



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

COMING FORTH BY DAY

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD (PAPYRUS OF ANI)

COMPLETE TEXT

Chapters 1-11

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CHAPTER ONE: THE DAY OF BURIAL

The last sensation Ani owned was ink: the bite of it, reed-sour, in the cuts on his fingers, and under it the pale grit of papyrus dust worked into his knuckles over forty years. Then Tutu's voice, saying his name twice, the second time quieter, as if she already knew the first had come too late. Then nothing he could call a sense at all.

After that, the world came back wrong. He did not see it. He heard it, and felt it, through the walls of his own wrapped body, the way a man asleep inside a house knows rain.

They were carrying him west.

He knew it by the water. The coffin, his coffin, cedar painted with his own titles in the good blue he had mixed himself, rocked with the sway of a ferry, and beneath the wailing he heard river: the chuck and slap of the Nile against a hull, the groan of the steering oar. The west bank. The beautiful West, the priests called it, where the sun went every night and the dead went once. He had written those words onto other men's scrolls a hundred times. He had not expected to ride them.

The wailing swelled when the sledge took his weight off the boat. Oxen, two of them, he counted the four-hoofed rhythm, hauled the sledge up the ramp onto the sand, and the scrape of wood on stone ran up through the coffin floor into his back like a long slow sentence. Women walked beside him, striking their breasts, tearing at their hair. Two of them he knew by voice: his sister at the head of the coffin, his niece at the foot. They had taken the parts of Isis and Nephthys, the two goddesses who wept over Osiris, and they cried the old cry, come to thy house, come to thy house, and meant it.

Tutu was there. He could not have said how he knew. No voice of hers, no touch he could name. Only a steadiness alongside the coffin, a footstep that did not stumble, keeping pace at his shoulder as she had kept pace beside him for thirty-one years.

The procession climbed. Sand gave way to the beaten path of the necropolis, then to stone, and the air that seeped through the coffin's seams cooled and began to smell of the tomb: dry dust, old lamp oil, the ghost of another century's incense. The oxen stopped. Hands took the ropes. The coffin tipped, feet rising, head dropping, and they stood him upright at the mouth of his own grave like a doorkeeper set before his own door.

Then began the packing of his life, and Ani, who could do nothing, did what he had always done. He counted.

The sem-priest came first, leopard skin over white linen, the spotted head of the beast hanging at his chest. His voice came muffled through the cedar, and with it the smell of burning myrrh. Ani

heard a case unlatched, the long sycamore case that had stood in his own courtyard these past days, and heard the papyrus whisper as it slid free.

His book.

Twenty-four paces of it, end to end, every column in his own hand: the spells he had copied since he was a boy, corrected, gathered, and at last made whole, the work he had once sold a field to pay for and never regretted. The Spells of Coming Forth by Day. Per em hru. The words for walking out of the tomb into morning. The priest spoke the title over it now, as it was laid in its place beside the body: the Book of Coming Forth by Day, the writings of the scribe Ani, true of voice before the great god. And he heard the rubric read out from the head of the first column, the red-letter instruction he had inked onto other men's scrolls all his life: to be spoken on the day of burial, at the going in after the coming forth. As for him who knows this book upon earth, he shall come forth by day in every form he desires, and he shall not perish. A true word, a million times true. He had written those red letters for a hundred dead men. Now they were read over him.

Before the case closed, Tutu came close. He heard the small sound of her approach, the hush the mourners made for her, and then her hand, flat, pressed down on the rolled papyrus itself. Over his book. Over his heart. He could not have said which. She held it there a moment, the palm of a woman who had ground ink for him on a thousand evenings, and whatever she said she said too low for the cedar to carry, and then the case shut and the moment was packed away with everything else.

Then the small things, one after another, each with its words spoken over it. The heart scarab: green stone, a beetle carved with its legs folded beneath it, set over the mummy's heart. The priest's voice dropped as he read the inscription, as if the words were too heavy to lift, and only pieces came through the coffin wall. O my heart of my mother... do not stand against me as a witness. Ani had paid the stone-cutter himself, so he knew the rest of the sentence by heart. That was the trouble. He knew it by heart, and the heart was the thing it was about.

The ushabti box went in after, almost an afterthought, eased into the corner: little figures of baked clay, a year of workmen in miniature, each one lettered with its promise to answer Here I am when the dead were summoned to labor in the fields of the next world. Someone laughed softly, fitting the lid. His nephew, proud of the paint. Ani forgave him. It was good, to be laughed over.

At the four corners of the burial chamber the priests set the four sons of Horus, guardians of the body, one to each quarter, named aloud as each was placed: Mestha, Hapi, Tuamautef, Qebhsennuf. Ani counted them off like columns checked against a ledger. Four. Correct. And among the funeral gear, the linen, the unguent jars, a fan, he caught once the soft hiss of feathers shifting, and through some seam of light or of knowledge he saw it in his mind: an ostrich plume, long and white, lying among the offerings. A feather. He did not know why the sight of it should settle in him and stay, but it did, the way a word waits at the tip of the tongue.

Last of all came the image. Ani heard the small heavy scrape of it carried past the coffin and knew it without seeing: a seated Ani in painted limestone, his wig, his collar, his name cut deep into the shoulder. It would stand in the chapel above the shaft, at the offering table, and receive in his place what a sealed body could no longer take: the bread, the beer, the spoken words. A second self, waiting in stone.

Then the sealing. The coffin lid, pegged and roped. The slab dragged across the chamber door, its grinding a thunder he felt in his teeth, and he had teeth again to feel it with, which surprised him. Mud plaster slapped over the seams. A last hymn from the world above, muffled, Tutu's voice in it now, cracked and rising.

Then silence. Complete. A silence with texture, like cloth.

The dark was absolute, and Ani lay inside his finished body with his book beside him and the beetle over his heart, and nothing happened, and nothing happened, and nothing happened.

Until, far off in the stone above him, something touched the face of the image, his face, gently, with iron, and the touch came down through chapel and shaft and slab and found him in the dark, and something in Ani remembered breath, the shape of it, the use of it, and waited for it the way a dry field waits for the flood.

CHAPTER TWO: THE OPENING OF THE MOUTH

The touch came again: iron, cold, laid against his face above, the painted face of limestone that wore his name upon its shoulder, with a surgeon's care, and with it a voice, muffled by stone, by cedar, by the layers of linen over his mouth, chanting words Ani had heard spoken over other men's dead.

The Opening of the Mouth. Above him, at the top of the shaft, in the little chapel where the offerings would be brought, the priests stood before his statue with the adze and the flint, and the rite that had once been done for his father was done for Ani's image now, since the image was all of him the living could still touch.

He could not see it. He could only wait inside the dark and take each thing as it came back to him, one at a time, like lamps being lit along a corridor.

Smell came first. Natron, the sharp salt-dry reek of it, packed against his skin seventy days now and only at this moment noticed, the way a sleeper wakes and learns the name of the weight on his chest. Then myrrh, sweet and bitter, drifting down the shaft from a censer above. Then the smell of his own bandages: linen, resin, dust.

Then hearing, and hearing was voices. The sem-priest's chant came thin as thread through the stone. I have opened thy mouth for thee with the adze of iron. I have opened thine eyes for thee.

The little instruments did their work: the adze first, then the pesesh-kef, the forked flint blade that had cut cords at births and opened the mouths of statues and now opened his, touching the stone face above once at the lips, once at the eyes. Ani felt each touch arrive not on stone but in him, down the shaft and through the likeness, somewhere behind his wrapped face, in the part of him that was listening.

Not sight. The blade touched the image's eyes above, and something behind his own wrapped face opened that had been shut, but there was nothing for it to open onto. The dark stayed dark. It was his dark now; that was the difference. He was not buried in it any longer. He was awake inside it, and that was worse and better at once.

Then breath.

It came like a remembered song: not learned new, only recalled, a thing his body had known for fifty-two years and had merely waited to be asked for. Air moved in the wrapped chest. It tasted of salt and incense and stone dust, and it was the best thing he had ever tasted. Somewhere under the gratitude, a scribe's small voice observed that he was dead, and dead men do not breathe, and filed the observation away to be afraid of later.

Then the mouth opened, and with the mouth came speech, and with speech came everything.

Ani lay still for a long moment in the breathing dark. Then he did what any scribe would have done. He tested the instrument.

He spoke, into the linen and the cedar and the stone, a line from his own book: the spell for opening the mouth in the realm of the dead, which he had copied out more times than he could count and never once said aloud.

Ptah opens my mouth, and the god of my city looses the swathings, the swathings which are over my mouth. Thoth comes, equipped with words of power in great abundance, and unties the fetters, even the fetters of Set which are over my mouth...

His voice came out strange: dry, small, the voice of a room rather than a body. And it worked. He felt the heka, the working magic in spoken words, take the way a pen takes ink. The words were not sounds. They were done. The last of the weight slid off his jaw, and he could have laughed or wept and did neither, because a scribe does not waste a working instrument.

"Again," said a voice from the corner of the chamber.

Ani stopped breathing. The voice was not a priest's. Nothing muffled it; not stone, not linen. It was inside the sealed room with him, where no one was, where no one could be. Low, unhurried, courteous, and not human the way flint is not wood.

"Who," he began.

“The chapter says what it says,” the voice answered. “Speak it whole, or not at all.”

Ani spoke it whole. When he finished, the dark was quiet again, and into the quiet the voice said his name. Not his titles, not scribe of the holy offerings of the lords of Thebes. Just his name, the short one, the one his mother had given him and Tutu had worn smooth with use.

“Ani.”

Something in him stood up straighter.

“I am Anubis,” the voice said. “You know my face. You painted it on your own walls.”

He remembered the wall. The jackal-headed god bending over a bier, hands outstretched above a wrapped body, and himself on a scaffold with a palette, complaining about the light. He had given the god a patient face.

“You are the guide.”

“I am the embalmer. I attend the mummy, and I lead the dead by the hand. Listen, because I will say this once. The rite has given you breath and a voice. The book beside you holds every road, every gate, every name between this chamber and the Hall of Two Truths. But a scroll cannot walk, and it cannot speak.” A pause, exact as a measure. “What comes next must be walked by you, and spoken by you. No one speaks your names for you.”

Ani thought of his book, twenty-four paces of his best writing, and saw it plain for the first time: it had been a rehearsal. He had spent his life copying the road so that other men’s feet would know it. Now the road was under his own.

“Then where do I begin?” he said.

“You have begun.” The voice was nearer than it had been. The corner of the chamber no longer held it. “The rest is standing up.”

Something moved towards him in the dark. Not footsteps; the dark had no floor that Ani could feel, and no walls that it troubled. A nearness arriving the way warmth arrives at a cold hand, patient, unhurried, certain of its welcome. It reached the coffin. It came through cedar and linen and the long stillness of the body without stirring any of them, and it found the part of him that had learned again to breathe.

A hand closed around his, or something that wore the shape of one.

“Now,” said Anubis. “Up.”

CHAPTER THREE: GOING FORTH BY DAY

The word Up was still in the air when the hand drew him, and Ani could not follow.

Something held him down, and it was not the coffin, and it was not the linen. It was himself. He was soaked through the mummy like water through cloth, and the hand pulled at him the way a hand pulls at smoke.

Then the smoke learned its shape.

It came piece by piece, the way his senses had come: his face first, cheek and brow and his own ordinary nose. Then shoulders. Then, where his arms should be, wings that knew their work without asking him, a tail that steered, small strong feet. He knew what he was. He had painted the creature a hundred times on a hundred walls and papyri. A ba: the soul in bird-form, a man's own self with wings.

The dark thinned as he rose, from resin and old linen to raw stone, and down the shaft came a thread of cold air that smelled of open evening. Ani spoke into the rising the spell of coming forth by day from his own book:

Oh thou Only One, who shinest from the Moon, let me come forth amid that train of thine, at large, and let me be revealed as one of those in glory.

The heka caught. Through cedar he went, through his own painted name, through stone, and the shaft took him like a chimney takes a spark. Seventy days of dark went past in one breath, and then there was sky.

Sky. Evening. The sun stood low and huge in the west, the color of a goldsmith's crucible, and the land of Thebes lay below him in the last of the light: the river running north like a poured road of bronze, the green seam of the fields, mud-brick roofs breathing threads of cooking smoke, the temple pylons laying their long shadows halfway across the town.

He laughed. Seventy days dead, and he laughed, because the air held him and the world was still there.

He flew.

The wings had been waiting seventy days, or fifty-two years, and knew everything. He turned over the necropolis and read it the way he read a column of accounts: the forecourt, the causeway, the shaft he had risen through, the small mud-brick pyramids capping the tombs along the ridge. His own tomb sat square and small among its neighbors, and nothing about it marked him out. From sixty cubits up, it looked like anyone's.

Across the river the town was lighting its lamps. He found his own house by its courtyard wall, and for a wingbeat he let himself think of Tutu inside it, grinding no one's ink, and the thought was warm and it hurt, and he banked away from it, because a ba that weeps falls out of the air.

Then he felt the tether.

It did not pull at his wings. It pulled at the middle of him, a gravity that had nothing to do with weight, and with it came a thread of scent through the clean evening: natron, sharp and salt, the smell of the chamber below. Sixty cubits of air between them, and still the mummy held his anchor.

He fought it for a moment, out of pure want, climbing west towards the gold. The pull did not harden. It only stayed, patient as a mooring rope, smelling of home, and after a moment Ani stopped fighting it. The pull was a stake, not a chain. The body below was the peg driven into the ground: it said he had a ground to return to, that Ani was still a person with a place.

“Guard the way back,” said Anubis, beside him on the wind. He flew as the gods fly, without wings that Ani could see, jackal head set into the west, unhurried. “The ba ranges. The ba returns. Lose the body, and you are a name with nothing under it.”

Ani looked down at the tomb and thought of what lay inside it: the scroll in its case, the ushabtis in their box, and on the mummy’s breast the green stone beetle, and under the beetle, in the dark of the chest, his heart. The one organ the embalmers had left him, because a man needs it where he is going. The book of his life, written in a hand he could not revise.

The old unease came up through the floor of him, the one that had sat in him since the funeral, since the priest’s voice had dropped over the scarab’s inscription. He spoke towards the earth the heart words of his own book:

Heart mine to me, in the place of hearts. Whole heart mine to me, in the place of whole hearts. Let me have my heart, that it may rest within me...

And after it, the plea against seizure, half prayer and half warning:

Let not my heart be torn from me by your fingers. Let it not be fashioned anew according to the evil said against me.

The wind took the words. Nothing answered. The heart lay where it lay, under the green stone, keeping its own counsel, and Ani flew on with a cold knowledge riding in him where a heart would be: the one witness who knew the whole of his life was the one witness he could not coach.

They went west into the gloaming, and the sun went down ahead of them into the seam of the world.

Ani had seen ten thousand sunsets from roofs and riverbanks. He had never seen one from inside the sun’s own road. The horizon opened like a door left ajar, a seam of gold stretched thin between dark land and dark sky, too bright for fire, too straight for light. Heat came off it, and a smell like evening water. Beyond it there was no more anything he had a word for.

Anubis had alighted on the black land at the seam's edge, and Ani saw him whole for the first time: tall, dark against the gold, the jackal head with its long patient muzzle and its alert ears. His own wall-painting, come walking. He had given that face patience, back when patience was a thing he could afford to invent. He was glad of it now.

He alighted beside the god and spoke the words he had copied for other men's evenings, the spell for living after death:

O ye seamen of Ra at the gloaming of the day, let me live after death, like Ra, daily.

"Am I ready?" he said. It came out smaller than he meant.

"No," said Anubis. "You are begun."

He held out his hand the way a ferryman takes a passenger, and Ani put his small strong foot into it, and the god stepped through the seam of gold and drew him after, and the gold closed over them, and the last true light Ani would see for a long time went out.

CHAPTER FOUR: INTO THE DUAT: THIEVES OF WORDS

The seam closed behind them like a mouth.

The light on the far side had no source Ani could find: a grey-green dimness the color of river water held up to the moon. It showed him a country of black roads crossing black land, water that did not reflect, mounds and ridges like a town buried to its rooftops. The air was cold and smelled of mud and standing water, and the tether ran back through the seam behind him, a thread he could feel without turning.

Anubis led him onto a road of beaten stone beside the water, and they walked.

Then Ani heard scales.

It came before any shape: a long slow drag of scale on stone, off in the water. Then the water began to move the way water moves when something large is rising out of it.

"Do not stop walking," Anubis said. "And keep your words behind your teeth."

The first crocodile hauled itself onto the road and swung its head towards him and opened its jaws, not at his body, but at the air beside his mouth.

It was listening.

Fear spoke the spell before Ani could stop it, the first line of the chapter for driving back the crocodile, and the moment the words left him the crocodile lunged, and its jaws shut on the middle of the sentence.

He felt the word go.

It tore out of the line like a letter licked off a page. The crocodile slid backward off the road with it, and the water took it, and Ani was left holding a sentence with a hole in it. The word itself was still his; he could see it in its place in the column he had lettered with his own hand forty years ago. What was gone was the saying of it. The spoken word did not come back when he reached for it.

More of them were rising. All along the road the water was full of heads like wet logs, tilted towards his mouth. Ani did what a scribe does with a ruined column. He wrote it again: whole, and fast, and ahead of their jaws. Whole, or not at all.

Back! Back, crocodile Sui! Come not against me, who live by the words of power. My teeth are like flint, and my grinders are like the Cliff of Tuf. Do not thou carry it off, O crocodile, who livest by thine own word of power.

The heka took. The nearest crocodile stopped as if it had struck a wall under the water. The others came from every quarter, and Ani named them off like a ledger read aloud:

Back, thou crocodile of the West, who livest on the setting stars. Back, thou crocodile of the East. Back, thou crocodile of the South. Back, thou crocodile of the North. What thou execratest is upon me. My face is unveiled, and my heart is in its place.

The water went still. One by one the heads sank.

“What was taken is the utterance, not the word,” Anubis said. “The word stays in you. The breath you spent on it does not come back. In this country a spoken word is a coin spent. Spend them whole, and spend them when you must.”

Ani walked on with the empty place riding under his tongue. Here his words were the baggage of the journey, and the road was full of thieves, and a scribe without his words was nothing at all.

The road climbed into broken country, and it was there that the serpents found them.

He heard them first; the Duat, the underworld, was a country you heard before you saw. A dry whispering like wind in a reed bed, and then the road ahead was a tangle of living rope, serpents lying across it three deep, heads up, eyes like beads of jet.

“Name them,” said Anubis, and stood still, and that was all.

Ani stopped an arm’s length from the nearest head, thick as the wrist he no longer had. Nothing in this country could be forced, he was learning. It could only be known. He drew on his own book and spoke to the great one by name:

Rerek, advance not. Here are the gods Geb and Shu. Halt, or thou shalt eat the rat that Ra execrates, and gnaw the bones of a putrid she-cat.

The serpent held his eyes a moment, tasting the truth of the words. Then it lowered its head and flowed off the road like water finding its level, and the whole tangle unmade itself behind it.

Ani's small strong feet were shaking. He noted it the way he noted everything, and filed it, and walked on.

Then the road ran up onto a ridge, and the ridge moved.

Not much. A settling, the way a sleeping ox moves in its stall. The whole black slope of it, a bowshot long, breathed. Ani stood very still on the back of the largest thing he had ever stood on, and knew whose back it was without being told. The road went over Apep, the great serpent, the enemy who lies in wait for the sun, and his chine was hollow and older than Thebes.

"Speak the spell for passing the chine of Apep," Anubis said, quiet as stone. "And do not run. Running is also a kind of speech."

Ani spoke, as soft as he could, over the sleeping back:

Let me not become motionless before thee. Let not thy venoms enter into my limbs, for my limbs are the limbs of Atum. I am he whose names are hidden, whose abode is mysterious for all eternity.

The ridge did not wake. It only breathed, and they crossed it step by step, and on the far side Ani's wings strained for the air, but Anubis said, "Walk," and he walked, and the serpent's slow breathing fell away behind them.

The country after the ridge was caverns, and the caverns were full of quiet.

They passed the mouths of them one by one, dark openings with their own cold breath, and Ani kept to the middle of the road and did not look in. A scribe looks; that is what a scribe is. And still he did not look, because the tether had gone taut in him like a plumb line.

So it was only once, and at the edge of his sight, and never directly, that he saw them: shapes hanging head-downward in the gloom of a cavern mouth, still as nets hung up to dry. No sound came out of that place. Nothing begged, or burned, or called his name. The shapes were simply finished, and the wrongness of them was that no one was left in them who could do anything at all.

Anubis stopped.

It was the first time Ani had seen him simply stop. The god stood in the road facing that cavern, and did not speak, and did not move, and his stillness had a weight that the crossing of Apep's back had not had. Then he turned away and walked on, and Ani understood he had been shown the one thing in the Duat his guide had no spell against.

“What were they?” he said at last. “The hanging shapes.”

Anubis walked a while without answering.

“Travelers,” he said. “Whose hearts spoke against them at the balance. Or whose names went out of them on the road.” He did not turn. “There is no torment in this country, Ani. There is only ending. The second death takes the heart, and the name, and the shadow, and what is left hangs where it fell, and does not rise, and is not remembered.”

Ani thought of the heart in the dark of the mummy’s chest, which knew everything he had ever done and would have to carry all of it to the scales. The road ahead was long. It ended in a hall, and in the hall was a balance.

“How far?” he said.

“Far,” said Anubis. “Keep your words close.”

And the grey-green dark took them, and the road went down.

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-arur: 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. Seqet-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.”

CHAPTER NINE: THE HALL OF TWO TRUTHS: THE CONFESSION

The word went ahead of them across the plain.

Now. Ani came down off the black ridge with it still in his ears, and the Hall grew as he walked, and there was no moment when it stopped growing. The roof ran longer than any temple in Thebes. The cobras along its ridge stood taller than granaries. Beneath the fringe of white feathers the near wall waited, blank and pale, and in the middle of it stood two doors, and close up he saw they were a pair, right and left, and not the same door twice.

He had come to the place his book could not walk for him. The scroll lay sealed in the tomb. Names had carried him past twenty-one guardians, and names lived in his head still, but the Hall wanted the other thing, the thing the Lake of Fire had only begun to read. His life. Spoken. True.

Anubis stopped a stone's throw from the doors, and Ani stopped beside him. The air here smelled of hot lamp oil and old linen, and under both of those, faint and dry, the dusty smell of feathers.

“Two doors,” Ani said.

“Two truths,” said Anubis. “The right door is Neb-Maat-heri-tep-retui-f. The left door is Neb-pehti-thesu-menment. Men give the hall a shorter name, and it has a longer one, and the hall answers to either, because the hall does not care what it is called.”

“Which do I go in by?”

“The one that opens.”

Ani spoke both names, evenly, the way he had spoken the names of the gates. The right door opened. Cold air came out of it, stone-cold, the cold of a room that had been waiting a long time, and it took the warmth off his feathers as he stepped through.

The Hall of the Two Truths received him the way deep water receives a stone.

It was vast beyond the wall's promise. Rows of small flames burned in stone cups along the columns, and the light of them did not reach the roof; the roof went up into the dark and kept going. Down either side of the hall, in two long ranks, twenty-one and twenty-one, sat the assessors, one judge for every province of Egypt, one for every sin a man could be accused of. They had the shapes of men and the patience of furniture. Forty-two pairs of eyes watched him come, small and steady, like coals seen through smoke.

At the far end stood the scales.

He saw the beam first, hung level from a dark pillar, and the two pans beneath it, and on the nearer pan, small and white and impossibly bright, a single feather. Behind the scales rose a shrine, and in the shrine a figure sat wrapped and still, green-faced, crowned. And beneath the beam, low against the floor, something crouched in the shadow the scales made. It did not move. It did not need to.

Ani looked at it once. Then he put his eyes on the stone between his feet, and breathed, and stood still.

“The confession,” Anubis said beside him. “You know it. Speak to each by name. Say what is true. No more.”

The god stepped back then, out from beside him, and Ani stood alone before the forty-two. No one could speak this for him. That had been the first law, given in the dark of the tomb before any of the rest of it, and the Hall was only the place where the law came due.

He drew the cold air in and began.

Homage to thee, O great god, thou lord of right and truth. I have come to thee, my lord, and I have brought thee right and truth. I know thee, and I know the names of the forty-two gods who are with thee in this hall.

He turned to the head of the first rank.

Hail, Usekh-nemmt, thou whose strides are long, who comest forth from Annu: I have not done iniquity.

The words left him and landed, and the hall took them the way it took everything, and kept them. They stayed in the air, standing, as though the air had shelves. Nothing answered. Nothing needed to. The declaration was recorded by the listening of the hall itself, and Ani understood that if one of them came back refused, he would know it at once.

Hail, Neba, thou who comest and goest: I have not uttered lies.

He waited for that one to be sent back to him. The harvest accounts rose in him as he spoke it: the flooded farm, the short measure written full, the kind lie. But the Lake of Fire had read that entry already and burned the telling off the deed, and what walked out of the flame owed no more on it. The hall kept the words. He went on.

Hail, Am-khaibit, who comest forth from Qernet: I have not slain men.

The vizier’s lists came up with that one: the court’s findings, the names of men the law had finished with, column after column in his best book-hand. His pen had served the sword and never wielded it. He had written every name true and softened nothing, and on the nights after he had read them

back to himself, so that someone in the world would still be reading them. The declaration stood. The hall kept it.

Hail, An-af, who comest forth from Maati: I have not snatched away the bread of the child.

His nephew, the year the flood failed, the same boy who had laughed over the wet paint of the ushabtis. Ani had cut his own ration in half for six weeks and never told him why the bread on his plate came thicker than his uncle's. Some declarations were like that, he was learning: light ones, spent gladly.

Hail, Ari-em-ab-f, who comest forth from Tebu: I have not stopped the flow of water.

A farmer upstream had dammed the channel in the night to steal his neighbor's share, and the man was kin to Ani by marriage, and the village brought the matter to the scribe because the scribe wrote findings straight. Ani wrote it against his own kin. The water ran clear again within the month. He had cupped that water as a boy, cold, tasting of silt. Nobody's water. Everybody's.

Hail, Nekhenu, who comest forth from Heqat: I have not shut my ears to the words of truth.

The widow's petition. A temple steward had taken her field on a forged boundary, and she had nothing but the truth of it, and the truth was the one coin the steward had not thought to buy off. Ani carried it up past the men who would have buried it. It cost him a patron's favor. The widow got her field back, and Ani kept her copy of the finding in his own chest until the papyrus went soft.

Hail, Hraf-haf, thou whose face is turned back, who comest forth from thy cavern: I have made none to weep.

That one cost.

The gold ink came back to him. He had bought it dear for the falcon page, and money was short that year, and when Tutu asked what page could deserve such ink he answered past her, sharp, and the words came out cruel: you grind ink; you do not pay for it. She wept once, in the courtyard, where she thought he could not see. He saw. He went out and sat beside her until the weeping was done, and it was mended between them, mended for good. But the tear had been his, caused, and as the declaration left his mouth he waited, cold, for the hall to refuse it.

The hall kept it. Somewhere far away, down a thread of natron-scent in a sealed room, his heart lay under green stone and said nothing. It was keeping its counsel for the scales.

Hail, Uamenti, who comest forth from the chamber: I have not defiled the wife of any man.

Thirty-one years. One house, one bed, one woman who ground his ink and stole dates off his plate and was the first thing he looked for coming home at evening. The declaration weighed almost nothing, one of the lightest he owned, and the hall kept it as it kept the heavy ones, with the same stillness, and Ani was glad of the sameness.

Hail, Ahi, who comest forth from Nu: I have never raised my voice.

He had never raised it to her. She had raised hers for both of them, at the tax clerks, at the donkey dealer, at the neighbor's goat, and the memory of her in the doorway in full voice warmed him here, in the cold heart of the cold hall. For a moment the forty-two, the scales, and the crouched shape all stood at a small distance, and the distance had Tutu in it.

Hail, Neb-abui, who comest forth from Sauti: I have not multiplied my words in speaking.

He nearly smiled at that one. The fourth gate had collected the debt already, and in voices.

After that the confession went the way a long column goes at the year's audit, once the clerk has found his rhythm. He had not stolen grain, nor carried away the cakes of the dead. He had not eaten the heart. He had not terrorized. He had not been wroth without cause. He had not blasphemed. He had not slain the cattle of the god. He had not snatched the milk from the mouths of children. Name by name, province by province, he gave each assessor its due, and the declarations went out of him and stood in the air, and the air grew full of his life, line by line, until all forty-two had been answered and the hall held everything he had ever done, kept, spoken, spent.

Silence came back. The forty-two had not moved. His heart, far away, had said nothing at all.

Then, from the far end of the hall, the bolt spoke.

"I will not let thee enter in over me," it said, in a voice of wood sliding on stone, "unless thou tell my name."

Ani knew the hall's own litany. He had copied it more than once, marvelling that even the architecture had to be answered, and now he answered it.

Weight of the place of right and truth is thy name.

The bolt slid. The inner door opened a hand's width, and its parts began, one after another, each as exact and incurious as a warder at a granary. The right doorpost demanded its name and he gave it: Weigher of the labours of right and truth. The threshold: Ox of Seb. The socket of the bolt: Flesh of his mother. The lock: The utchat of Sebek, the Lord of Bakhan, liveth. Each answer opened the door a little wider, until Ani stood before the gap with the floor beyond it pale in the lamplight.

Last came the warder of the inner door, tall, with the face of a man who had heard every answer there was. Ani did not wait to be asked.

Discerner of hearts, searcher of reins is thy name.

The warder studied him for a long moment. Then it stepped aside.

"Enter," it said. "Thou art known."

Beyond the warder the hall opened to its far end, and nothing stood between Ani and the scales.

Anubis came and stood beside him, and they regarded the scales together.

“Now the heart,” the god said.

CHAPTER TEN: THE WEIGHING OF THE HEART

The scales stood taller than Ani, and everything in the hall leaned towards them.

He walked the last length of the floor with Anubis beside him, and with every step the apparatus of judgment took on more parts. The pillar of the balance was dark wood shod in bronze, and the beam hung from it on a pin, and from the beam's two ends the pans hung down on cords so fine they were nearly invisible, so that the pans seemed to float, waiting to be told what they held. A plummet on a thread hung beside the pillar, motionless. The floor under the scales was pale stone worn smooth, and the lamps here burned lower and steadier, and the air smelled of hot oil and cold metal and, close now, the dry dust of feathers.

On the near pan lay the feather.

Ani had seen it before. A white plume among the funeral gear, laid with the offerings by hands he could not watch, and it had caught at him then and settled in him like a word at the tip of the tongue. Here was the word. Maat. Truth and order and the way things stand when they stand right, the law the river keeps and the stars keep and the grain measure keeps when the clerk is honest. It lay on the pan weighing nothing at all, and it was the heaviest thing in the hall.

Behind the scales, in a shrine of dark wood, sat Osiris.

He was wrapped close as any mummy, and his face above the wrappings was green, the green of black soil after the flood goes down, the green of things that rise again. The tall crown stood on his head with its two plumes, and his crossed hands held the crook and the flail. He did not move. He did not look at Ani, and Ani understood that this was not coldness. The lord of this hall had died and risen, and everything that came before him now came to be weighed against the one feather. Kings of the living grew old with their judgments. This one had made his once, and it was resurrection, and he sat inside it like a seal in its ring.

To one side of the scales, at a small sloped lectern, stood Thoth. The ibis head bent over a palette with two ink-wells, black and red, and a reed pen trimmed to a fine point lay ready across the scribe's fingers. The scribe of the gods had come to work. Ani knew that posture. He had held it for forty years over contracts and accounts and the long pages of his book, and seeing it here, on a god, did something to him he could not have named. The being in this hall whose trade was nearest his own would write down what happened next, and would write it true.

Anubis went to the pillar. The guide who had led him by the hand across the whole of the dark now took up his other office, the one the vignettes in Ani's own scroll showed: the keeper of the balance. He crouched, and took the plummet's thread between two long fingers, and watched how it hung, and shifted the beam by a hair, and watched again, and his whole long face was work. Nothing in him was casual. Ani thought that nothing in him had ever been casual, in all the thousands he had brought to this floor.

And beneath the beam, where the shadow of the pans lay darkest, Ani saw her whole at last.

The head was a crocodile's, long-jawed, the teeth showing in rows along the shut mouth. The forequarters were a lion's, maned, heavy-pawed, the claws sunk into the stone. Behind them rose the broad dark bulk of a hippopotamus, the three great takers of life from river and desert and marsh bound into one body. She crouched with her jaw on the floor. She did not lift it. She did not turn her head. She did not look at him, or at Anubis, or at anything; she waited, and waiting was all she did, and all the moving in that corner of the hall was done by Ani's fear.

He thought of the cavern on the Duat roads, the shapes hanging head-downward in the gloom, finished. Their hearts had spoken against them at the balance. The crouched thing under the beam was what finished looked like when it had a shape.

"It is time," Anubis said.

The tether pulled taut behind Ani's heart.

He felt it go tight, the thread of natron-scent and gravity that had run back through all the dark to the sealed room where his body lay, and something came up it, pulled along the whole length of the road, out of the cedar and the stone and the dark. It came to rest in his cupped hands, and his hands knew it before he looked down.

His heart.

It lay there small and red-brown and warm, beating slow, the same steady time it had kept under his ribs through fifty-two years of Thebes. The one organ the embalmers had left him. The seat of his memory, his conscience, his whole true record, everything he had done and everything he had meant. He had carried it his entire life and never once held it. It knew him. That was the terrible thing. It knew him all the way down.

He heard the priest's voice again, dropping low over the green stone at the funeral, half-heard through the coffin's cedar wall. He heard Tutu breathing somewhere beyond it. He had kept those words in him through every gate and every fire, and now he set his own voice against the silence of the hall and spoke them whole, to the warm weight in his hands:

O my heart of my mother! O my heart whereby I came into being! Do not stand against me as a witness. Do not oppose me in the tribunal. Do not make thyself hostile to me before the keeper of the balance. Let there be no parting of thee from me in this place.

The hall kept the words, as it kept all of them. Anubis held out his hands, and Ani gave his heart up into them, and the god carried it the two steps to the scales and laid it in the empty pan, gently, the way the embalmer lays anything that belongs to a man.

The cords took the weight. The beam moved.

The heart-pan dipped, and rose, and dipped again. The feather-pan rode up and settled and rode up. The beam swayed on its pin, seeking, and the swaying would not stop, and Ani stood with his hands empty and watched his whole life swing.

Because the heart was remembering. He could feel it happening. Everything was in it: the harvest lie, burned to ash in the fire, but the heart kept the ash. The cruel words about the ink, mended, but the heart kept the sound of her weeping in the courtyard. The favors taken, the findings written soft for men who could help him, the small cowardices no fire had found. It had all been true in the confession, every word spoken straight, and the hall had kept every word, and still the witness on the pan was weighing its own testimony, and Ani could not coach it.

The beam dipped. Rose. Beneath it the crouched shape waited with its jaw on the floor, and did not lift it, and did not need to.

Ani could not breathe. The ba-body had no need of breath and demanded it anyway. Thoth's pen hung poised over the palette. Anubis watched the plummet and did not move, and nothing in his stillness told Ani anything at all.

The beam slowed.

The dips grew shallow, the way a pendulum comes home. Plea or choice or stone, he was not meant to know which. The swaying settled. The cords went still.

The two pans hung level.

The heart and the feather, even. The beam lay flat across the pillar's pin, balanced, and the plummet beside it hung straight down the line of truth and did not waver, and the hall was so quiet that Ani heard the small tick of the pin taking the beam's rest.

Thoth's pause stretched over everything.

The ibis head stayed bent. The whole hall, the forty-two, the shrine, the lamps, the crouched thing beneath the beam, held inside that pause the way a house holds inside the moment before a birth is announced. Then the reed pen dipped into the black ink and scratched across the papyrus, a

small dry sound, the sound Ani had made with his own hand ten thousand times, and the record was made, and what was written could never be unwritten.

Thoth raised his head and spoke, and his voice was the voice of a clerk reading a finding into the record, exact, final:

Hear ye this word in very truth. The heart of the Osiris Ani hath been weighed, and his soul hath stood as witness for him. He is righteous upon the great balance, and no sin hath been found in him. Maa-kheru.

Maa-kheru. True of voice. The verdict of the justified, the two words his whole book had been written to buy. Down the long ranks the assessors took it up, one after another, forty-two voices repeating the finding into the hall's keeping, until the word came back off the far wall and stood in the air with all the rest of him.

Anubis was still looking at the beam.

Then the god's shoulders, which Ani had never once seen anything but level, settled. His breath went out slowly through the long muzzle. His hand came and rested on Ani's shoulder, warm and heavy through the feathers, and stayed there.

"You may stop counting," Anubis said.

Ani laughed. It came out of him cracked and enormous, and the hall kept it too, along with everything else.

When he looked again towards the shadow beneath the beam, it was empty. She had gone as she had waited, unremarked. No god marked her going. Her hunger went with her, unmet, elsewhere, not his, and Ani understood that she had never once been his. His heart had spoken for him, and she had no business here.

Movement came from beside the shrine.

A figure stepped down out of the stillness there, tall and young and bright in the lamplight, with the fierce hooked head of a falcon and eyes that held the high sky. Horus, son of Isis, the presenter of the justified. Ani had worn that shape once, for an hour, over the Duat roads, borrowed gold, emerald wings. This one had been born to it, the way Ani had been born to a reed pen.

The falcon god came to him across the worn stone and stopped, and looked at him, and there was nothing in the look but welcome.

Horus took Ani's wrist in a warm sure grip, the grip of the living taking hold of the dead to bring them home, and turned him towards the throne.

CHAPTER ELEVEN: VINDICATION AND THE FIELD OF REEDS

Horus's hand was warm around his wrist, and it did not let go.

The warmth of it carried Ani the length of the worn floor, past the empty shadow beneath the beam, past Thoth's lectern, until the shrine filled his sight. The green face waited inside it, the tall crown, the crossed hands holding the crook and the flail. Close now, Ani felt that the god's stillness had weight, the way deep water has weight, and that it leaned towards him in welcome.

Horus stopped before the shrine and raised his voice, and the hall that had kept every word Ani spent in it kept this one too:

I have brought unto thee the Osiris Ani. His heart hath been weighed, and no sin hath been found in him. He is true of voice.

The Osiris Ani. He had spoken that name over himself all through the dark, at every gate. He heard it now spoken as a fact.

The green face did not change. The wrapped hands did not lift. But Osiris looked at him, the first time the god had looked at anything, and the look rested on Ani as the beam had rested, level and final. The lord of the West spoke once, in a voice like water arriving in a dry field:

"Come in, Osiris Ani."

The words went through Ani and took root. No gate had opened so quietly, and none had opened so far.

True of voice. The words held now, everywhere: every name spent, every confession kept, every spell written true stood in Thoth's black ink, never to be unwritten.

Anubis stood back from the shrine, where guides stand. Ani turned to him; everything he wanted to say came up at once, so he said the truest small thing he had: "You led me all the way."

"It was your road," Anubis said. For one breath his long face held something that was not work.

"There are others in the dark. I go back for them."

He went out the way they had come, unhurried. The guide's work ended here, at the boundary of the living-again. He had never once left a traveler short of it.

The door Horus brought him to stood on the far side of the throne, and it opened east.

Light came through it. Real light, the first since the seam of gold had closed behind him over the necropolis. Ani stood in it with his eyes streaming while the falcon whose shape he had once borrowed waited kindly beside him. When his sight came back, it came back to green.

Barley to the horizon. Emmer seven cubits high, twice a man's height, whispering in a wind that smelled of crushed reeds and river. Blue channels cut the fields in straight lines, water chuckling over stone, going somewhere useful. Along the banks the perfected dead were working, ploughing

and sowing and reaping and singing at it. This was the country his book had promised all along. No cloud, no dream. Egypt, without the death in it.

He had copied the words a hundred times and never believed them the way he believed them now, ankle-deep in warm irrigation mud. Let me plough there. Let me reap there. Let me eat there. Let me drink there, even as they are done upon earth.

A boat of eight oars carried them along the canals, each end shaped like a serpent's head; the god within her was Un-nefer, the beautiful one risen. On the farther bank grazed the seven cows and their bull, the herd that feeds the dead forever. Ani named them as he had named the gates, and they lifted their heads to their names, and the naming cost him nothing here.

Then the summons came.

A voice went out over the fields, calling names to the labor, to the dykes and the furrows and the carrying of sand. Ani's name was in it, and he stepped forward, old habit, ready to answer for himself.

And the answer came without him.

Small voices, far off and near at once, down the long thread of the tether from a sealed room under the Theban hills: Here I am.

The ushabtis. Baked clay, the height of his hand, his nephew's careful paint, each little figure lettered with its promise. He had stowed them almost as an afterthought, and someone had laughed over the lid, and the laugh had been good. Now the little workmen stood up in the dark of the tomb and answered in his place, and would answer tomorrow, and tomorrow, and forever, so the scribe could keep the day. Ani stood in the sun, bowing to the smallest provision of his own funeral.

Down the tether, past the answering, he felt the body resting: cedar and stone and the green scarab, kept and keeping, decay refused. His heart had gone home down that same thread to its place beneath the stone, and it beat there easy, his again, the witness returned to the body it had spoken for. The stake that had held him through the whole dark now held the world still for him. The ba was free, and the free ba had somewhere to come home to.

They were waiting at the landing, under a sycamore beside the water, at Qehqenet, the place of meeting.

His father and mother stood in the tree's shade, old and not old, themselves and better. His mother put her hand to his face, as she had when he was a boy with ink on his fingers. His father only looked at him, as he had looked the day Ani first brought him a clean column, and the looking was enough.

And behind them, at the door of a homestead with linen on the line and bread on the board, stood Tutu.

How she had crossed, and when, Ani did not ask. Time is counted differently in that country. She was here. Her hair was grey, because she had liked it grey. She looked him over the way she had looked over his scrolls, checking for errors, and found none worth mentioning.

“You took your time,” she said. “The bread’s fresh.”

He took her hand. It was warm, whole, and it did not come to him through stone, and it did not rest on papyrus over his heart, but in his own palm, holding. Thirty-one years she had set bread beside his elbow while he wrote. He had crossed the whole of the dark to stand here holding her hand in the sun, and nothing on the road, not fire, not gates, not even the balance, had been as hard as the first moment of believing it was real.

They ate. The bread tasted of barley and salt and morning, and the beer was cold from the channel, and his father told him about the harvest, which had been good, which would always be good.

In the evening Ani went down to the river, and the east was waiting.

On a black ridge, when nothing was promised, he had spoken a vow: I will rise with the dawn. The spent word came back to him now with interest. A place had been kept for him on the barque that moved through the night like a river of gold. Now he stood at its side, and the hymns he had copied all his life came up around him like a tide, and his lips moved with them.

The book’s name was his condition now. Coming forth by day. He had carried those words from the first red letters of his own scroll, heard them spoken over his sealed body, walked them through fire and gate and balance. As for him who knows this book: he shall come forth by day, in every form he desires, and he shall not perish. A true word, a million times true.

It was true. He was the proof of it, a scribe whose morning was coming.

The sky in the east went gold, and the barque turned towards it, and breath came to Ani the way the flood comes to a dry field, and he went out with the light, into the day, and the day went on forever.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

The Egyptian Book of the Dead is not a book the way this one is. Nobody wrote it from beginning to end. It is a family of spell collections, copied onto papyrus and coffins and tomb walls over fifteen hundred years, and its real Egyptian name is *Per em hru*, “the spells of coming forth by day.” Every copy was different: the family commissioning one chose the spells it wanted and had the dead person’s name written in. None of them tells a story from first page to last.

Ani’s copy is real. The Papyrus of Ani, made at Thebes around 1250 BCE, is the most complete one that survives: some twenty-four meters of spells in a fine hand, painted with scenes of the funeral, the gates, and the judgment. It sits today in the British Museum (catalogue number EA 10470), and the woman painted beside Ani is his wife, Tutu. Nearly everything in this book that comes from the ancient text comes from that scroll.

The quoted spells follow E. A. Wallis Budge’s English translation of that papyrus, published in 1895 and long out of copyright; where the ritual wording sounds old-fashioned, that is why. The scholars’ numbers (Spell 1, Spell 25, Spell 125) are a modern filing system, which is why nobody in the story ever speaks of “chapter 125.” To Ani they were simply the words, and he knew them the way you know songs.

Everything else, I should confess.

The first invention is the road. The collection is a toolkit, not a map; its spells come from different centuries and different needs, and none of them says to visit the Lake of Fire before the gates, or the gates before the judgment hall. The single journey of this book, tomb to horizon to dark roads to fire to gates to hall to field, is my stitching. Every stop on it is real. The order is mine.

Second, the gates. The spells themselves disagree about the underworld’s doors: one counts seven, another fourteen, another twenty-one. I chose the seven gates of Spell 144 and stayed with them. I also left out two other ancient works, the *Amduat* and the *Book of Gates*: royal texts sealed in kings’ tombs, with their own twelve-hour night journey. Ani owned the *Book of the Dead*, not those; his glimpse of Ra’s barque comes from his own scroll’s hymns, and nothing here is borrowed from the royal books.

Third, the working parts: the rule that a word of power, once stolen or spent, does not come back; the tether tying the *ba* to the body in the tomb; the heart climbing that thread into Ani’s hands; the scales swinging visibly before they settle. All are mine. The old paintings always show the balance already settled. I let it waver, because Ani’s fear had nowhere else to go.

Fourth, the people. Anubis really does lead the dead by the hand in the old paintings, and he really does tend the scales, but his character, his patience, his one unguarded moment at the balance, and every word he says along the road are invented. So is Tutu as you meet her here: she is a real

person, painted beside her husband, but the sources give her no voice, so her grief, her humor, and her grey hair are mine. So are the facts of Ani's life: his age, the length of his marriage, the quarrel over the gold ink, his nephew's paint on the ushabti box, the harvest lie he carried to the fire. And where the real Opening of the Mouth rite touched the mummy's face, here the touch falls on the statue in the chapel and breath travels down to the body through the likeness.

Fifth, the judgment's staging. In Spell 125 the traveler names the floor, the bolt, and the doorposts of the hall first, then confesses to the forty-two judges. I reversed the order so the confession could build towards the weighing, and I let Anubis speak the doors' names rather than test Ani on them. Ammit's going, once the scales balance, is mine; the old texts never show her leave. Osiris's single spoken line is mine as well: in the sources he is silent on his throne, and I could not bring Ani all that way to a closed door.

Sixth, the ending: the reunion with Tutu, her crossing unexplained, the bread and beer, the parents waiting under the sycamore, the ushabtis' small voices answering from the tomb, and the last image of breath arriving like the flood. All invented. The spell for the Field of Reeds really does show the dead ploughing, reaping, and meeting their parents at Qehqenet, and the ushabti spell really promises that the figures will answer. But the spell gives geography and duties, not feelings. The feelings are mine.

What I did not invent matters more. The spells set in italics throughout are real, from Ani's own scroll in Budge's translation. The names of the gates and their guardians, the forty-two judges' names, the feather of Maat, the verdict *maa-kheru*, true of voice: all real. The Field of Reeds as farmland, canals and wheat twice a man's height, is the ancient vision, not my improvement on it. And the promise in the title is the oldest thing in the book: that the dead might leave the tomb, walk in the light, and come home again. Three thousand years on, that papyrus still sits behind glass in London, and the scribe's name is still legible in his own ink. Which was, after all, the entire point.

NAMES AND HOW TO SAY THEM

Ancient Egyptian was written without most vowels, so every English rendering is a careful guess. These are approximations, offered so you can read aloud with confidence. There is no wrong way to welcome Ani home.

Name Say it like Who or what it is -----
----- Ani AH-ni The
scribe; our traveler

Tutu TOO-too Ani's wife

Anubis ah-NOO-bis The jackal-headed god who guides the dead; his old Egyptian name is Anpu, IN-poo

Osiris oh-SIGH-ris Judge of the dead, lord of the West

Horus HOR-us The falcon god who presents the vindicated to his father

Thoth THOHTH, to rhyme with "both" Scribe of the gods, who records the verdict

Maat MAH-aht Truth and right order; both the goddess and her feather

Ammit AH-moot The devourer who waits beside the scales

Ra RAH The sun god, crossing the night in his barque

Isis EYE-sis Mourner and protector, the wife of Osiris

Nephthys NEF-thiss Her sister; the two stand at the head and foot of the mummy

Nut NOOT The sky, named in Ani's litany of members

Ptah puh-TAH The craftsman god, named in the litany

Seth SETH The storm god, named in the litany

Hathor HATH-or Goddess of love and of the western horizon, named in the litany

Neith NEETH The ancient weaver goddess, named in the litany

Nu NOO The first waters, named in the litany

Seb SEB The earth god; the hall's threshold is his ox

Sebek SEH-bek The crocodile god; the hall's lock is named for him

Un-nefer oon-NEH-fer "The beautiful one," a name of Osiris risen; the god in the canal boat

Sekhet-Aaru SEK-et AH-roo The Field of Reeds; paradise

Qehqenet keh-KEH-net The meeting place in the Field of Reeds

Thebes THEEBZ Ani's city, on the Nile

the Duat DOO-aht The underworld; the dark country of the road

Per em hru PAIR em HROO The spells' true title: "coming forth by day"

maa-kheru MAH-ah KEH-roo "True of voice"; the verdict of vindication

heka HEH-kah Magic; the neutral force the spells work with

ba BAH The soul as a human-headed bird, free to travel

ka KAH The life-force, fed by offerings

akh AHK The shining, transfigured spirit; the goal of the rites

ushabti oo-SHAB-tee The small servant figures who answer "Here I am"

Apep AH-pep The great serpent of chaos, enemy of the sun

The names of the seven gates' doorkeepers, watchers, and heralds, and of the forty-two judges of the hall, are written as Budge transliterated them in 1895. Long ones like Sekhet-hra-asht-arū resist tidy English syllables; say them slowly and they will do. The shorter ones, such as Unhat (OON-haht) and Hu-kheru (hoo-KEH-roo), are easier friends.

A SMALL GLOSSARY

akh: The transfigured spirit, the state the whole journey aims at: a person made shining and effective after every rite is done and judgment passed. Ani first hears the promise on the ridge above Ra's barque, where the spells speak of making the akh excellent.

ba: The part of a person that can travel: personality with wings, shown as a bird with a human head. Ani spends the journey in this shape, free to fly but tied to his body in the tomb.

Book of the Dead: The modern nickname for the *Per em hru*, "the spells of coming forth by day," the family of spell collections buried with the dead. Ani's copy is the papyrus sealed beside him in Chapter One.

Duat: The underworld, the dark mapped country of rivers, caverns, and gates that the dead and the night sun both travel. Not a place of punishment; a road with dangers on it.

Field of Reeds (Sekhet-Aaru): Paradise as the Egyptians imagined it: a perfected Egypt of canals, green fields, and wheat twice a man's height, where the dead plough, reap, eat, and meet their own. Ani finds it smells of crushed reeds and river.

heart scarab: A green stone beetle set over the mummy's heart, carved with a plea asking the heart not to testify against its owner at the weighing. Ani paid the stone-cutter himself, and he remembers the inscription when his heart goes onto the pan.

heka: Magic, understood by the Egyptians as a neutral force of the universe, a tool rather than a sin. The whole Book of the Dead is a manual of heka, and using it is never cheating.

ka: The life-force, the vital double that stays with the body and is fed by offerings of bread and beer from the living. It is why Tutu's side of the work, the offering table and the statue, matters.

maa-kheru: "True of voice," the verdict spoken when the scales balance; the one word Ani spends the whole book earning. Thoth speaks it first, and then the forty-two judges take it up.

Maat: Truth, justice, and the right order of things, imagined both as a goddess and as a single ostrich feather. The heart is not punished for sin; it is weighed against her feather, and it must balance.

Negative Confession: The long declaration before the forty-two judges of the hall, in which the traveler names each judge and denies a specific wrong: "I have not stolen," "I have not caused tears." Forty-two declarations, and in this book some of them cost Ani a memory.

Opening of the Mouth: The funeral rite in which a priest touched the face of the dead with an adze to restore breath, sight, and speech. It is the hinge of the whole story: no voice, no spells, no road.

second death: The only damnation this world knows: not torture, but ending. A heart devoured, a name erased, a body decayed. The spells against it are the ones that say “for not dying again.”

ushabti: A small servant figure buried with the dead, lettered with its promise to answer “Here I am” when the owner is summoned to work in the fields of paradise. Ani’s were painted by his nephew, and they keep their promise.

weighing of the heart: The judgment itself: the heart in one pan of the great scales, the feather of Maat in the other, Anubis tending the beam, Thoth recording, Ammit waiting beneath. The old paintings always show it balanced. So does this book, eventually.

SOURCE NOTE

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