



MYTHOPOUCH

RETELLING

COMING FORTH BY DAY

THE BOOK OF THE DEAD (PAPYRUS OF ANI)

VOL. 1 BURIAL AND GOING FORTH

Chapters 1-4

A modern educational version for readers aged 15 and up

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CONTENTS

THIS VOLUME

VOL. 1 BURIAL AND GOING FORTH

Chapter One: The Day of Burial

Chapter Two: The Opening of the Mouth

Chapter Three: Going Forth by Day

Chapter Four: Into the Duat: Thieves of Words

ALL VOLUMES IN THIS RETELLING

Vol. 1 Burial and Going Forth (this file)

Vol. 2 Names, Fire and Gates

Vol. 3 Judgment and the Field of Reeds

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.

SOURCE NOTE

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