



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

COMING FORTH BY DAY

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD (PAPYRUS OF ANI)

VOL. 2 NAMES, FIRE AND GATES

Chapters 5-8

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CONTENTS

THIS VOLUME

VOL. 2 NAMES, FIRE AND GATES

Chapter Five: The Power of Names

Chapter Six: The Lake of Fire

Chapter Seven: The Seven Gates of the House of Osiris

Chapter Eight: The Barque of Ra: A Glimpse

ALL VOLUMES IN THIS RETELLING

Vol. 1 Burial and Going Forth

Vol. 2 Names, Fire and Gates (this file)

Vol. 3 Judgment and the Field of Reeds

CHAPTER FIVE: THE POWER OF NAMES

The road after the caverns ran downhill a long time, and somewhere on that slope Ani lost his name.

It did not tear out of him the way the stolen word had. There were no jaws for this. The name simply would not come when he reached for it.

He noticed because he was taking stock. It was what he did after every trial; it was what he was. Losses first, the scribe's habit: one word of power, gone, entry struck, the empty place still riding under his tongue. Body: present. Wings: whole. Tether: still running back through the dark, a thread of natron under his ribs. Name:

Nothing.

He reached for it again, the way a man pats his belt-bag to be sure of it, and his hand closed on air. He reached harder, and the harder he reached, the less there was, as if the reaching itself rubbed the column clean. Anubis, walking ahead: he could name Anubis. Tutu, grinding no one's ink in a house in Thebes: named, and the naming of her cost him a wingbeat. Himself:

The dark had thickened; that was part of it. The grey-green light had thinned to a grain in the air, and his thoughts were thinning with it, loosening the way plaster loosens in damp. He had seen what became of travelers whose names went out of them on the road. He understood now that a man could feel the shape of that fate from inside it.

He stopped walking.

"Anubis." His voice came out thin, a boy's voice, and he could not correct it. "I have lost..." and there the sentence died, because the word the sentence needed was the word that was gone.

Anubis stopped a few paces on and turned. The long patient face regarded him. The god's ears had not even pricked with surprise, and Ani understood that Anubis had stood like this before, watching a traveler feel for a name that was not there.

"Help me," Ani said.

"Find it," said Anubis, and that was all.

No one speaks your names for you. The first law, spoken in the dark of the tomb before any of this had begun.

Ani set the panic aside the way he set aside a column that would not balance. Go back to the beginning of the account. Trust the ink.

He went back along the tether.

He let himself feel all of it, the salt-sharp thread of natron, the gravity under his ribs, the pull he had fought once over Thebes and accepted since as a stake and not a chain. Back through the dark it ran, through the seam, down the stone throat of the shaft, into the small sealed room where his body lay. The tomb held everything, and the tether held the tomb. He found the scroll in its sycamore case, the green scarab over the heart, and his wife's flat hand pressed to the papyrus, the last living thing to touch his life's work before the case closed.

She had said something then. Too low to carry. He had watched her lips move through the din of the rites, and he had wondered ever since.

He stopped wondering. She had been saying his name. Not the long name, the titled one he wrote on contracts. The short one, the one his mother gave him. The one Tutu said when she found him asleep over a half-finished column at midday and set the bread down beside his elbow.

Ani.

It came back the way breath had come back in the sealed tomb: first the memory of the thing, then the thing itself. The spell for remembering his name rose up in him, the one he had lettered for exactly this hour, and he spoke it whole:

My name is given to me in the Great House. May I remember my name in the House of Fire, on the night when the years are counted up and the months reckoned one by one. I am with him who sitteth on the eastern side of heaven. If any god whatsoever advance against me, I shall proclaim his name forthwith.

The heka took. The thinning stopped. His thoughts drew together again, and the dark was only dark, not a solvent.

Anubis had not moved. "Good," the god said, and turned, and walked on.

But Ani did not walk. A scribe who has nearly lost a page does not go on trusting the page. He copies it out again, and then he copies the copy. Ani stood in the road and armoured himself in names, limb by limb, god by god, out of the litany of members from his own book:

My hair is the hair of Nu. My face is the face of Ra. My eyes are the eyes of Hathor. My lips are the lips of Anpu. My neck is the neck of Isis. My arms are the arms of Neith, the Lady of Sais. My backbone is the backbone of Seth. My thighs are the thighs of Nut. My feet are the feet of Ptah. There is no member of my body which is not the member of some god.

Nu, the dark water before the first day. Ptah, who spoke the world into being. Anpu, the old-tongue name of Anubis, the guide waiting on the road ahead. He named himself into their company member by member, and each name seated itself in him like a stone set in a wall.

One member he could not name. The spell had no line for the heart. It lay far behind him, in the mummy's chest, under the green stone, keeping its own counsel: the one part of him that would have to speak at the end of the road and could not be armoured beforehand, for him or against him. Ani left its line unwritten, and went on.

The road ran level now, and black, and far. His wings ached. The miles of it pulled at him like a current, and it came to him that he had been fighting the Duat on foot, trial by trial, when his own book held a better way to travel.

He had mixed true gold into the ink for that page. At the workbench, with the window light coming over his shoulder, Tutu had asked him what page deserved it, and he had said: the falcon.

He spoke it now, walking, and let it rise:

I have risen, I have risen like the mighty falcon of gold that cometh forth from his egg. May I fly and may I hover as a hawk, with a back seven cubits wide, and with wings made of emeralds of the South.

The change took him at the shoulders first: heat rolling through the feather-roots, the small strong feet drawing up into talons, the line of his face cleaning itself into a beak. Gold ran down every feather. Green bloomed along the span of the wings, deep as new barley. The road fell away beneath him.

He flew.

Below, Anubis ran the road at a jackal's ground-eating trot, untroubled. Once he looked up, and said nothing, which from Anubis was praise.

For the first time since the seam closed behind him, Ani believed he might pass. He had lost a word and held the rest. He had lost his name and found it. He had written this book his whole life, and tonight the book was writing him.

Then the wind off the road ahead changed. It smelled of scorched dust, and beneath the smell, something older and cleaner, like a kiln opened after a firing. Below the dark shoulder of the land there lay a lake of light.

CHAPTER SIX: THE LAKE OF FIRE

The lake of light was a lake of fire, and it was waiting for him.

Ani saw it from the air: a sheet of blue-white flame laid out below the dark shoulder of the land, burning without smoke, almost without sound, a low even roar like a potter's kiln at full heat. Its warmth rose to meet him from a bowshot away. He dropped towards the shore as a falcon and

stood up out of the descent in his own shape, the ba-form settling over him like a cloak. The gold went last, and went reluctantly.

At the four corners of the fire sat four baboons, and they were huge.

Obelisk-huge. Each sat on its haunches like the colossi before a temple gate, hands flat on its knees, mane ruffed, muzzle long and calm. Their eyes caught the flame and gave it back doubled. The fire came to their feet and went around, deferring, and Ani understood that the flame belonged to them, or they to it. They had the stillness of things that had waited since before there were travelers, and expected to wait after.

The smell reached him even here, scorched dust and hot stone, and under it that kiln-clean air. The heat pressed his face like a hand.

Anubis came up beside him out of the dark of the road and stood, and offered nothing. This threshold was Ani's.

When Ani stepped down towards the shore, the four rose. All together, without hurry, the way great doors swing. It was the nearest thing to a challenge they gave: you do not pass until you are known.

Ani knew them. His own book held their portrait, four dog-headed apes at the corners of a lake of flame, drawn in red and black by his own hand. He stood before the nearest of them, no taller than its foot, and spoke the greeting of the lake of fire:

Hail, ye four apes who sit in the bows of the boat of Ra, who convey truth to the Lord of All, who judge my weakness and my strength, who feed upon right and truth, who are without falsehood, and who abominate wickedness. Destroy ye the evil which is in me. Burn away whatever is false in me, and let me come forth purified.

The four bent their heads. When they answered, it was one sentence in four voices, and the fire bowed flat across the whole lake at the sound of it:

Enter thou in, and let nothing whatever oppose thee.

Ani walked into the fire.

The flame closed over his shins, and it was not hot. That was the first astonishment. It was warm the way noon sun is warm on a field worker's back, an honest warmth, a warmth with work in it. Where the fire found him true, it warmed him.

Where it found him false, it seared.

He felt it read him. There was no other way to think of it. The flame moved over him the way his own reed pen moved over a contract, entry by entry, unhurried, and here and there it stopped, and pressed.

Once, at his shoulder, it burned like a brand, and a memory came up out of him and burned transparent.

He was twenty-six years old, sitting the temple accounts at harvest, the lamp oil low, the grain measures piled at his elbow. A farmer from the riverward plots had come short after a bad flood, and the record required his name written down as short, and Ani had lifted his pen and written the full measure instead. A kind lie. He had told himself that for twenty-six years, and he had never once called it anything else, not even in the dark, not even to Tutu.

The fire did not care that it was kind. It cared that it was false. It burned the telling off the deed, and left the deed bare: a good thing, done in a dishonest hand, and under the kindness a smaller thing he had never let himself see, the wish to be liked, to be the scribe who understood. The lie burned away from the memory like smoke off a field, and the memory stayed, transparent, seen through at last. It did not hurt less. It weighed less.

The flame found the empty place where the stolen word had been, and flowed around it, and left it empty. What was gone was gone. The fire read only what walked into it.

Ani waded on, waist-deep, chest-deep, the light of it all around him and through him, and it came to him what this lake was for. It was not a punishment. Nothing here was punished. The fire was a reader, and it was not the last one. Farther down the road there was a balance, and the balance would read the heart as the fire read the man, and the heart was the one entry this flame could not reach, lying in the dark of the tomb, keeping its own counsel.

The far shore rose out of the flame ahead of him, black stone, warm underfoot. Ani stepped up out of the fire the way a blade comes out of the quench: lighter, and tempered, and clean.

Anubis stood waiting. Behind him, at the four corners of the lake, the baboons had turned their long muzzles east, towards a dawn that did not come in this country, and each gave one low cry, rough and brief, the sound of greeters greeting something they trusted to arrive.

"The fire reads what walks into it," Anubis said. "The balance reads the heart."

"I know," said Ani.

The god looked at him a moment, then turned to the road. Beyond the shore it climbed, and at the top of the climb, rising out of the dark as though the dark had decided at last to build, stood a wall with a door in it. Knife-light moved along its edge.

The first of seven.

CHAPTER SEVEN: THE SEVEN GATES OF THE HOUSE OF OSIRIS

The knife-light stopped moving when Ani reached the foot of the wall.

All the way up from the lake he had watched it travel the seam of a door in the dark, a thin bright thread, patient as a reed pen ruling a margin. Now he stood within arm's length, and the thread hung still, and he understood that it had never belonged to the door. It was a blade's light, and the blade was waiting for him.

The wall ran left and right until the dark took it back: black stone, fitted without mortar. The door stood twice his height, wood sheathed in green-black bronze. Along its edge the light quivered, and he could hear it now, a faint high ringing, metal held ready. The air smelled of wet iron.

Anubis stood at his shoulder and said nothing.

A voice came through the seam, flat and courteous, a granary clerk's voice.

"Who comes to the house of Osiris?"

Ani knew this place. He had copied the knowing of the gates three times in his life, and his hand held the memory of every line. Seven gates, and each gate had three who kept it: a doorkeeper, a watcher, a herald, each with a name. A traveler who knew the names passed.

He squared his feet over the stone and spoke.

"I know the names of this gate, and of them that keep it. Sekhet-hra-asht-arū is the doorkeeper. Semti is the watcher. Hu-kheru is the herald."

The ringing stopped. The door opened a hand's width, and the ones inside came out to look at him.

The doorkeeper had the head of a hare, tall-eared and still, a knife across its body the length of Ani's leg. Sekhet-hra-asht-arū: the overturned face, the many attributes. Behind him the watcher waited, serpent-headed, its tongue tasting Ani's voice in the air. Semti, the listener. And the herald stood crocodile-headed, jaws working. Hu-kheru, Hostile-Voiced. He threw Ani's name back into the gate so that the wall itself took it up.

"Ani," the herald said, in a voice like stones grinding. "The scribe. He is known."

The hare-headed one lowered the knife. Ani spoke the words written for this threshold:

Open the way in Re-stau. Make light to be on the way to Osiris.

The door swung wide. Cold air came out of it, smelling of old cedar. Ani walked between the three of them, and none of them moved, because he was known, and knowing was the whole of their law.

Anubis came after without a word. The door shut behind them, and the sound of it going home ran up through the soles of Ani's feet.

The second gate stood a bowshot on, its knife-light already moving.

This time the voice only waited, which was worse. Ani spoke into the waiting. "Unhat is the doorkeeper. Seget-hra is the watcher. Uesau is the herald."

Unhat, he who raises his face, came out lion-headed, mane brushing the lintel, and looked down at Ani with eyes the color of banked coals. The watcher turned his head all the way around, the revolving face, reading him from every side. Uesau, the consuming one, had the head of a lean desert dog and said nothing at all.

Ani gave the gate its words:

He sitteth to do his heart's desire, and he weigheth words as the second of Thoth. Grant that I may pass onwards, and gain sight of Ra together with those who make offerings.

The door opened on the word weigheth. The gates asked for names; somewhere ahead, words of another kind would be weighed. The thought went through him and was gone, because the third gate was already in front of him.

The third gate stank.

The smell came out before any voice did, foul and wet, a stench of rot that clung to the back of his throat. The doorkeeper came out jackal-headed, filth matted in his ruff, and his name was the worst of the twenty-one: Unem-hau-ent-pehui, who eats his own filth. Ani's stomach turned. The ba-body still remembered how to gag.

A name was a key. He had written fouler things into contracts when the record required it. He spoke the name plain. "Unem-hau-ent-pehui is the doorkeeper. Res-hra is the watcher. Uaau is the herald." And the gate's words: I have opened the way in Re-stau. I have eased the pain which was in Osiris.

Res-hra the watchful never blinked. Uaau the herald, called the curser, poured curses over Ani as he passed, misfortunes and evil names, and they slid off him the way lampblack slides off a washed hand. The door shut. The stench stayed three steps and then let go.

At the fourth gate, Ani made his first mistake.

He was in the rhythm of it now, warm with it, and when the doorkeeper came out, man-headed, multitudinous of voice, a crowd's noise out of one mouth, Ani gave him more than his name. He gave the titles, the praise from the margin, the whole of it, rolling and sure.

The voices of the gate rose and buried his. The door did not move.

Anubis spoke once. "Say what is written. No more."

Ani shut his mouth. The noise went on a moment and then thinned, voices going out one by one like lamps, until there was silence to stand in. Kheseef-hra-asht-kheru. The face that repels. The opposer of garrulity. Into the quiet Ani spoke three names and nothing else. "Kheseef-hra-asht-kheru is the doorkeeper. Res-ab is the watcher. Kheseef-atu is the herald."

Res-ab, the attentive one, leaned towards the silence after the names, listening for what would fill it. Nothing did. The door opened to Ani's quiet.

Any apprentice could fill a column. The whole of a scribe's art was knowing what to leave out. He had spent a life learning when to write; the fourth gate taught him when to stop.

After that the gates came faster, and Ani came to them with the ledger open in his head.

The fifth took his names the way a toll-keeper takes grain. Ankh-em-fentu, who lives on worms. Ashebu, the consuming flame, whose breath rolled out of the gate in a wash of heat that dried the sweat on Ani's neck. Teb-hra-kehaa-kheft, hippopotamus-faced, who charges opposite, bellowed Ani's coming down the corridor of the wall.

The sixth gave him thunder. Atek-tau-kehaq-kheru, seizer of bread, raging of voice, whose single word shook dust off the lintel. An-hra, he who shows his face, showed it, filling the doorway. Ad-sheer, sharp of face, carried a knife of grey flaked stone that held the light. Ani gave them their names and their words and went through, heart hammering, mouth sure.

Anubis had spoken not one name since the wall rose out of the dark. The law kept itself: no one speaks your names for you.

The seventh gate stood at the top of a rise, and no knife-light moved along its edge.

Its doorkeeper came out hare-headed, ears tall, but his knife hung at his side, lowered, almost casual. Sekhem-remenu, who prevails over knives. Behind him the watcher came out lion-headed, and his voice went up instead of down, high and clear, a voice for calling good news. Aa-kheru, the high voice, Great of Triumph. He called Ani's name onward into the gate, and the wall took it up gladly.

The herald of the seventh gate was a man, whole and human, and he carried no blade. Over his arm lay a whisk of white hair, the tool of attendants in great houses where guests are expected. Kheseef-khemiu, who drives back the enemies. He studied Ani, found him expected, and inclined his head.

Ani spoke the last address, and his voice did not shake:

I have come unto thee, O Osiris, who art cleansed of thine impurities. Thou goest round about heaven, thou seest Ra, thou seest the beings who have knowledge. Prosper thou for me all the ways which lead unto thee.

The whisk-bearer swung the door wide and bowed him through. The lion walked beside him a dozen paces on the far side, slow, in escort, then stopped and let him go. Behind Ani the seventh door closed with a sound like a tomb lid going home, and he did not look back. There was no road through it that he knew of, anymore.

Twenty-one names. Every one of them his own voice. The mastery of it went through him warm, and he nearly laughed, and then he saw what lay across the plain beyond the gate.

The land fell away into a wide bowl of dark stone, and across it stood a hall.

Its roof ran long, and along the ridge stood a rank of rearing cobras, hoods spread, catching a light that had no source in this country. Above the cobras, set upright along the whole length of the roof, stood a fringe of feathers. White. Still. More of them than he could count from here.

Two doors stood closed at the near end. Nothing about the hall asked for names.

Ani looked at the white feathers and thought of the green stone scarab lying in the dark of the tomb, and of what lay under it, keeping its own counsel, and all his confidence went cold. The gates had wanted names, and names were his trade. What waited under that roof wanted something else.

“What is it?” he asked, though he knew.

Anubis stood beside him, hands at his sides, watching him read the roof.

“That is not another gate,” Anubis said. “The Hall of the Two Truths. Where the heart is read.”

CHAPTER EIGHT: THE BARQUE OF RA: A GLIMPSE

The feathers would not let go of his eyes.

Ani stood with the seventh gate at his back and the Hall across the plain, and he was counting, because counting was what he did with fear, and the count would not hold still. Cobras along the ridge of the roof. Feathers above the cobras. Two doors, closed. Somewhere under that roof there was a balance, and far behind him in the dark of a sealed tomb lay the one witness he could not coach, keeping its own counsel under green stone.

Anubis touched his shoulder.

“Come,” the god said. “There is something you should see.”

He led Ani aside from the road to the Hall, towards a ridge of bare black rock that shouldered up out of the plain. They climbed. The rock lay in split plates that shifted and rang underfoot, and Ani climbed with his hands, and the tether ran back through the dark behind him, taut and patient, a plumb line to the tomb. The wind on the ridge had no smell at all. That was its own strangeness. Even the Duat's roads had smelled of mud and cold water. The ridge smelled of nothing, as though the air had been emptied for listening.

At the top, Anubis stopped. Ani stood beside him. For a while there was only the dark below, a country of still water and darker land, and the Hall's roof lay behind them now, unseen and not unfelt.

Then, far off down the middle of the dark, the water began to shine.

It came on slowly, a line of gold working up the black river, and the gold widened, and the river burned with it, light on water where no sun existed. In the middle of the light moved a boat. Ani could not see hull or sail at this distance, only the shape the light made, long and low, a barque of gold on black water.

Along the shores, faces turned up to it. They were beyond him; the glow touched them all the same, row on row of small pale upturned points, and the glow warmed them the way lamplight warms a house's doorway. Voices came up off the water and off the shores, and it took him a moment to understand that the voices were one voice, a hymn, rolling up the river like surf, wave after wave of it.

Ani knew the hymn. He had copied it more times than any other page in his book, the great hymn to the sun at his rising, and his lips moved with it before he knew they were moving:

Homage to thee, O thou who art Ra when thou risest, and Temu when thou settest. Thou risest, thou shinest, thou art crowned king of the gods.

Far ahead of the light, down in the deep dark of the river, something huge moved. A long shadow heaved once against the gold, thrashing, and flame answered it, a sheet of fire going up and folding over it, and the hymn went on without a break, and the hymn's answer was the same as the flame's: the enemy is given over to the fire, and the boat passes, and the water closes, and the gold goes on.

It was over in a breath. The barque had never slowed.

Ani stood on the ridge with the cold wind in his feathers and understood what he was being shown. His book held spells for going aboard that boat, and every one of them carried the same rubric: for making the akh excellent, the shining spirit, the self made strong and effective and whole. He had copied the words for forty years.

The vindicated rise with the dawn. Daily. That was the promise the whole book was named for. Coming forth by day. He had thought it meant escaping the tomb. It meant this river, this boat, this gold, forever.

Under the wanting, the old cold moved. Every man buried at Thebes had believed he would sail in that boat, and Ani had walked past a cavern where some of them hung head-downward in the dark, finished. The boat showed; it did not swear. Between the showing and the sailing lay the Hall behind him, and the balance, and the green stone in the tomb. But the gold came on up the river, and he found he could not keep his eyes off it, and he did not want to.

“I will rise with the dawn,” Ani said.

He heard it leave him as he said it, and felt the small final weight of it going, a deben of copper weighed out, spent, unreturnable. A spoken word did not come back. He had bound himself with it, and he did not take it back, and he would not have if he could.

Anubis stood beside him with the last of the gold on his long muzzle.

“It is possible,” the god said. “Nothing is promised before the Hall.”

“I know,” said Ani.

“Hold on to it,” Anubis said. “You will need somewhere to put your eyes.”

The barque drew away down the dark, and the gold thinned, and the hymn thinned to a thread and then to nothing, and the river closed over the light and went black again. The wind came back to the ridge, smelling of nothing. Below them, across the plain, the Hall waited with its white feathers, and the cold of it reached Ani even from here, and the memory of the gold stood against it and did not yield.

Anubis turned towards the plain.

“Now.”

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