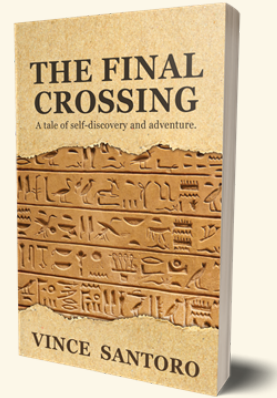


Welcome to your free chapter.

## The Final Crossing

*A tale of self-discovery and adventure.*



*The year is 1800 BCE, during the reign of Pharaoh Amenemhat III. He has brought prosperity to his kingdom, marked by numerous monuments and buildings, decorated temples, an array of pyramids, and a canal system to regulate the inflow of water in much needed areas. Few military activities have allowed for a peaceful reign and for the opportunity to exploit the mineral wealth of his quarries. From Nubia to Byblos, he is honoured and respected. He has allowed foreigners to live and work in his country, among them the heqa khasewet, 'rulers of foreign lands'.*

*But his rule begins to blemish. His massive building projects and several low Nile floods are exhausting his coffers. It is the beginning of the decline of a great dynasty. Neither foreigner, nor slave, nor free man can escape the decay.*

## PART ONE

### Chapter 1

The sound of dragging footsteps along the pebbled path grew louder. The morning heat would soon turn into an inferno and drain any enthusiasm from the simplest of pleasures. But it was not enough to hamper a hunting expedition.

“Finally,” Nenshi said as he bent down to grab his bow and arrows nestled between his feet. “Must you always be late?” He looked up to the sky and squinted to get a reading of the sun’s position. “I don’t have all day. Unlike you.”

“Don’t scold me like a child. I keep forgetting,” Hordekef replied and wiped his clammy hands on his shirt.

Nenshi shook his head. “You keep forgetting you’re a free man and I am not?”

Hordekef shrugged his shoulders and turned to look down at his hunting dog. “Precisely,” he replied as he tugged at the leash to nudge the dog to come closer. It refused. “I have known you as a nobleman’s son, not a servant.”

Nenshi frowned, and hated to be reminded of his status. Unlike most servants, even being raised in nobility had its burdens. Hordekef gave the leash another tug. The dog still refused to budge. “Perhaps one day you will call me to celebrate your freedom rather than go hunting.”

There was silence, save for the sound of the dog’s pants.

The yearning for freedom had grown over time but the longing was not enough to set Nenshi free. Even though it was uncommon for servants to ask for their freedom,

if warranted, in time, it would be granted. But Nenshi could not wait to be accorded such benevolence.

“Well ... when will you ask your master to grant you your independence?”

Hordekef asked. “You have told me, repeatedly, you would.”

Nenshi was reluctant to answer but felt the obligation to provide his friend with an explanation. "I have tried several times. Something always gets in the way, his work, visits from old friends. I don't know what else to do. He has been good to me. You know that. I don't want to disrespect him."

"Tehuti is aging. After he enters the underworld, you will still respect him. Unfortunately, your status will not have changed."

Nenshi remained silent. The dead air surrounding him fell on his shoulders and caused him to be still, immobile. The heaviness could only be shaken with distraction. "Let's go, we're wasting time," he said, tipping his head sideways in the direction of the wasteland. "I didn't come here to talk about my woes."

"What's the hurry?" It was a casual question as Hordekef ambled without a care, his body swayed to the rhythmic tunes from a lute played in his mind.

Nenshi glared. "I still have tasks to finish. It seems Tehuti needs to remind me about my status. I never understood it. He has afforded me privileges yet he keeps me in servitude. Let's not waste any more time." He sighed as he raised his bow and arrows and motioned to begin the trek.

The insistence didn't spark Hordekef to move any faster which frustrated Nenshi.

“Is this your way of protesting any desire to go hunting?”

Hordekef lifted his head. His chin slightly tilted upward. “My skills are no match for your ability with those weapons. At times I think it would be better to meet you at the tavern and quench my thirst rather than fight the heat and go home empty handed, as usual.”

“Perhaps today will be different,” Nenshi said as he looked behind him where three servants stood. The same three Hordekef had always chosen to carry water, food and hopefully the spoils. “Must you always bring them?”

“Who? Them?” Hordekef pointed with his eyes. “Of course. Who else will carry the rewards of our adventure?”

“We will. We’re strong enough.”

“That toil is beneath me.”

“That’s obvious. Sometimes you’re like the rest of them. You take advantage of your position. You can’t even enjoy a day hunting without dragging servants to appease your whim.”

Nenshi turned towards the helpers. One was just a young boy who could barely hold his own weight let alone carry spoils. Luckily the other two, stronger and much older, were accustomed to the ordeal.

“Have they had anything to eat before you left?” Looking at their bodies slouched forward, Nenshi sensed a lack of energy. Or perhaps they were bored of the same routine.

“I don’t know,” Hordekef replied. “They prepare my meals. I didn't prepare theirs.”

Nenshi shook his head and reached into his sack. He pulled out some dates, figs and bread and gave them to the servants. At first, they were reluctant to accept the offering. Nenshi smiled and gestured to take them. Hunger quashed hesitation and they accepted the food, given by a privileged servant to servants in need.

Nenshi turned to Hordekef and said, “Let’s go. I have a feeling today will be a good one.”

“You always say that. But wait. Brave One looks hungry.”

“So you care more about the dog’s hunger and far less for that of another man.” Even though Nenshi objected to the delay, he realized it was prudent to be patient and wait when Hordekef was ready rather than end an excursion that had not yet started. After all, the servants were fed so why not the dog.

The sun’s heat began its daily onslaught. Nenshi wiped the sweat as it rolled down his forehead. Pensive, slouched forward with his hand to his chin did little to calm the intensity nor mollify his mind, heavy with languor. Cramped thoughts swirled. He watched Brave One as he licked his paws. The dog was free to roam the fields yet the servants were chained to their life of servitude. Hordekef lived as he chose and Nenshi lived as a servant dispensed with privileges. The leap to ask for freedom was within reach. Yet at times, he was no closer in taking that step. Raised in nobility had given him insights into what it would be like to be a free man. The tantalizing possibility

pulled at him, a request he thought would take less effort than removing the droplets that edged down his temples.

The morning sun moved across the sky. Its rays pierced and became increasingly relentless. Eyes glazed in thought, Nenshi's heart pounded to gain control. He tore himself away from the grip, the same grip that often held him captive. He stood, focused, pulled back his shoulders and clenched his jaws. The drumbeats in his chest softened. A gentle smile replaced the anguished stare as he scanned the desolate arid land where he came to hunt and seek solace.

The wilderness had become his sanctuary where no man dared to take root; where the gods had forgotten it exists. The same wasteland mirrored his temple; a shrine that sustained a dream, immune from the memories of a life in want of change.

Sand, rocks and scarce vegetation shrouded his world which reminded him of the burden of his status, a class he did not choose. For now, his favourite pastime shared with Hordekef would make him forget about his lot in life.

"We should really move on," Nenshi insisted. "The day's heat is creeping up quickly."

"This won't take long," Hordekef said and reached into a sack and took out a piece of meat specially prepared to the hound's liking. "Mmmm ... smell this." He raised it towards Nenshi's face but Nenshi gently nudged Hordekef's hand to the side. "It's goat," Hordekef added.

"I know what it is."

“Brave One likes goat.” His eyes then shifted towards his servants. “I would never feed him figs and bread.”

Nenshi shook his head. Annoyed at the humiliating remark, he gripped his bow and arrows.

"Did you bring him to eat or hunt?" Nenshi asked.

"He's too old to give chase. Look, he's like an elder statesman, content and passive."

"Or he has just become lazy. He knows to stay close to the hand that feeds him rather than chase down animals."

Hordekef clenched his jaws. Nenshi ignored the reaction. The bickering killed the joy in hunting. It had dried up and they both knew it. The simple pleasure in competition between friends turned into a rivalry, an ordeal, as challenging as the hunt itself.



They reached an oasis that sprang from the desolation. There was life even in the desert. The three servants took their usual positions. They stood next to one another, well behind the two hunters. Nenshi grasped his bow in one hand and an arrow in the other. He closed his eyes for a moment and relished the freshness of a rare gentle breeze as it filled his lungs. A soft sigh broke the stillness.

"Must we always go hunting? We can also go fishing." Hordekef said, lips taut as he pulled out a cloth, tucked in his waistband, and dabbed his forehead. A deep

breath could not relieve him from the angst, nor from the air, as dry as the bones of a boar's carcass.

"Here, take some." Nenshi offered his water-filled flask in the hope it would quench his friend's thirst and soften his mood. "I know you prefer to fish rather than hunt."

Hordekef grabbed the container, raised it over his head and let the water pour out. It ran down his chin, his neck and on to his silken shirt.

"There's fun in fishing." Hordekef said. "It reminds me of our childhood. Remember when we would play at my house. My mother would say to my father, *Nenshi might as well live with us. " He spends so much time here."*

Nenshi nodded and smiled at the recollection. "We can go fishing sometimes, but there's no challenge in it," he said and wiped the sweat from his face with his hand and waited for the flask to satisfy his own drought.

"I welcome the day we fling spears instead of arrows." Hordekef took another sip from the flask. The truth was that there was no competition between them in hunting. Hordekef knew he was not as good as Nenshi with the bow and arrow, even though he always tried to find a way to top him. There was no embarrassment in fishing, no opportunity to be outdone.

The heat crushed any desire to engage in a debate about the virtues of hunting. It was Nenshi's simple preference to be away from the River Iteru. There were too many people on both sides. Most took advantage of the grassy swales and ponds that gave way to lush green hills and provided an abundance of life. Instead, Nenshi favoured the



remote areas - home of wild animals, low shrubs, and scattered trees, nurtured by the occasional rain. It was here, in the wilderness, that he would come to slay a beast and forget about his lot in life.

Finally, the flask was handed over. Nenshi lifted it with care, making sure not to spill a drop. While the sight hound rested on his belly, ears bent back, Nenshi cupped his hand, poured water into it, and gave it to the dog. The thirsty canine lapped it freely. Nenshi stroked his long head and rubbed his even longer muzzle. He then lifted the flask towards the servants as a gesture of offering. They smiled, bowed, and pointed to their own flasks.

"Brave One," Nenshi called. The dog knew the sound by which he had always been summoned. He lifted his head and turned his eyes upwards. Nenshi passed his hand along the hound's slender and flexible spine, feeling the smooth coat. The caress revealed a feeble dog whose legs, no longer muscular, certainly were not able to propel him and reach great speeds in pursuit of a fleeing animal. Even his eyesight now betrayed him. At one time he could spot a hare in thick grass farther than an arrow could travel. Now they were of little value. Only his keen sense of smell and acute hearing were left.

"I remember when you would chase down an antelope, bite its hind leg and not let go until it dropped to the ground," Nenshi said. Brave One turned away as if embarrassed by the memory. Nenshi patted him again. Just then the dog pivoted his head towards bushes in the distance, next to a pond. Nenshi turned in the same direction.

"What is it?" Hordekef asked, stretching his neck to get a better look.

"Shh ..." Nenshi held up his hand. "It's time."

"How do you know?"

"Brave One just told me."

Hordekef's eyes narrowed. The dog's sudden resurgence of life, for shifting favouritism from a mere stroke of the spine, displeased his master.

The three servants took a few steps back. Eyes locked on what lay hidden in the bushes. Perhaps a lion waited for the right moment to attack. Many hunters, along with their party, had not returned from their favourite pastime. Often, they would become the hunted.

Hordekef quickly positioned himself with his bow and arrow. Was this an opportunity to outdo his friend? He aimed in different directions like a blind man with a cane trying to decide which way to go. A bird flew out from the thickets. Hordekef swung around and released the arrow. He frowned and glared down at the hound. "He can no longer tell the difference between a bird and a beast."

Nenshi smiled. Still crouched next to Brave One, he prepared his bow and arrow. The scarce high grass, some of it browned by the lack of water and hot sun, stood tall. He managed to peer over them as he rose. His thighs bulged with every lift. The bushes rustled for a moment. An absent wind could not have caused the sway, for the air was calm.

The ridged tips of a gazelle's horns, sharply bent backwards, could be seen. A male. Its light pale colour was visible only through the branches and leaves. The white

and brown stripes between the eyes and mouth stood out even more. For a brief moment Nenshi remembered a key lesson taught to him by the great masters of hunting, afforded only by the affluent. His teacher would tell him, *squeeze the bow tightly as if you were strangling a serpent. Pull back on the bowstring, make sure your elbow points out and does not tremble. Pull back until your thumb touches your ear, that way you know you have the right tightness. This will also help you aim more accurately.* Nenshi did exactly as he had been taught.

As he clutched the shaft of the bow, the muscles in his outstretched left arm swelled. The gazelle stopped chewing. His nostrils expanded detecting an unwanted scent. Both man and beast were motionless. In an instance, the arrow struck. A cry of death broke the silence. The servants exhaled as if the weight of the animal was lifted from their shoulders. Once again, Nenshi's prowess with the bow and arrow prevailed. It was also a reminder of Hordekef's shortfalls. The pang of envy spread, like a fruit gone rancid through the contamination of a worm. Another hunt had ended with reward and rejection.

They stood over the dead beast. "I was certain the gazelle had seen you," Hordekef said. "You were motionless, like a statue. It was a fatal move, the twitch of the beast's muscle that was your signal - as if the gazelle had surrendered its life to you."

"One of us had to make the first move." Nenshi smiled and pushed back his shoulders as if he had just defeated an army, single handed. He wiped the sweat from his temples with his finger and flicked the drops to the ground. He brushed back his wavy dark hair which exposed his high forehead and dark eyes.

"Not bad ... for a house servant," Hordekef jabbed, the compliment withdrawn.

Nenshi's excitement waned, his lips tightened, his fist clenched. The words cut deep. "I didn't need to be reminded," he said, flinging his own heartless tone.



As they approached the mansion Nenshi looked behind him. The servants had slowed their pace to create more distance, wary of becoming the target of the discord between friends. And to be out at the peak of the day's heat was ludicrous. It was not the weight of the dead beast that slowed them to a crawl.

The bloodstained throat of the gazelle hung upside down. Two servants carried it by its legs and neck tied to a long thick tree branch at each end. The third, luckier servant, carried the bows and arrows. The dead animal reminded Nenshi of Hordekef's failures. He now regretted having killed the beast.

"Your aim is better than the last time we hunted. Maybe you just need to practice more." Nenshi's attempt to bridge the friction did not go unnoticed. Hordekef's demi-smile veiled his feelings.

"I don't need more training," Hordekef said, with indifference.

"Then perhaps you need some good fortune. But remember, good fortune is not something that just presents itself. It must be created."

"And what good fortune have you created for yourself? To be free."

Hordekef was right and Nenshi knew it. To talk about freedom was one thing. To act on it with conviction was another.

The relentless heat, the still air and the thought of not having pleaded for his freedom made the walk home seem longer. If the leaves from the top of a tree swayed it was only because of a bird jumping across from one branch to the other. Surely not from a sudden gust of wind.

"Sometimes I think the comfort in my life has overshadowed everything," Nenshi said. "Riches have fogged my dreams. They are a blessing and a curse. I don't see myself as a servant. But there are times I wish I could change everything and live as a servant. Then I would not hunger to be free."

"Look at it this way - you are practically a free man. You come and go as you please. You have the education of a nobleman's son." Hordekef's attempt to mollify a growing concern had little satisfaction.

"What good is it if I can't use it?"

"There are many servants who would give their right hand to have what you have." Hordekef raised his voice to reinforce his message.

"Yes, I'm grateful. I come and go as I wish. I don't have a sibling to compete with. But I want more."

"Not enough? You have everything and that is not enough?"

"You don't understand." Nenshi's face reddened, not from the heat.

"I may not fully understand," Hordekef said, apologetically. "But gratitude starts from within. Those were Soreb's words not mine. Your tutor, remember?"

"If only Tehuti had chosen not to buy me from those slave merchants."

"If he didn't, someone else would have and it might have turned out very differently."

"Then why has he not made me his son, through the courts?"

"Because only those who could not have children could adopt, you know that. Tehuti had a son."

"That excuse is too convenient." Nenshi had grown tired of trying to justify his master's lack of initiative. "Meti should not have died." He took a deep breath to quell the frustration building inside.

"But sadly he did, and you had become like Tehuti's adopted son."

"There were plenty of opportunities for him to grant me freedom. And now with the country almost in ruin, it will be more difficult to get a favourable judgement."

"Ruin? What do you mean?" Hordekef's face scrunched. "Egypt is the greatest of all lands."

"It's not just my opinion. I've heard it from Tehuti. He has seen things with his own eyes. You know how much Pharaoh is consumed with erecting buildings, temples. Tehuti had been commissioned to design some of them. There is no money left for Pharaoh to manage his kingdom and take care of his subjects. There is even talk of threats of invasion. The decline is seeping deep. Some even question the existence of an afterlife, including me."

"Times do change, and people like to talk about it. But you are fortunate to have Tehuti's support. I'm certain he will not abandon you."

"I suppose. I have privileges yet I am deprived. But I must demand my freedom."

"And he will grant it. I know it."

"I hope you're right."

As they sauntered back home, they joked and laughed leaving behind the acrimony of changing times - left in the wilderness, perhaps to wither away.

"Don't forget," Hordekef said, "You promised to meet me at the market tomorrow."

"I'll be there, even though you haven't told me why."

Hordekef grinned and nodded his head like a playful child. They parted ways.



As Nenshi approached Tehuti's mansion, the uneasy feeling returned. It felt like the sun's heat, unbearable - a burning desire to be rid of a life he didn't choose; one he didn't want. He walked through the lavish garden towards the mansion, a stark reminder that a servant raised as a nobleman was less than a man. And now his yearning for freedom loomed in the wake of a country on the wane and rumours of foreigners at the doorsteps of his homeland. The night would pass with spiralling thoughts of confronting his master.

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