

Ankhtifi the Brave is dying

The First Heroes New Tales of the Bronze Age

by Noreen Doyle, ...

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After the Old Kingdom, when the world entered a period of climate change that some researchers speculate was precipitated by the near passage of comet Hale-Bopp, Egypt slipped into a century and a half of political chaos (c. 2190–2040 B.C.). Local lords fought for and against a quick succession of kings who claimed to rule Upper and Lower Egypt. Noreen Doyle introduces us to one of these lords loyal to the king: Ankhtifi, who, in his tomb at modern-day Mo'alla,

was the first Egyptian to take the epithet translated as „the Hero” or „the Brave.”

Ankhtifi the Brave is dying. Yet he is not an old man. He can hold his back straight. He does not lean so very much upon his long staff. The two loaves of *khenmet-bread* and the foreleg of a calf he carries in a finely woven basket do not cramp his arms. It is, he supposes, the wounds of campaigns festering invisibly beneath his skin. They have violated his body, pierced his shadow, created windows through which his *ba*-soul would fly, as he has defended his King. Or perhaps it is the scarcity of bread, the thinness of cattle and fowl, the filth in the water. In time, he allows his fluttering *ba*, in time. Not yet. It is dawn, not dusk.

The sun mounts the eastern horizon, over the steep cliffs toward which he walks on a path carefully beaten down and clean, on which oxen will someday drag a sledge and his coffin from the town of Hefat. Unlike other lords in other districts, he keeps no sunshade-bearer to follow him: now that man sits at the door of Idy's house, giving out grain to the needy, of which there are so many in these days. Ankhtifi himself shades Hefat. Does the mountain that shades the city need a fan of ostrich feathers held over its peak?

Only falcon wings shade his head, great ones, perfumed.

Soon they will fly away, Ankhtifi thinks as the scent of incense fills his nose, warmed by the morning sun. They will fly away to the far-off Residence until sleep and desire draw them back again to these two *khenmet-loaves* and the foreleg of a calf.

Spearman walk behind him, one on the right, one on the left. It is a small display of the force he can muster at an instant. Everyone loves Ankhtifi here in Hefat and in the Districts of Nekhen and Edfu, but men from other districts and other cities sail upstream and moor here, from Thebes and from Koptos, and those men must not forget.

Oh for the days when one cast arrows and spears at one's foe and received them in return, rather than bags of barley and chickling peas. Oh for the days when all the falcons in the sky were little ones, whose shadows frightened only geese, although Ankhtifi is not afraid, not so very much.

The track takes him from brown fields that crack like bread left too long in the oven to the desert, where life has forever been even sparser. A pyramid of a mountain rises before him, quite apart from the enormous cliffs to the east: a pyramid built by the gods, Ankhtifi's way to heaven when his body is interred here and his *ba* at last flies away from this droughtened earth to the Field of Offerings, eternally moist, forever green.

Every season the Red Land creeps a little nearer to the river. The withered roots of lentils and lettuce and weeds cannot hold it back. Only the river, rising from its bed like an army, can do so, and so within his tomb there is a prayer invoking the name of the King: *May Horus grant that the river will flood for his son Neferkare*. It has not done so very well, not for a very long time.

Ankhtifi enters his little valley-temple, where someday priests will present offerings, but today it is unfinished and empty: the priests are not yet appointed,

and the workmen labor elsewhere in the tomb. From this chapel a paved causeway leads partway up the steep mountainside. Ankhtifi walks this way, knowing someday he will be carried, and arrives in the forecourt, where, at his signal, the spearmen pound their piebald shields with the butts of their weapons. With his staff Ankhtifi traces out the threshold of Elephantine granite at the entrance of his tomb, mindful of the royal uraei raising their hooded necks on the architrave above his head.

„Great Overlord!“ comes a cry from deeper shadows. Voices echo from within the tomb.

A man emerges with a broom in his hand and bows low before Ankhtifi. He is thin.

„You may speak,“ says the Royal Seal-bearer, Lector-priest, General, Chief of Scouts, Chief of Foreign Regions, the Great Overlord of Edfu and Nekhen, Ankhtifi.

„My lord,“ says the man, Sasobek, showing dusty tongue and teeth, „you are welcome in your house of eternity. We did not expect you so early in the day, or else we would have brought a leg of beef and beer sweetened with date juice.“

More intention than promise fills Sasobek's words; there is little beer and less beef in Hefat or elsewhere in the districts, and the dates have not ripened well. Sasobek would offer them if he could.

The antechamber spreads wide before them, aglow in a patchwork of lamplight: thirty columns hewn from living rock hold aloft its ceiling; its floor is swept clean of any trace of dirt.

„My name is here, coupled with your dearest desire,“ says the falcon that has shaded him, now settling into a particular darkness. No one else hears this voice or sees the bright eye and the brighter eye staring at the two loaves and the leg Ankhtifi has set down at his own feet. „Take care.“

„In your name, my lord, I have always taken care,“ Ankhtifi whispers. The workmen hear but say nothing because he is their overlord and a lector-priest, and they know that he speaks to the god.

In pools of light stand and crouch men, all thinner than they once were, scraping out their lives in the drought and the famine that has worn them down as if they were chisels and brushes. They bow before him, careful amid their bowls of paint. Ankhtifi takes stock of them not as though they were tools but as though they were his sons. He knows them, every one, and their wives and sisters and aged parents, their sons and daughters, their cattle and their fields, their skills and their follies.

He is surprised to find the son-of-his-body Idy here among the outline-draftsmen and painters.

Brightly colored scenes surround them, painted on plaster, newly finished, their figures bold and vigorous. The festival of the falcon-god Hemen of Hefat is celebrated in paddled boats. Fatted cattle are herded and butchered, fish harpooned and netted in abundance. Porters bring bag after bag after bag of emmer on their shoulders to be emptied into the granaries. Once it was so. Idy and his three brothers accompany Ankhtifi. Once that, too, was so.

What, Ankhtifi wonders, is his last surviving son doing here? Why is Idy not at home before the door from which barley is handed, or inspecting the granaries, or overseeing the riverbank? He taps his staff upon the immaculate floor of his tomb.

„My son, my heir.”

„My lord, my father.”

„Tell me your business. I would know what occurs in my domains and what you have seen, for soon you will stand in my place and see what I see. I would see by your eyes while I’m still among the living.”

Idy’s gaze drifts, for a moment into light, for a moment into shadows. Does he see the god? His lips part, so that Ankhtifi sees Idy’s tongue before he speaks.

„I came to account for the workmen’s rations.”

Good, then, good, Ankhtifi thinks. There is enough in Hefat that none go entirely without, but only because for enough the hungry do not mistake excess nor do the treasurers mistake too little. And Idy does not see the god, not yet.

Idy goes on: „What work these artists do at your word! O you will dwell contentedly in the Field of Offerings, my lord, my father, and none shall ever dishonor your name, nor pollute your house of eternity.” He turns away from Ankhtifi to gesture at the painted plaster on the western wall. „You are forever young, and your beloved wife stands here, and your beloved daughters, and your beloved sons, my brothers, here and here and here—and I! Since the days of our forefather Sobekhotep, no one here has ever seen the like of this tomb or its owner.”

„Since?” Ankhtifi rasps. Is this doubt in his son’s voice? Could it be? Ankhtifi’s next breath catches in his throat.

But Idy says, „Not even then—not ever, before or after! Did Sobekhotep call himself Great Overlord? Did the god Horus plan out his tomb? Did the god Hemen dictate a spell to guard it? Did any god ever proclaim anyone other than Ankhtifi to be peerless, whose like has never before been seen nor ever will be seen? Who else has ever called himself the hero, the brave?”

With his staff Ankhtifi strikes a pillar with such force that a little yellow paint scrapes away. It does not matter. The relief carved upon its face will endure for a million years.

There are murmurs in the dark. Sasobek comes forward with his broom and sweeps the imperceptible flecks from the floor. Sand has come along on Ankhtifi’s sandals, and Sasobek discreetly attends to that, too.

The falcon stirs in the shadows, rasping claws along the standard upon which he perches when at rest. None sees him, none hears him, but Ankhtifi, and none but he and the falcon is party to the agreement between them.

Ankhtifi walks to the edge of the burial shaft cut into the center of the floor, like a black pool that gives no reflection, that refuses the light. His staff prods its darkness. „Do you remember Khuu, the wretch of Edfu?”

„Yes!” the workmen cry, and Idy says, „I do.”

„Men killed their neighbors, the fields of Edfu were left untended like marshland. This is the state of affairs that those in Thebes would wish upon the entire countryside. They deny our rightful King Neferkare, a child of the House of Khety, and would place their own line of wretches upon the Horus-throne. Horus himself summoned me, Ankhtifi, to sail upstream and free knives from men’s palms and make men embrace those who had slain their brothers.”

„We remember that day,” says Idy. The others echo him. „You spoke when all of us were silent, when the other lords had lost their speech and could not raise their arms.”

„I led you to the river,” Ankhtifi says. „It was a little higher in those days.” A little, he thinks, just a little. „Do you remember?”

„We remember!” the men cry, and, as the falcon—it is full daylight; why is he still here? will the King in his Residence sleep the day through?—makes a noise like the bending of a copper saw, Ankhtifi remembers.

People were less hungry in those days. Boats were sailed upstream and rowed downstream, rudders set at sterns or quarters with less concern for sandbars and stones. There had been even better years with abundant harvests and fatted cattle and nets burdened with fish of all kinds, but those were all lost to living memory and known only through tales of the days of kings named Khufu and Unas and Pepy, when men were called northward to labor on great pyramids.

One day—*that* day—a boat came downstream. Its spars were laid across its beams, but there was no sail or rigging. Eight men manned its oars, a ninth kept his hand at the tiller, and women and many children huddled in its wet bottom, for most of the deck planking had been taken up.

„Where is the Great Overlord? We have sworn not to take our hands from looms and tiller until we have come to the city where the Great Overlord lives! Our hands bleed! We have passed by Nekhen because he was not there! Is he here in Hefat?” cried the helmsman as the rowers pulled in their oars. Two of them leapt into the river and drove the boat ashore as the children dumped themselves overboard and splashed in the water until their mothers joined them and herded them to land. They crouched in a place of a little shade of a tree, where they looked like twigs broken from its branches. The helmsman said, „Where is the Great Overlord of this district?”

„The Great Overlord is where he should be, attending to trouble when it comes to his shore,” said Ankhtifi. These were not fit men: like the women and children, their limbs were thin, their stomachs distended, and they wore cloaks of bruises and welts. „Where are you from? Are you people of mine?”

„Would that we were,” said the helmsman, „or else we would not have trouble to bring to your shore, my lord. We come from Edfu in this old boat that we took from a boatwright before he could break it up for timber.”

„If the boatwright should come in search of his craft, you might be punished. I may punish you for theft anyway.”

„He won’t come after it, my lord. He’s dead, but not by our hands. His brother killed him, because he would not pledge his heart to Khuu’s new lord.”

„New lord!” Ankhtifi exclaimed. „Our lord, Neferkare, still wears the crowns in the Residence at Neni-Nesut, so the administrator of Edfu has no new lord. I, the King’s Seal-bearer, would have been informed if he had flown to heaven.”

„Neferkare is king in Neni-Nesut and Lower Egypt, and here in the District of Nekhen if you say so, but he is not the king of Edfu any longer,” said the helmsman. „Khuu has declared it.”

„What manner of abomination is this? Has some vile Lower Nubian sorcerer laid a spell on Khuu’s heart?”

The helmsman did not know; he had spoken all that he could of the matters of big men, and he, a little man, was tired and hungry and his wife and children were crying on the shore. Ankhtifi learned the helmsman was in fact a potter and, although Hefat had potters already, Ankhtifi appointed him a place where he might build a little house and workshop beside the rest.

That evening Ankhtifi laid a banquet for these people on the river-bank and another in his pillared hall, where he summoned his sons and his council. They ate choice cuts of beef, drank good beer, ate white bread, and spoke of what the potter had told them.

The Overseer of Troops of Hefat, Minnefer, said, „The District of Edfu lies at the southern border of our district, and we are very near the northern. It is a long way.”

„Khuu is like a wound in the foot of the King,” Ankhtifi said. „We are the hands of the King.”

„And where is the King’s heart but in the Residence at Neni-Nesut,” murmured Minnefer, „far to the north at the entrance of the Faiyum. He might as well dwell in Syria.”

„He is near the gods and honors them, to ensure that the river floods in its season. That inundation must pass Edfu before it reaches us. Would you have a rebel between us and the first floodwaters?”

„The vile Lower Nubians lie between us and the first floodwaters, and what ill is that? Unless they’re drinking up the water of the river, to make it rise so poorly as it does nowadays.” Everyone laughed, even Ankhtifi.

„If Edfu falls,” Ankhtifi said, as his smile withered word by word and the laughter drained out of his voice, „what of Elephantine, to the south? Will it fall to Khuu? Will Khuu then join with the Nubians upstream? Will they together push north with the current and attempt to crush us?”

„Ha,” said Minnefer, slouching on his stool, „for once in your life you’re too ready for a fight, Ankhtifi! Usually you’re all speech and council. Life is good in Hefat. I am old enough to know. Don’t go looking for death in Edfu. Death is bad anywhere, but worst away from home. A rebel against our King would have to arise in Elephantine for there to be any real trouble. It will not happen.”

„And did you think a rebel would arise in Edfu?”

„Oh, no, but you did, Ankhtifi the Brave!” the workmen say, and for a moment Ankhtifi does not know where he is: why is his hall so dark, why has the smell of the roast evaporated, replaced by the taste of dust in his mouth, and why are workmen here in the place of his councilors? Why are these men so thin? Where are his other three sons?

„Khuu was ever a wretch and a rebel,” Idy says. „You could not fail against him.”

Could he? No, he could not, because the god said so. And suddenly it is as if he stands not on the perfectly clean floor of a nearly finished tomb but on the dusty pyramid mountain that workmen’s picks and chisels have not yet carved out. It is as if the title Great Overlord of Edfu is not yet his, and as if the falcon does not yet follow him in shadows.

The falcon came to him *that* night for the first time, when the councilors had returned to their homes and his wife, Nebi, had gone to bed, as had his sons and his daughters. Ankhtifi went out to the hills to watch over this place where life was good. The lay of the land was perfect here, farmland and hill-country each in good measure, shady stands of trees fringing the riverbank. Minnefer had argued the truth: it was good, very much so.

And as Ankhtifi was thinking these things, a bird descended from the sky. For a moment he thought it was a bat, or a swallow that had lost the way to its nest in the riverbank, but it was too large, and the markings on its face were those of the most perfect falcon Ankhtifi had ever seen. What could it be but a god? Horus or Hemen? One and the same? And if it were not, if it were merely some exceptional bird with most perfect markings on its face—who would know if the Great Overlord Ankhtifi went to both knees and pressed his face to the ground before it? No one, unless the bird might tell its master, in which case Ankhtifi would still be justified indeed.

So he did, then brought his hands up before his face in a gesture of praise. There was a scent about the falcon, a remarkable odor of sadness and age, as if it had flown over all the incense-terraces of the God's-Land.

Ankhtifi bowed again. Even as a lector-priest, he did not know what to say before a god.

„So,” said the falcon, „here are my hands!”

Into the aromatic lull that followed, Ankhtifi offered these words: „The King willing, here is my lord!”

„Are you so certain?”

„You are god, or you are as god. Such would be my lord, if it is the King's will.”

„My hands, with such wisdom you would do well as my heart! I am your King. Behold me, *Ankhtifi*, He-Who-Shall-Live.”

Ankhtifi, who was accustomed to receiving no direct command, did as commanded. Ankhtifi, who feared none, worried that his gaze might be too direct or too deferent. But he looked upon this god and saw that it had perched upon a standard. Indeed, Ankhtifi noticed as he drew his eyes away from the ground and up its length, that this standard was set upon nothing, being merely balanced above the rocky ground, as if the weight of the bird upon it were so perfect that the world would forbid it to fall, and if by some device of the god it did fall, the world itself would move aside, lest the standard come to harm.

And he saw, too, that every feather was as white as alabaster or blue like lapis lazuli, that its feet and beak shone like the green gold of Amau, that its talons were silver, that its right eye was bright as the noon sun, its left eye as bright as the full moon.

„Well, what is the matter, Seal-bearer of mine? Answer.”

„I had thought that my lord, my King, was the son of Re but born of a woman's womb. No queen could have brought you into the world, my lord. You are a god, fashioned in the time of creation.”

„I emerged from the womb of Iput and six years later began the first of my ninety-four years upon the throne. No king does that without learning a trick or two. When I was a boy, my Seal-bearer Harkhuf—Warden of Nekhen, Lector-priest, not so unlike you—went down to Nubia to fetch me a pygmy from beyond the land

of Yam. I worried mightily for this divine dancer from the Horizon-Dwellers. *Don't let him drown!* I begged Harkhuf, *Keep a guard with him night and day.*"

Until this moment Ankhtifi had thought nothing could amaze him more than what had already happened, but the falcon, god or King or both, outdid himself. Ankhtifi had heard of this Harkhuf, and of the pygmy of the Horizon-Dwellers, and of the King, all generations past. But he knew nothing more of the story, so bit his tongue.

"That pygmy was a marvel, worth more than every resin-tear from every incense-terrace, more than every green nugget from every gold mine in Amau, more than every black log from every forest of ebony. I was so very young, still suckled at my mother's breast, and even then I recognized his preciousness. What dances he danced! He pleased the gods mightily, my hands. Perhaps that is why they allowed him to work the magic that he knew, the magic of the Horizon-Dwellers that is not known in the land of Egypt or indeed anywhere else in the world. In secrecy he taught me how to live in three years as other men live in one, and thus I sat upon the Horus-throne for four years and *ninety*. Not until then did I fly to the West."

Well, then, that was it, Ankhtifi thought, strangely mollified that this was not *his* King, Neferkare of the House of Khety, but rather Neferkare Son-of-Re Pepy, the old king of many years ago when kings were still building pyramids of size. This must be his *ba*, wandering about the world. In any case, Ankhtifi had done very well to bow and would continue to treat the falcon thus.

"My lord, if my King should permit, I will be your hands, even as I am the hands of the successor of your successors."

"Successors!" The falcon laughed, a sound like the bending of a copper saw. "I have no successors; those who have upon occasion occupied the throne in my stead have been little men and one little woman."

"Is my King Neferkare so weak that you, his forefather, do not acknowledge him? Should I disavow my allegiance to him? I would not do so with a willing heart, for he is indeed my King."

The falcon's copper laughter turned to a proper hawkish shriek.

"I am your King Neferkare."

"That pygmy knew death nearly as well as he knew life. Not once but ten times have I sat upon the Horus-throne! I have been one more than the Ennead!" And the falcon proceeded to name his old name and recount those of the Great Nine Gods, interspersed with the names of kings, some of which were known to Ankhtifi, others not: "Neferkare Pepy—Atum! Neferka-the-child—Shu! Neferkare—Tefnut! Neferkare Neby—Geb! Neferkare Khenedy—Nut! Neferkare Terer—Osiris! Neferkare Pepysonby—Set! Neferkaure—Isis! Neferirkare—Neph-thys! Neferkare—wait, there is no more. One more than the Ennead."

Then his timbre changed, becoming darker or tired. "It is enough now. The tenth time shall be the last time, the perfected time, and for ten times four-and-ninety years I now will reign. Those Amenemhats and Senwosrets and Amenhoteps and Thutmoses and all those Rameseses! They think they will succeed me. Let them pass their lives away as fishermen, as arrow makers, as boys of the horse-stables."

Ankhtifi did not think he knew any of these men, and he did not know what a horse was, but he let the falcon speak; what else could he do?

„But you, Ankhtifi, you are my loyal hands, ready to bind up the wound in the sole of my foot.”

„I am ready to do anything that pleases you, my lord, my King.”

„Of course you are; you’ve proven yourself no fool. How much like Harkhuf you are! Go to Edfu with your troops. Tell your councilors and your soldiers that Horus himself dispatches you there. Defeat Khuu, who is a rebel and a wretch and who has stolen much of what belongs to the shrine of Horus-Behdeti, the god of that place. And every third night, from next one forth, bring to me two *khenmet-loaves* from the altar of Re and an offering of flesh. Do this, and my hands shall be rewarded.”

„It will be done,” Ankhtifi pledged, bowing to the ground again, and when he raised himself once more, the standard was gone and the falcon was gone, and just the slightest essence of the incense-terraces hung heavy in the still night air.

He was eager for morning and, having returned home to his bed, tried not to sleep, but sleep he did, and when he awoke he was not entirely sure if it had all been a dream. It did not matter, dream or otherwise, and Ankhtifi thought otherwise. Horus—the King!—had ordered him to Edfu.

When his council heard this, they did not know properly what to say. Even as Ankhtifi had never before spoken to a god, awake or dreaming, nor had any of these men spoken to someone who had spoken to a god, not on such intimate terms. So, although they still believed that Ankhtifi was for once in his life too ready to fight, they declared that they would make themselves ready, too.

Ankhtifi and his sons and all the troops mustered their boats and their spears and their bows and their shields. They stepped their masts and raised their sails, but the wind died.

„This is,” said Minnefer, looking northward, „an evil sign.”

„The wind always dies when you most want it,” Ankhtifi said, looking southward. „Take out the lines and we’ll track.”

So some of the men took out the ropes and pulled the boats from shore, hour by hour, up the river. Each of Ankhtifi’s four sons, all strong young men, took their turn at the lead of the trackers. Ankhtifi prayed to Horus, Hemen, Neferkare, whatever he should call the falcon, to restore the wind, that they might all the sooner be upon the border of the district of Edfu. Shadows and clouds passed along the sky, as if the god Set were up to a storm. A great flock of geese flew up the river. In their wake the wind rose—from the west and dusty, useless and dangerous like Libyan tribes. The geese followed them in the days that they tracked, and even at night as they camped, Ankhtifi could hear their cackle, *negeg-negeg-negeg*.

Then, at last, as one evening they tracked past the city of Nekhen, the flock scattered. Ankhtifi sighted a falcon, the north wind returned. The square sails grew rounded and the trackers joyfully leapt aboard. Ankhtifi drew a deep breath, filling his nose with the fragrance of the God’s-Land.

„Sail,” he said, „even into the night.” The sailors did as he ordered, without argument that there might be shallows the pilots could not see, obstacles the

helmsmen could not avoid. He longed to ask them if they disregarded their sailor's instincts because their noses were filled with incense from the wind—or perhaps it was now upon his own breath and they obeyed him on that account. But he did not ask, for by the time he thought to, they were on the borders of Khuu's district and one word might give them away to the rebels. Under the cover of night and silence they passed by crumbling villages and wastelands; dark, stinking things floating in the river; piles of grain rotting on the shore; until they came to the fields and the city of Edfu.

The sky was yet dark to the west; the east was just giving birth to the sun, which had yet to warm the moist morning air. Baboons, stirred into worship of the sun as shadows crept away from the hills, barked across the river.

Ankhtifi broke his men into four ranks and placed himself before the first. He led the first up the riverbank through the fields that were green with bindweed and cornflower, clover and vetch. His eldest son, Sobekhotep-the-younger, led the next line, Hotep-the-younger the next, Sanebi the last, and Idy held the rest of the troops back along the river, guarding the boats.

They came upon bodies along the way: a man and young girl, left there to rot, fly-blown father and sister to the stinking, swollen forms that had floated by on the river.

Smoke rose from beyond the wall of Edfu. A dog yapped, a bitch answered. The high voices of children carried in the still morning air. Such ordinariness in a day when the dead lay unburied troubled Ankhtifi deeply.

Where were the men to tend the fields? Callous and lazy, too, the grip of the rebel had made them. Truth had been overthrown and abandoned like the corpses. Evil spread like a weed in the fields.

„Khuu!” Ankhtifi called. „Where is Khuu?”

For an hour, like an eternity, Ankhtifi and his troops stood there before the wall. Living in the shadow of a rebel had made even the soldiers slothful. They would rather drink beer and chew melon seeds.

„Ankhtifi of Hefat has come to Khuu! In the name of the King!”

Now Khuu's men took notice. They whooped and ran to the walls, pouring through the gate while others crouched atop the walls.

„Halt, you of Khuu!” cried Ankhtifi, raising his battle-ax. „In the name of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Neferkare, put down your spears, lay aside your bows, and drop your slings!”

The men of Khuu did halt, and although they did not put down their spears, nor lay aside their bows, nor even drop their slings, they did not immediately press their attack. Instead, they laughed.

„Neferkare is not king here,” cried an archer from the wall. Others took up the reply like a chorus, weaving into it insults: „Neferkare-who-has-lost-his-testicles is not King here, Neferkare-who-drinks-urine is not King here, Neferkare-who-eats-filth is not King here.”

„Then,” Ankhtifi replied, „there can be none here who can stand against me, because the only one who can best me is a man worthy of Neferkare, King of Upper and Lower Egypt. Lay aside your weapons and take up Truth once again.”

The troops of Edfu who were assembled before the gate made way for a man. This man wore a starched-white kilt, heavy rings and armlets of Nubian gold and

precious stones, and carried a fine battle-ax of bronze. Ankhtifi thought he saw red hairs among the black of his head.

„Khuu, I have come to weed your fields,” Ankhtifi said.

Khuu laughed. „I would not trust a man of Neferkare with a sack of barley on his back.”

„Why have you made a wasteland of your district?”

„There will be a harvest of grain after the next inundation. This year it has been necessary to winnow the chaff that covers my district. No doubt you have seen stray bits lying about. Like the wind I will take you out, too, Ankhtifi of Hefat, unless you prove yourself to be other than straw. There is a new lord in Egypt, and he performs in Truth before the gods. Let him lay mud upon your fields, Ankhtifi, let him bless the District of Nekhen.”

„The District of Nekhen is already blessed, by Hemen, by Horus, by Neferkare. We are civil in Nekhen and do not leave our dead for the carrion-birds and the flies, nor let the fish nibble upon their backs. This is not Truth. This is chaos. The stench of it fills my nostrils, Khuu. You and your name and your district, they reek.”

Khuu raised his ax, and as he did so, slings and arrows and spears came up in the arms of his men.

„Beware, Khuu, for Horus himself—your own god!—brings me to Edfu. I am the hands of the King.”

„Then I will deprive this so-called king of his hands and of that shriveled sack of skin that hangs empty between his legs.”

Khuu overtook the distance that had separated them, and Ankhtifi took up his shield. With a yell from Khuu, arrows rained from the walls and slingstones came like bees to chicory. Ankhtifi’s men stood still until, in the moment after, Ankhtifi gave the order to defend, and they raised their shields.

Khuu pressed his shield against Ankhtifi’s, trying to bring him to ground. „You’re a fool,” he said between his teeth as Ankhtifi resisted. „Beside Montu of Thebes, god of war, another god stands behind the new lord, a Great Cackler, one self-created, the Hidden.”

„Have you seen this god?”

„No one has. No one can see this Amun.”

„I have seen Horus, spoken to Hemen, and he stands behind no one but Neferkare! But—” Ankhtifi pressed harder now „—but—” to give room to his ax „—but this god flies above me!”

His ax bit hard into the stiff cowhide of Khuu’s shield, which was torn away by this blow. At that strike, and one word from Ankhtifi, the troops of Nekhen broke from their defense and returned the assault.

In the end, Khuu and thirty of his troops lay dead. Khuu’s sons were slain, and all of his brothers. And so were Ankhtifi’s sons, all but Idy, who had remained behind to guard the boats.

Ankhtifi, wounded but standing like many of his own troops, summoned together the men of Edfu. His heart ached to strike blows at these men who had killed his sons, but he had to do otherwise, in the name of his King, lest civil strife burn forever across the District of Edfu. He would take his sons home and give

them good burials and mourn them and miss them and rule justly over their slayers.

„Now embrace your neighbors. You will bury all of your dead,” Ankhtifi said, wiping the blood from his ax but ignoring that which spilled down his thigh. „There will be no more filth upon the land. Cleanse the District of Edfu.”

The men of Edfu complained bitterly. „He killed my brother,” said each man, pointing to another.

„And you,” replied Ankhtifi, pointing at them with his clean ax and they shied away, „have killed my sons. I will deal with you, the slayers of my sons, as you deal with the slayers of your brothers.”

Leaving Minnefer behind to implement his orders, Ankhtifi went home to Hefat.

„And so you won Edfu,” Idy says. „Great Overlord of the Districts of Edfu and Nekhen.” He pronounces this dual title as if he can taste it in his own mouth at once with his own name.

Ankhtifi’s mouth is too dry to taste anything. Sasobek is sweeping again, and it is as if he has brushed away all the moisture from Ankhtifi’s tongue. His thigh aches.

Ankhtifi says, „Edfu was given to me. By Horus, by Hemen.”

Why? He would ask the King but the falcon is gone now. In the Residence far downstream the King has awoken.

„Because,” says Idy, as if Ankhtifi spoke his question aloud, „you are the hero without equal!” And he goes about pointing to where the texts say this very thing, here and here and here.

Ankhtifi-nakht. The Brave. Ankhtifi-nakht. The Hero. Ankhtifi. He-Who-Shall-Live.

The fields grew a little better in those days than now, but only a little. The days when the floodwaters reached all of the good fields and blessed them with new black mud were generations past, the memories of forefathers long ago laid into the tomb. Ankhtifi dispatched scribes to account for the grain in the granaries, not only in the District of Edfu but likewise in the District of Nekhen, so that he knew his resources to the smallest detail. He ascertained what was in Khuu’s treasury, and made note of mines and the places of good clay and the herds of cattle in Edfu. He became aware of the smiths and the potters, of the fishermen and the hunters, of the scribes and the priests. And he noted what goods came down from Elephantine and Nubia beyond it, and what goods came up through the Districts of Thebes and of Koptos and from the Faiyum far beyond them. He noted what came from the Sand-farers of the Eastern Desert and what came from the Libyans of the Western Desert.

He appointed treasurers to oversee the granaries, ordering them to take a fair measure of each harvest and set it aside. No one questioned his demands because Ankhtifi ever took but a fair measure.

Ankhtifi marveled that his power stretched so far from the District of Nekhen, and that he was well-loved, even by those whom he had made to bury the murderers of their brothers. As Ankhtifi gave an order, so it was carried out by

those far distant from him, his judges and his treasurers and his troops. And it was always well done, because he was well-loved.

Every third night, even as a few hungry men watched after him, he went out to the pyramid of a mountain, where he set out two *khenmet-loaves* and the foreleg of a calf for the falcon. And every third morning, unlike any other offering Ankhtifi had ever set out for any other god, these were gone, vanished from the earth, devoured in their entirety, the basket clean and undisturbed.

„This is the secret to power,” said the falcon one evening when Ankhtifi again met him on the pyramid-mountain with these offerings, „its judicious giving-away. I was profligate in my youth, before I flew to the sky, and I gave too much to too many. The kingship suffered and so Egypt is now in such a state that rebels defy Truth. I diluted rather than tempered. This is not a mistake I will make again. You are well-chosen, Ankhtifi.”

„I am touched by the trust you have put in me, my King.”

„As I give to you, Ankhtifi, so you give to me. That is the agreement between us. I give you authority, for I am the arms at the end of which are you, my hands. And in turn you give me effectiveness, for you are the hands upon my arms.” He blinked his eyes, the bright and the brighter, toward the offerings in the basket.

„There has never been another man like you, Ankhtifi. Not even Harkhuf, who so dutifully brought me my pygmy from beyond Yam. You have no peer. You are to be my sole receptacle, you, and yours ever after, in ways that not even my favorite general from the days of my first youth could ever be. In the earth beneath my perch, within this pyramid-mountain, build yourself a tomb, which I will guard with spells taught to me by the pygmy of the Horizon-Dwellers. He knew these spells as well as he knew life.

„No, he knew them better than life,” the falcon said, thinking perhaps of the eight short reigns that had been his after the first lengthy one. „This is my boon to you. By the hand of men your house of eternity will be hewn, by the spells of gods it will endure and protect you and yours. Even as you and yours will protect me.”

And the falcon described the tomb as it was to be, hewn from the earth itself, columns growing thick like reeds in the swamp on the day of creation, a roof of stone, a great copper door, a burial shaft sunk into its floor. The threshold must be of stone brought from Elephantine, the architrave carved with uraei, like the cobra that guards the King’s brow. Ankhtifi took due note of everything and planned for how to acquire it.

„Everything must be honestly gotten, in accordance with Truth, and maintained in Truth and purity,” said the falcon. „That is why I have chosen you, Ankhtifi, for you are not only brave but trustworthy. You are unique and have no peer.”

Ankhtifi bowed before his lord, his god, his King.

Subsequently he took a fair measure of the fair measure of the harvest for himself, and he did the same with every trade-good that came into his districts and the livestock and the catch of the hunters and fishermen, the products of the mines. Carefully he apportioned the labor of stonecutters and masons, and when they might be spared from erecting defensive walls, he set them to hewing his tomb exactly as the falcon had dictated. They did precisely what they were told, for to do otherwise would be disobedience, and they loved Ankhtifi too much for that.

Traders did not complain of what they had to give to Ankhtifi, but they voiced bitter opinion of what they had to give to others, even when it was less. Ankhtifi listened carefully to what they had to say, to learn what was happening in Elephantine and Nubia, in Thebes and Koptos.

„The Great Overlord of Thebes,” travelers said, „he claims control of the ways of the Eastern Desert. The King may not pass to the God’s-Land.”

At this Ankhtifi might have laughed, for every third night the falcon came to him perfumed with incense of the God’s-Land, but matters were too serious for that. He spoke of this to the King.

„With Thebes and Koptos together, Antef grows,” the falcon replied. „He threatens to fill up the land with his vile seed. The House of Khety is not big enough to contain him.”

„Khuu called him lord and spoke of a Great Cackler, a Hidden god.”

„Khuu is a wretch and dead, deader than you will ever know, boiled in the lake of fire, which was all too good for him. His name, *Khuu*, means *baseness* and *wrongdoing*. You do not remember, but that was not always his name. You will never remember that name given him by his mother.” And indeed, such was the strength of the King’s words that Ankhtifi could never remember any name but *Khuu*.

„Be judicious, my hands, my precious hands. Make peace with them to the south, make war with them to the north, and make your tomb here exactly as I told you. Now I will tell you what must be written within it. This is Truth, all shall believe, there will be no doubt:

„You are the beginning of men and the end of men. Such a man as you has never before been born and will never after be born. You will have no peer in the course of this million of years. You, Ankhtifi, are the hero without equal.”

The falcon flew into the air, circling Ankhtifi’s head, filling his nose with perfume.

„And as for any overlord who shall be overlord in Hefat and who commits a bad deed—”

Ankhtifi breathed in the perfume, memorizing and wondering at the terribleness in the falcon’s next words and not for a moment doubting the truth of them.

In the following days Ankhtifi gathered his scribes and his overseers about him at the necropolis. The mountain where he had first met the falcon swarmed with men, smelling sharply of salt and urine, a stink that obliterated the lingering trace of the incense-terraces. But these were the strong arms of the Districts of Nekhen and Edfu. *That smell should be as a perfume to me*, Ankhtifi thought.

And he told his scribes everything the falcon had ordered inscribed within the tomb. They agreed with every word, peerless, beginning and end, the hero.

Three times they had him repeat the last of the falcon’s words: „As for any overlord who shall be overlord in Hefat and who commits a bad deed or an evil act against this tomb—” and then the butchery that would be performed upon him in the netherworld, an arm struck away for each offense. „Hemen will refuse his offerings on his festival-day, Hemen will not accept any of his offerings, and his heir will not inherit from him.”

The scribes took note, collating their copies in order that the text might be perfect, murmuring approval of its thoroughness and efficacy.

When the scribes had gone off to their work, Minnefer came to Ankhtifi. „Your troops are eager to go north, my lord. Every sailor who comes from the north with tales of Thebes and Koptos only blows his breath across the fire in their hearts. They would fight and defeat Antef for you and the King.”

Ankhtifi told Minnefer what the falcon had said, that together these two districts made Antef too great to fight at this moment. „And to think that once you said that I was too eager to fight, Minnefer!”

Minnefer made no jest in return, as once he might have. He only smiled and obeyed.

As Ankhtifi bided time, earth came away from the tomb like the swollen river receding from the fields, and the smells of labor became Ankhtifi’s perfume.

It did not go as well with the river, which he watched with hope. It had not risen well, and this was the second month of Inundation. With offerings farmers tried to coax the waters to rise a little higher, to stand a little deeper, on the fields to lay down more precious, fertile mud. One might as well have tried to coax a flood down from the sky. Ankhtifi even dared to hope that while digging the burial shaft in the floor of his tomb-chapel the workmen would strike water and so make a well. But they did not. Peerless that he might be—peerless that he was, the falcon had so said—such things were not within the purview of Ankhtifi’s authority.

Boats yet came and went with little trouble along the river, and one windless morning a boat tracked from the north by six men put to shore at Hefat. There was nothing special with regard to this: boats tracked by six men or four came and went by Hefat every day that the wind did not blow exactly right. This boat had a round-topped cabin woven of reeds, with shields of cattle-hide covering its windows. From this cabin emerged a man with a quiver of arrows and a good bow. Sailors of other boats who were at the riverbank called for Ankhtifi, for they recognized this man as the Overseer of the Troops of Armant. Armant was a town of the District of Thebes, its Overseer a follower of Antef.

„Come!” the Overseer called, waving his arms.

Ankhtifi watched from the apex of his pyramid-mountain. The Overseer’s voice was small to him.

„Come!” the Overseer called again.

Because he did not nock an arrow or leave his boat, Ankhtifi did not come. He went about his business at the tomb and then, after a time when the Overseer had finished shouting and sat down at the bow, Ankhtifi made his way to the river. When he came to the shore, the Overseer leapt up.

„Come, you hero!” he said, swinging his bow like a sickle. „I have come to bid you north to our camp.”

„Have you come or have you been sent?”

„You are bade to Armant,” the Overseer replied evenly. „My lord Antef would speak with you.”

„This Antef may speak with me here, at Hefat. His district is not so very far. Even your sailors have scarcely beaded their brows with sweat.”

The Overseer dropped his voice, but not so much that Ankhtifi could not hear him clearly. „Thebes and Koptos have parted ways. Antef dares not come farther south than the Mount of Semekhsen, does not dare pass the boundaries of his district, for fear that Koptos will attack while he's away. Come, in my boat or your own. Armant is not so very far.”

Ankhtifi demanded of the sailors of other boats who had lately come from the north what they knew of this, but none could say. The lords of those districts were like lions, they said, and when lions gorged on a single kill, who was to tell at what moment they might argue over the choicest bits and part company?

„I will not come,” said Ankhtifi.

He sent the Overseer of the Troops of Armant back the way he had come; he knew that by nightfall the man would be back in the District of Thebes. It was not so very far indeed.

Idy and Minnefer and his councilors came to him and, having learned the Overseer's news, offered to ready the boats so that, if it was true, Ankhtifi might take advantage, in the name of the King.

Ankhtifi shook his head. „I will not come,” he said, „but in my own time, I will go.”

He offered loaves and a foreleg to the falcon that night. „It is your time,” he said to Ankhtifi, his eyes shining more brightly. „This is a boon I grant you: your opponents will always fall to you in battle. You have no equal.”

And he went the next day, before dawn, with two boats and twenty men. They rowed with stealth, the spoon blades of their oars kissing the water and speeding the craft along faster than the flooding current. Here the river branched, and Ankhtifi's boats slipped into the little channel that flowed nearest the Mount of Semekhsen.

There were men at the hill, many men and a half-built fortified camp, with the standards of Thebes and of Koptos.

„He lied!” Idy said, as if such a thing had never before occurred to him.

„He lies, like a hippopotamus in the mud,” Ankhtifi said. He hefted his spear, the shadow of which grew longer in the morning light. „And like a hippopotamus in the mud, he dies.”

They disembarked, having staked their boats out of sight. A shadow fell over them, winged, perfumed, like a moment of night that was not yet scattered by dawn. His troops did not question Ankhtifi, although he was leading them, a trustworthy band of twenty, against five, six, seven times as many, or more, as they counted by the growing light.

They came to the boundary of the camp, which had stirred and began to break fast. Men scratched themselves and shoved bread into their mouths. The Overseer of the Troops of Armant walked among his soldiers, shoulder to shoulder with other overseers of troops from other towns. These men were the nose, the breath, of this army. The soldiers among whom they walked were the tusks and the flesh, lolling in the mud. Yet there was no sign of the heart, no sign of Antef of Thebes.

„Stand beside me, my strong arms, my harpoons,” Ankhtifi said, „and I will pierce the nose.”

Ankhtifi stood tall, like the sun suddenly birthed from the horizon, and the scented shadow fell away: the King, far away in the Residence, awoke and rose from his bed.

Cries of terror rose from the troops of Armant and their allies. These quickly turned to whoops and they grabbed their weapons.

„You! You there!” Ankhtifi called, giving them neither name nor title nor sobriquet. „I am Ankhtifi, Seal-bearer of the King of Upper and Lower Egypt, Lector-priest, Great Overlord of the Districts of Edfu and Nekhen. I have prevailed in the south over Khuu the wretch of Edfu. I am the hero without peer. By Horus and by Hemen I am here to fight you, all of you, and I will smite you, all of you, and I will carry north through your own districts your herds and your fleets and present them before King Neferkare in the Residence at Neni-Nesut! I will fight all of you. Who among you will fight me?”

The Overseer of the Troops of Armant came forward and quieted his men. If he gave his name, now or ever, Ankhtifi has long ago forgotten it, perhaps at the falcon’s word. „Neferkare, so far as we are concerned, is as dead.”

Ankhtifi laughed now, and laughed and laughed, for the Overseer spoke more truth than he could ever know.

„Antef is our lord,” the Overseer went on, sounding something less than certain in the face of Ankhtifi’s laughter. „You would be wise to make him your own. Join Thebes and Koptos, Ankhtifi. Would you rather that Antef overrun Nekhen and Edfu and leave you and your heirs with nothing at all?”

„Will you fight me?”

The Overseer perhaps thought of Khuu, or perhaps he thought of the victorious troops of the Districts of Nekhen and Edfu. Or perhaps he thought of the god that had brought Ankhtifi unseen to the boundary of his camp. Whatever he thought of, at the end of it he said: „I will fight you. My troops will fight you.”

And they did.

At Ankhtifi’s signal the trustworthy troops of Nekhen and Edfu stormed the encampment, piercing it like harpoons. They brought down their axes upon the shields and the arms and the heads of Armant and Thebes and Koptos. Their slingstones smashed in eyes and tore off ears, their arrows pierced limbs and chests and skewered the very hearts of men, and their spears transfixing whatever they touched.

What the spears did not transfix, and what could move eyeless or earless or with arrows feathering their arms, and what had lost merely hands and not limbs to axes, these fled north, like a single wounded beast. Ankhtifi pursued their leaders, the overseers of troops, and fixed them with his spear. He laid waste to their camp, destroying it utterly, carrying away whatever of value could be carried away, burning whatever would burn.

Then Ankhtifi’s men went home, injured but valiant. They went against the current, and this time no wind filled their sails, but they did not care. Home was near, and all the way the trackers hauled while bleeding and singing, *„Ankhtifi the Brave, the hero who has no peer.”*

„Seven, perhaps eight, perhaps nine, against one,” Idy says, marveling at the memory to which he himself was witness, of which he himself bears old scars.

Ankhtifi is startled: has he been speaking? He thought the dryness in his throat was from crying battle-orders to his men. „You have no equal, my lord, my father.”

Ankhtifi looks at his son, who stares at him wide-eyed, adoring, no different from the workmen. It is so now. But someday men will not question *Idy*, when *he* is overlord and the authority of Neferkare, of Horus, of Hemen, fills *him*.

Ankhtifi steps away from the burial shaft in the spotless floor of his tomb.

For some time no one came south from Koptos or Thebes. No one traveled south at all, unless they began in the District of Nekhen or Edfu and went upstream to Elephantine. Scouts dispatched by Ankhtifi through the desert to look upon the District of Thebes reported that Antef strangled the ways of the desert, that King Neferkare had but hard access to the mines and quarries in the east. When boats came again, their crews and passengers said the same.

The falcon did not speak of these things. Ankhtifi wondered if they felt it showed some weakness the King did not wish to admit, or if he did not so keenly feel this loss, or if there were simply more pressing matters always at hand. And there were. The river was sluggish. Each year it rose as high as it had the year before, but it never seemed quite so high as the year before that. Ankhtifi ordered his treasurers to appropriate a little more than a fair share, and farmers complained to the treasurers. Ankhtifi sent men among them to tell them that this share was going into the granary like the rest, as proof against the fickleness of the river, and the farmers gave even more than they were asked.

Ankhtifi marveled at this with the falcon as he laid before him offerings.

The falcon said, „A king's strong arm is his tongue.”

„And the strength of the land is the river,” Ankhtifi replied. „It is low, even at its height.”

„Horus grants the flood.”

„You are Horus. You are Hemen. Grant us the power of the river. Give it away, make us, make yourself, thereby all the stronger.”

The falcon blinked his bright eye, then his brighter one. „Put my name into your tomb, just once, asking Horus to grant in my name what you most desire. There is power in that.”

„Once only?”

„It will be for your son to multiply my name, and for his son, and his son, they who will be overlords after you. Fear will be in them, and love and respect. Your tomb will be unpolluted until the end of time, because none will ever question your authority. Even as I have assured their inheritance, so they will assure mine. The Thebans would take this from me. They would take this from us both.”

It startled Ankhtifi to hear the falcon speak of this now. It had been such a long time since the falcon had spoken of Thebes.

„I have thought to go north,” said Ankhtifi. „My troops, I can call them from their fields for a little while. The time to plant comes earlier and earlier each year, yet the growing season is shorter and shorter. The river is quick to retreat from the land, and the drought of summer is quicker to descend upon it.”

„Go north, then, hero,” the falcon said. „Go north and lay my hands about the throat of my enemy.”

Before going north, Ankhtifi went to his scribes and told them what to write upon one wall of his tomb: „May Horus grant that the river will flood for his son Neferkare.”

Then, over the course of ten days, he summoned his trustworthy troops from their fields and their barracks and from their labors. They rowed past the Mount of Semekhsen, where it seemed that the smell of burning staves and a whiff of incense lingered still. They slipped past the town of Armant on the great channel of the river. Those who were along the riverbank in the dark hours gasped in fear. They sent runners northward.

Then Ankhtifi's best archers made ready to shoot them. They were sure of their mark even in moonlight because confidence in their overlord filled them, but Ankhtifi stopped them.

„Someone must tell Antef that I have come to challenge him. Let them go. Their fear will inform him well.”

They rowed until at dawn they came to Tjemy's fine estate on the west bank, whose fields were not so deeply flooded as once they might have been, whose quay was no longer so convenient as once it might have been. Soldiers stood along its walls.

The fleet moored at the riverbank, and out poured the valiant troops of Edfu and Nekhen. Ankhtifi at their lead, they marched to the walls.

„Come out, you! Come out! Who will fight Ankhtifi the Brave, the Great Overlord of Edfu and Nekhen? Tjemy! You, there! Who?”

Ankhtifi raised his ax.

None replied. Even a volley of arrows, aimed at the walls, did not stir the soldiers from their places. Shadows grew short and then long again, now stretching back toward the river. The runners from Armant at last came by and Ankhtifi let them pass.

„Let them tell Antef of Thebes,” he said. „Let them proclaim in Thebes that cowardice perches like sparrows on the walls of Tjemy.” Then he turned to the walls again:

„I thought Montu was the god of Armant and the god of Thebes! Have you abandoned the god of war for a cackling goose? This Hidden god of Thebes has hidden your courage!”

When none replied he divided his troops. Southward again he sent them, with Idy and Minnefer. By foot and by boat they went, seeking villages and farms, estates and camps. For two days they scoured the western shore of the river, north and south, the muddy fields and the sandy hills. None came out to fight them.

So they crossed the river and went to the north, to that place where one Imby had built his tomb. A camp had been made there not long ago. Warm ash from campfires still lay in little pits, and the tracks of men and donkeys were still fresh. The camp-men had come from the north, but they were gone now, headed south, and, on the river, Ankhtifi's fleet followed while scouts marked the trail of footprints and hoof prints.

They led to the plain of Sega.

Here stood a small fort the height of four men, its merlons biting the sky like teeth. The bricks were new, forming plumb-straight faces violated only on the

northern side, by a single doorway. Acaciawood planks, hewn smooth and joined tight, fit between thick jambs no battering ram had ever rattled. With a noise like thunder, that door was now barred shut from within.

Ankhtifi stared at the wood and the brick. Not so much as a hair of a soldier, not the tip of an arrow, peered down over the walls at them.

„I am Ankhtifi the Brave! Who among you will challenge me?“

No one answered.

„Who will come out to fight me and my trustworthy troops?“

No one answered.

Ankhtifi brought forward those who had axes and they beat at the door, but it was so well-barred that they could not break it.

No one answered.

So began the siege.

Ankhtifi's troops camped outside the walls, beyond bow-shot, beyond the range of a slingstone. Evening came and their campfires burned, and they could smell the fire and see the smoke rise from behind the walls of Sega.

As he stood on a rise and surveyed the little plain and the fortress he thought he saw the falcon. Perfume carried on the night air and there was something in the dark.

„My lord?“

A great cackle, an enormous flap of wings—

„My lord?“

A goose flew up from the river, near enough that its wing brushed the top of Ankhtifi's head as he threw himself to the ground.

He whispered, „My lord?“

No one answered.

He went back to his campfire and lay on his side, even as he imagined the King, lying on a golden bed in the Residence, sleepless through the night.

For ten days they camped at Sega, and for ten days they heard men behind the walls, smelled bread at the cook-fires, saw the smoke rise after dark, and heard the cackle of a goose. On third evenings Ankhtifi left *khenmet-loaves* and a foreleg, the latter wrapped in linen against the flies. Although the falcon never spoke to Ankhtifi at Sega, each of those mornings these were gone, only stained linen wrappings strewn about the ground.

Each morning the men of Edfu, and each afternoon the men of Nekhen, scaled the walls, one atop another's back because they had no ladder, and each time they were repelled by Antef's men, though none ever could claim to have seen their weapons or their faces.

Idy said, „So much do they fear you that they dare not show even their noses!“

Three times Ankhtifi walked around the walls, seeing only his own shadow cast upon the bricks. West, south, east, north, there upon each face stood Ankhtifi's shadow.

His shadow was so strong that it cast itself upon all of Sega! Did those within the wall not realize this? Or perhaps they did, and were seized with the terror of it.

„Bring out your goose and wring its neck before me!“ Ankhtifi cried before the door of Sega, raising his ax as his shadow did likewise. „Do honor to Horus and to

your King! Come out! Wring its neck! Roast it! We will feast together and then decide who will fight Ankhtifi the Brave!”

A goose cackled. Like laughter. Noise from the throat that would not be strangled. *Negeg-negeg-negeg*.

The troops of Nekhen and Edfu began to array themselves around the fort of Segá, drawn closer by Ankhtifi’s agitation. He directed them to bring the boats spars and rigging, which they fashioned into ladders that could be quickly climbed by two men abreast. Ahead of his troops, Ankhtifi would ascend one and, at his signal, the soldiers would scale the rest. They would clear the wall, they would defeat Antef’s men, and Ankhtifi himself would strangle the goose and offer it to the falcon with two *khenmet-loaves*.

Idy climbed the rungs beside his father but Ankhtifi proceeded to the top alone. „They fear you,” Idy cried from below, echoed by the troops waiting at their ladders. „They will drop dead the moment your face appears at the height of their wall!”

Ankhtifi looked over the wall of Segá.

And he slid down again, throwing his troops into confusion and chaos.

„Go!” he yelled to his men. „To the east and to the west, apart from Segá, find those who will fight you! Find them, find them and know that if they do not come out, if they will not fight you, it is through fear. It is not because they are obeying their hidden god! They cannot hide our victory.”

His trustworthy troops did as he commanded. Like flies they swarmed the district, challenging at every village, at every estate, at every fortification, but no one answered.

And when they gathered again at Segá, before they went home Ankhtifi reaffirmed that it was fear that kept the Thebans behind their walls, because Ankhtifi was a man whose like had never been known before and would never be known again, not for this million of years.

„You have never said, my lord, my father,” says Idy, “what you saw beyond the walls of Segá.”

No, he never has. Ankhtifi does not deny it. He wonders if, like the name of Khuu, like the name of the Overseer of Armant, it is something he cannot remember but in this peculiar way because the falcon has made it so. He replies, „I saw the birthplace of languish, the cause of lack, the wellspring of privation.”

Hiddenness, like a god who cannot be seen, unrevealable but for the goose that Ankhtifi saw and wished to strangle, laughing from a green field of barley and lentils and lettuce, *negeg-negeg-negeg*.

When the falcon was not speaking of Antef of Thebes, and he often was not, or of the wonders of the God’s-Land, or of how he wished that all his court was as efficient and insightful and brave and trustworthy as Ankhtifi, he spoke of his pygmy from the Horizon-Dwellers. The gods delighted in his dance above all else, the falcon said. Nothing on the earth pleased them nearly so much, and indeed, the falcon himself had loved nothing better. „Not Ipuit, Wedjebten, not even Neith, favorite of my wives. Not even my dear mother or my brother.

„My fiftieth year of kingship came, and I was as an old man, but not as a man who had sat upon the throne for so long. Feebleness was itself weak in my limbs.

The pygmy from beyond Yam had taught me what to eat and how to pray and how to sleep and what spells to recite in what hours of the day on what days of the year. *I might live forever*, I thought. One day the pygmy came to me and asked if he might return home to the Horizon-Dwellers. *Soon*, I promised, for he had served me well, though thought of his departure filled me with unutterable sadness, such was the depth of my love. Then the royal barber found a white hair growing among the black that he so carefully shaved from my head. I had him let it grow and then pluck it when it was the length of one finger. I showed this white hair to my pygmy. *No man may live forever*, he said, not even the King. *From clay our bodies are fashioned, to clay they all decay*. When he saw that this did not please me, he said, *But because I love you, and because you love me, I will teach you how to live again on the earth, after your ba has flown from your body*. Over the next ten years he taught me these spells, and I learned them.

„When I had proven to him and to myself that I had learned them beyond forgetfulness, he came to me and again begged to return home to the Horizon-Dwellers. I was loathe to let him go. He had for so long been my friend and my confidant and my teacher! I wished to share eternity with him. His wisdom was boundless; I wished to know all he could teach me. His dances pleased the gods, they pleased me, and I wished that they would do so forever. He told me, wagging one finger, *I am going to call upon a god. The god will teach you a lesson, a lesson that I myself cannot teach you. Which lesson the god teaches will depend entirely upon which lesson you learn*.

„One night of my eighty-seventh year of kingship, he took me into the desert. He pointed to the sky, and I saw this god of his, a pale streak in the sky. I had seen such things before and shrugged. The pygmy said, *That is my god. Will you let me return home to the Horizon-Dwellers?* My heart could not bear to let him go. For eighty-five of my years he had been beside me. He was like my shadow; what would I do without him?

„The month and the days passed, and the pale streak remained in the sky, growing brighter, until one night it was enormous, brighter than the moon, and then the pygmy said to me, *My god has arrived! Now I will go home*.

„And he jumped. The pygmy from beyond Yam jumped out of his skin. I saw his *ba*, or something very like his *ba*, fly so very, very high! For two days I stood there watching him, neither sitting nor eating. He landed upon the great, bright streak with such force that some of it broke away and fell beyond the western horizon. He rode it like a boat, this god of his, back to the Horizon-Dwellers.

„The earth tossed dust upon its head in bereavement. To this day, to this very day, the gods and the earth mourn the loss of my pygmy. And so do I. In the fullness of my power I learned the lesson that the god taught.

„Power is sacrifice. To gain power one must give it away in due proportion. To gain the utmost power one must be denied that most desired thing. I loved the pygmy more than I loved my own everlastingness. And in my longing for him, from the heat of the unquenchable fire within my heart, my power will last forever. And in your longing, Ankhtifi, so will yours.”

And since those days the river has lain quietly in its bed, listless and bereaved. Sandbars do not submerge, but loll like hippopotami in the water. Soon one will be able to walk from east to west and back again with a dry kilt, and after that, with

dry sandals. Boats sail carefully, with a pilot ever at the bow taking soundings with his pole. Ankhtifi has been a pilot for Hefat. He once thought he had found the deepest channel. Today, dying of wounds from old campaigns and of privation, he doubts.

„Ankhtifi the Brave, the hero without peer,” Idy says when Ankhtifi’s story has come to the deep droughts and the years of failing crops and starvation, when it is with barley in their arms and not bows that the troops of Nekhen and Edfu meet the troops of Koptos and Thebes. Inglorious, ignominious years. Suffering years. Years of languish and lack.

Through this Idy has remained as certain as ever. And so have the men, everyone of the Districts of Edfu and Nekhen, even as their children grow sickly and their pregnant wives die and their arms grow weak.

How certain are they of Ankhtifi’s authority? Could there not be some doubt?

He points to written words and reads them aloud: „As for any overlord who shall be overlord in Hefat and who commits a bad deed or an evil act against this, my tomb, Hemen will refuse his sacrifices on his festival-day, Hemen will not accept any of his offerings, and his heir will not inherit from him.”

He turns this finger upon the workmen, upon his son. „Do you doubt this?”

The men are dumbstruck. It is their own handiwork the god has so guarded, and if they have not thought of this before they think of this now, and tremble.

„Would any of you do such a thing ever, in a span of a million of years?”

Idy blinks. He steps away and stands apart from the others. Will he speak? Ankhtifi wonders. Idy will, he must speak out while the people are silent, on the day of fear. He must not be afraid. He must doubt. He will be the next to see the falcon and receive the King’s boon. He must see what Ankhtifi has come to see, to know what Ankhtifi has come to know.

Idy replies.

„No, my lord, my father. For you are the hero who has no equal. No one like you has existed before nor will he exist ever after. You have accomplished more than your forefathers, and coming generations will never be able to equal you, not for a million years.”

Ankhtifi leans on his staff, bowing his head to the truth of it. By covenant it has been so written, upon the walls and upon the columns of this tomb, and thus it is so in the world. The men whisper that he is listening to the god; Ankhtifi the Brave would never otherwise bow his head.

But, now gesturing toward the doorway with his staff, he says, „Look, the sun has set while we have stood here talking. The light dims over the hills in the west, and it is time to eat, soon time to sleep. Go home. I would be alone in my house of eternity.”

They leave, without question, even the spearmen who would sooner see their sons die and lie unburied than allow any harm to Ankhtifi. Idy looks back before he has passed over the threshold, which Sasobek sweeps clean of wind-borne dust, but he does not linger. They know that Ankhtifi speaks with the god. They love Ankhtifi. They fear him. Neither they nor their children, born and to be born, will ever do anything against him, disobey, violate.

Ankhtifi the Brave is alone. The falcon has not yet returned this evening for the two *khenmet-loaves* and the foreleg. The King, still wakeful, paces the Residence, perhaps, or receives tribute from men of far-off lands. He yet counts the oil jars in the great storehouses of Neni-Nesut, makes love to a queen he does not love so much as his pygmy.

Whatsoever else he does, the King does not raise the river, and never will.

Ankhtifi raises his hands toward the ceiling, as if he might reach out through its stones to heaven. He raps the ceiling with his staff. „All I asked from you was this one thing, O King! O lord! O god! Do not deny me what I most desire.” His staff clatters to the floor. He clutches at his own image on the pillar and presses his cheek upon it. „I do not want your authority. What has it given me? Might my own tears raise the river? Must I myself lay new mud upon the fields?”

Ankhtifi’s fingers trace the hieroglyphic script upon the pillar. He is He-Who-Shall-Live, the brave, the hero, whose equal cannot exist. These are the King’s own words, uttered with the King’s own authority. These are the god’s own boon.

Into the shadows he whispers, „What you have given to me, O lord, I now give to you in kind.”

He turns from the pillar. It is cool, and he presses the carved signs into his back. They scratch his skin as he squats.

His bowels move. He is an old man. He is dying.

It is dark and soft like Nile mud. It reeks.

And, leaning heavily on his staff, his back bent, with the two *khenmet-loaves* and the foreleg of a calf burdening his arms, Ankhtifi walks toward the west, home to share one last meal with Idy.

