the whine of the wind died down, they’d heard the raucous cries of the Shrikes disappearing into the west. Hui knew it would only be a matter of time before the bandits realized their error. He prayed that would be enough.

They kept running east, heading towards the banks of the Nile. They scrambled over rocks until they reached the foot of the hills. And for a while it seemed they'd escaped.

But Hui heard that bone-chilling call and response of the hunting pack again, and his heart sank. Now he realized that if they were going to die, he had to confront his brother first. He came to a halt.

Unfurling the cloth from his mouth, Hui said, 'How could you, brother?' His voice cracked and he choked back a sob. 'You all but murdered Kyky yourself. Throwing him to those killers! He was our friend – our friend since we could barely walk. And you discarded him as if he meant nothing to you—'

Qen held up his hand, demanding silence. Hui watched his brother's eyes in the gap between the folds of cloth and in that moment he didn't recognize him at all.

Slowly Qen pulled the cloth from his mouth.

'Basti was never going to let Kyky go, you know that. He was dead the moment he came back for me. I will always give thanks for his sacrifice—'

'Sacrifice! You threw him into that slaving pack!'

'Better one of us die than both.'

Hui felt sick at the unfeeling tone he heard in his brother's voice. He'd always known Qen was hard and ambitious. But the ruthlessness he'd shown in that moment was shocking. It was lying there inside Qen all the time, and it had burst forth at the moment his instinct told him what he needed to do to survive. Kyky's life had meant nothing to Qen. How could Hui never have seen this quality in his brother before?

Hui felt the world shifting beneath his feet. He would never be able to look at Qen in the same light. Those bonds they

shared were broken and they could never be pieced together. But something more troubling stirred within him.

*Should there be justice?* Hui thought of Kyky's mother, and the grief that would consume her when she learned of her beloved son's death.

Could Hui carry Qen's secret with him for the rest of his days, the guilt eating away at him? Kyky had been denied the afterlife by his brother's actions. No funeral rites would ever usher him across that threshold. Should he tell all, so that in some small way things could be made right? Could he betray his brother?

'If you had given up the prize, Basti would have shown no mercy,' Qen was saying. 'The three of us would now be hanging from that rope with his other victims, the vultures tearing at our flesh, a warning to any who dared challenge him.' He nodded to the bundle Hui was now clutching to his chest. 'We still have that – the glory that we came to gain. We still have the one thing that powerful men would kill to hold in their hands, and the key to great riches. We still have our lives. And we still have our destiny.'

'But Kyky—' Hui protested.

'You killed him, brother. You,' Qen spat. 'You persuaded him to come on this fool's errand. You bewitched him with stories of riches and fame. And you told him he would be safe, whatever happened. If there is blame to be had, it is on you. Your greed for greater things killed Kyky. Not me.'

Qen showed Hui his back. There was nothing more to be said.

Hui felt tears sting his eyes. That accusation had burned its way into his heart, and he knew, in truth, that he couldn't deny it.