

Mason grabbed her arm and dragged her with him through the reeds beside the river. His training, his field of Egyptology, kicked in amid the choking field of reeds.

Was this place the mythical land of *Aaru*, *The Field of Reeds*, as the Egyptians called their heaven, a place they dreamed of reaching after their dangerous journey through the underworld following judgement in the Hall of Osiris, where they had to prove their innocence in a trial called the *Weighing of the Heart* on a set of scales?

The ancient Egyptians had a rock firm conviction that you needed to take it with you when you died, to provide yourself with worldly goods that were placed in your tomb. Food, beer, clothes, furniture, games, weapons, treasures, magical protective amulets to protect you from evil and demons... but of course with the very, very poor there was nothing, perhaps just a jar or a bowl in their grave, like the dog's blue food bowl.

They believed that the afterlife would be a continuation of life on the Nile valley, only eternal, but with the same sorts of challenges, which was why the rich took the precaution of burying Shabti figurines with them, magical slave statues covered in spells, the world's first labour-saving devices designed to do the dirty work for the tomb owner in the next world.

Reeds whipped against Mason's legs and body and that of the girl being dragged.

Did scaly crocodiles lurk in here in the fields of *Aaru*? He longed for a weapon to defend them. Anything. A rock. Even a stick, in case he had to fight off some unknown predator. His instinct for protection told him to be afraid, yet he wondered what he should have to fear in this place.

Then he recalled that here in the realm of the *Field of Reeds*, gods and demigods walked among men.

Heaven?

Maybe it was also hell, he thought as a voice boomed over the reeds, startling them.

They heard a cracking bellow that bent the reeds like a gale force.

"Who enters the Field of Reeds? And what riches and offerings do you bring with you?"

'Riches?' he thought. "Offerings?"

Wasn't the terrible toll of death enough?

He twisted to see a marching apparition like a statue of metal or stone, towering in the weeds. It was a giant, eagle-faced being. A *neter*, or god. Or perhaps a demi-god. The air thinned and chilled and Mason's nose detected a curious odour like burning gum. The perfume of divinity. The entity had a great fist raised in a threat to strike

Mason pulled Beckah down with him into the reeds where they sprawled on their bellies amid a crowd of bending stems, the acid-green pungency filling their nostrils.

"Bring riches with you and you will be served," the cracking voice said. ***"Bring no wealth and you must serve. You can flee, as they all do to escape eternal servitude, but you will be hunted down."***

'How is it possible that I can understand him?' he thought.

'Have I, have we, been wholly transmuted into this place of half day and half night?'

What did this entity's booming declaration mean?

That to those who have will be given and to those who have not, what little they have shall be taken from them?

Not paradise, not bliss and rest, but eternal servitude!

Did the dead *buy* their eternal paradise here?

"So you choose to hide and run?" the entity thundered. ***"Then the gateway demigods will hunt you down. Ammit, the Devourer of Hearts. Demons with serpent heads. Lioness women. Jackal men. And you have nothing to protect yourself with because you are the wretched Ones With Empty Hands."***

Better to move in a wide circle ahead of the pursuer, placing distance between them, he decided.

Where was the dog now?

Mason heard a far-off whine, and he gave Beckah's arm a tug, urging her to follow.

"Keep down low."

Maybe there were tombs of Egyptians somewhere, still filled with things they could borrow.

A spear. An axe. Bows and arrows. A sword.

Useful things.

And gold - that might be the most useful commodity of all in this place.

Borrow?

He was shocked by his own thoughts.

Will I, a trained archaeologist, now become a tomb robber?

Stealing grave goods from the dead.

"What's happening here is just insane," she said.

"Exactly And that's my worry. What is this place, really? Do we all just create our own kind of heaven in the end? Could this mean that the Egyptian afterworld was just a different reality, a sort of virtual world created by a civilization's collective unconscious and sustained by its religion? I'd hoped for more."