



Ancient Fanfiction: Harkhuf's Prisoner
By Elisabeth Koch

Part 1:

"Daddy? Can you tell us, how you came here and why you know the king? Please daddy, we promise to go to sleep if you tell us the story once more!" My eyes wander over my son's big eyes and I let out an overly dramatic sigh. "Let's compromise. Today I can tell you the first part of the story, and tomorrow I'll tell you the second part, but only if you promise to sleep as soon as I finish..." The young boy let out an excited gasp and cuddled up against his older siblings. For myself I choose a position against the backdrop of the dimly lit city with the crescent moon in my back. Somewhere in the distance a cat shrieks.

"The first night on the boat was mild, not unlike the nights of the early Growing Season here at the White Wall. I had never been on a boat overnight before. Back home, my friends and I would only cross the river on occasion to spend a lazy day exploring the other bank. Once my best friend even got bitten by a snake, so we decided to stay close to the village most of the time.

My parents and sisters lived close by. We basically shared the same yard and there was no need to cross the river too often. Originally, my father had come to the dwelling from very far away and he didn't ever want to go back or travel that far again. He never spoke about the reasons for leaving his former home, and I never wanted to press him as he seemed uncomfortable whenever the topic came up. Whenever my family travelled to the nearby capital to sell some produce, we usually just went with our three donkeys and stayed over at our friends' house. One of my mom's childhood friends had moved to a village downstream when she married and, when we passed by, we made sure to spend the day.

But now the Northerners had taken me with them and we had moved through the moonlit desert. I was surprised how swiftly they had navigated through the dark in foreign territory. When I had asked them about it, their commander Horus-is-his-protector told me that he had accompanied his father since he was a teenager and that this was actually his fourth expedition to the south. I had believed him because I had seen him talk to all the people we met on the way. He was fluent in the languages of Irtjet and Wawat - and very proud of those skills. Later, when I got to know everyone in the troop, it turned out that he mainly relied on some locals they hired and paid very well every time they came to the south.



I felt lucky that I at least understood most of what my travel companions said. When they had arrived in town, I had already been learning their language for the better part of two years. Two years prior, the queen had sent a representative to my house to explain that whenever the Northerners came back, I would have to leave my wife and accompany them. She had sent along some men from her personal guard to 'help' me understand that there was no option to decline her order. So I took classes with the teacher she provided and was under the control and protection of her majesty from then on. I would have preferred to just support my parents and wife in the fields but the queen was of the opinion that this work would be too dangerous. During these two years my wife got pregnant and I was very anxious what would happen to the child when I was sent away. However, that needed to be none of my concern as the gods took her and our daughter when she gave birth. After their passing, I dedicated even more time to getting versed in the language because there was not much keeping me in this village now, and, shortly after, Horus-is-his-protector arrived with his troops.

Sure, at the beginning of my northward journey, I still would have felt more comfortable speaking in my native tongue, but to be completely honest, now that I am in the Beloved Land for so long, I have forgotten almost all of it. In hindsight, the teacher was not very good, though. He had even failed to mention that the language could not only be spoken but also written down! Your teachers here are so much better! So please learn your gods' words and write them well so that you will get a good job at the residence. And it is also important that you sleep enough, so now close your eyes and..."

I turn back to the kids huddled in a ball on their reed mat. Sure enough they have fallen asleep by now. At least I saved the best part of the story for the next day, when they would be equally as eager to not go to bed.

Part 2:

A commotion ensues among the three dark-haired children. "Guys, hey, keep quiet and no pushing! We said I would continue the story of how I came here tonight, remember? Ey, stop pushing him! Nobody is falling off this roof tonight!" When they have assumed their places I return to the story.

"Where was I? Ah yes, we boarded the ship from Abu after walking through the desert for about two or three months in which we collected more tributes from the villages we passed. On their way south, before coming across the capital and the queen and



ultimately me, the troops had already made deals with the local villagers, so that we only ran into problems twice. Both times, I was ushered out of the village immediately, but the first time I saw one of our soldiers kill a bystander as a warning while several others encircled the chief's bodyguard. We took a lot of additional cattle away from that village...

In Abu, we left most of the other participants of the expedition at the local garrison. Horus-is-his-protector had received a letter from the King in which he was ordered to return to the capital immediately and bring me along. From then on, the journey was relatively uneventful, except that I could not sleep anymore. A guard now had to stand to either side of me the entire day. Since we were on the ship it wasn't too bad but after a while I got very annoyed. They didn't even let me pee alone because 'there could be scorpions in the sand.' At night, the soldiers would have to come and check on me ten times! There was this one guy -- whose name I can't remember but he also lives in Abu now -- making fun of me deliberately sneezing every time he was on night duty. The ass always woke me up! He only stopped at around the halfway-point of our river journey, when he got bitten by a snake while he supervised me taking a leak. Fortunately, the bite was not life-threatening and I could even help him out with some remedies. I remembered what plants the village doctor back home had used to soothe my friend's pain when he got bitten. She had prepared a paste with some honey and smeared it on the wound. The commander was very impressed, though, and later introduced me to the palace doctor so that we would exchange some recipes. For a few days, they put the sick man into the same space they let me sleep in. That was my time for revenge: at night, I waited for him to fall asleep and then sneezed very loudly...

Wherever we stopped on the way through the country, the priests and village officials would bring food for the troop. They had to because His Majesty had ordered everybody to take good care of us so that I would arrive safe and sound in the residence. That is also how we obtained the honey for the annoying guy. Anyway, another fortnight after the snake bite, we finally arrived at the residence. The commander had dispatched an envoy to the palace the day before to ensure that everything was ready. I was greeted by a cheering crowd and a young King who could barely contain his excitement. Granted, he was my size and had probably never actually seen an adult this short. After the official ceremonies conducted by the King, the commander, and the priests of the capital, His Majesty ordered me into the palace and questioned me the entire evening and night until his mother and the courtiers could barely keep their eyes open. It turned out, they had told him many anecdotes



about another little person that had been a courtier many years ago and he wanted to know the truth behind all those stories.

But that is a story for a different time, kids. Now you know how I came to the Beloved Land. Let's go to sleep and enjoy this refreshing night. I will tell you all about the King and how I became a dancer for the Gods tomorrow."

Context:

The story about the unnamed little person that came from the south to Egypt is based on a letter that the Egyptian official Harkhuf ("Horus is his protector") published in his tomb near Aswan, c. 2300 BCE. In his rock-cut tomb, Harkhuf mentions not only that he accompanied his father to the southern desert and traveled there himself but how long his four military expeditions took. From the last expedition, he brings a little man to Egypt that arouses the interest of the young king Pepy II.

While Harkhuf is sometimes hailed as the "first explorer," this term is misleading. He had previously accompanied his father to the south, was aware of how to move through the desert with a group of people and knew how to negotiate with the locals. He did not explore so much as he improved or negotiated relationships with local rulers. His statement that nobody traveled further than him has formulaic character and fits well with similar formulaic statements from other officials of his time. Therefore, the account of his exceptionalism has to be taken with a pinch of salt.

The most discussed document in Harkhuf's tomb is a letter from king Pepy II that was so important to the commander that he let artists cut its hieroglyphs into the tomb walls. The letter is sent by the young king Pepy II and offers a remarkable glimpse into the mind of the prepubescent king. He can barely contain his excitement about Harkhuf's announcement that he will bring a little person from the south. Little people, especially men, were able to rise into important court positions in Egypt. The boy-king was fascinated that he would meet such a person, of whom he only heard stories before. He tried to make sure that the southerner was well-guarded and would not die before he reached the residence. Unfortunately, we do not know anything about this person, his life or his travels other than his gender. Researchers debate if he was suffering from a growth condition or was even part of a pygmy tribal group that sold him to the Egyptians.



The king's letter remains fairly vague and mentions only that the goddess Hathor granted this man to the travelers to bring him back to Egypt. This goddess becomes the queen in our Ancient Fanfiction. Since we do not know where exactly this man is from, the narrative also remains vague for his backstory. Other questions that the narrative tries to answer as faithfully to its source material as possible are: How did the Egyptians treat the local population on their expeditions? How was the man able to communicate with his captors? What did he feel at the time? How did he feel once he arrived in Egypt? How did he continue to live his life?

We tend to have a very positive picture of an Egyptian civilization that mimics our own, but we should not forget that the inhumane treatment of enemies was a common theme in all of ancient (Egyptian) history. History is written by the victors and the Egyptians stylized themselves as such, even if they lost their battles. The names of the places and people in the story were mostly translated into English because they used to convey meaning in Ancient Egyptian, too. The Greek equivalents were avoided to give a more native Egyptian impression. Thus, Memphis is referred to by its White Wall and the settlement of the Island of Elephantine in modern-day Aswan by a version of its Egyptian name "Abu."

So while his abductor, Harkhuf, is relatively well-known today, the abducted man was swallowed by the eddies of history. Our Ancient FanFiction tries to give him a voice and a backstory because he was as much an individual as Harkhuf.

We hope you enjoyed the story. If you would like to find out more about the source material, officials in Old Kingdom Egypt (c. 2300 BCE), or the status of little people in Egypt click the links below.

Resources for more information

[Egyptian History Podcast](#)

[Livescience about little people in ancient Egypt](#)