

524 BC - Siwa Oasis - Ancient Egyptian Empire

I keep my eyes trained on the setting sun. It is nearly dusk on the fifth and final day of the ceremony to honor Amun-Re before His temple and oracles will be open to pilgrims. Which means I have been on a mountain, standing and chanting for the past five daylight hours with my arms and eyes always raised and pointing towards the sun. But it is worth it. There is nothing I wouldn't do for my God. Even though my body aches all over, the balls of my feet went numb two days ago, and my quivering arms feel as heavy as stone, I am happy and fulfilled as I do my duty to serve.

The wind whips the desert sands from below against my nearly bare skin. My long white linen skirt's hip high slits allow the wind and sand to reach almost all of my legs, and the thin strap of cloth tied around my chest for support doesn't offer much protection either. The sand stings as it strikes and adds grit to my already parched mouth. Rather than curse this obstacle though, I choose to be thankful that my hair is tightly braided away from my face so it is not also in my mouth and my eyes are not obscured from His bright beauty.

The last of the golden orb disappears below the lowest dune on the horizon. I feel relief and sadness; the end is always bittersweet. I finish the last lines of the prayer, and gracefully lower my arms. The silence hangs for a few moments before I turn around to face my fellow holy men.

I nod to the priests. They use the same solemn deliberateness I've displayed, to walk around the dais on which I stand. They are at the far east corner, the resting place of Amun's statue. They carefully tip and pick up the seven foot sculpture. Meanwhile, my fellow oracles fall into line behind me. The priests form two lines and their acolytes place the statue on their shoulders. Their acolytes and our trainees light pitch torches and surround us. Our procession starts down the mountain and into the lush oasis forests that surround the Temple of Amun, our home.

The vegetation is dense and the torch light casts eerie shadows on the palm trees around us. I observe some of the acolytes' trepidation as their steps become less sure and our procession slows. "Fear not the darkness!" I call to them. "Apep would not dare impede our steps when we travel with AmunRe." The words bolster their spirits and our pace picks back up. I wish to keep speaking to them of the greatness of our God and keep morale high, but my throat is sore and dry since I've spent the past five days chanting. So I call out to a particularly long-winded oracle.

"Brother Omen, what do you think of our surroundings?"

I can hear the smile in his words as he begins to pontificate, "Amun's powers of life and creation are evident in our every step, Sister Mirror! Do you hear the rustling of brush as the jungle's animals move away

from our feet? Do you feel the water in the air clinging to our skin? Do you smell the exhalations of the plants around us? All of this is a direct consequence of the Sun God's powers! Can you feel how blessed we are to be —" His words distract the young from their fearful thoughts and light our way as much as the torches. Omen does not disappoint me.

Half way through our journey, we come to the natural springs. Our servants are already here and prepared to ritually cleanse us. The traveling torches are smothered out since the spring has semipermanent torches strategically placed for the maximum amount of light. The best acolytes and trainees are given the honor of holding Amun-Re. They will hold Him aloft all night while the Oracles and Priests are cleansed.

The servants separate us, and lead the priests off towards one pool, while the eleven oracles are led to another. We are stripped of our prayer clothes and left to soak in the lukewarm but naturally bubbling waters for the next few hours in privacy. It is the only time we will get to ourselves for the foreseeable future and we savor it. As soon as the servants are out of earshot our formal affectations slip off of us as easily as our clothes did.

"Oh thank the Gods, this water feels wonderful!" Tracks groans as he leans against the side of the spring and audibly cracks his aged back. Many of the others do the same, stretching and twisting their aching bodies. The past five days have taken a physical toll on all of us. I am so tired; I can barely move. I choose to simply float on the buoyant salt water, relishing the feeling of weightlessness. I stare at the starry sky and think about nothing, losing myself in the white noise of the other's chatter.

Soon I feel ripples in the water. Someone is moving towards me. Sun takes my arm in his hands and begins to massage the sore tissue of my left tricep. I can't stop the sounds of relief that pass my lips, and he motions to Fire to come over and join him. Fire stops rinsing out her hair and moves to massage my right arm.

"I remember when I used to lead the ceremony." He says nostalgically. "My body would ache for weeks afterward." I can hear both the remembered pain and how he misses it in his voice. It feels like I can hear my future, "but then Entrails, and her magic fingers joined our ranks," he nods in her direction across the pool where she is massaging Particle's feet. "After she'd massage me in these waters, my pains would fade within days. Her gifts are great and she is generous to have taught us her ways." He pulls and pops each of my fingers separately before focusing on my palms.

"I will have to find an appropriate gift of thanks to her and to you two. I can feel the weight of stress being released from me." I mummer appreciatively.

It means much to me that Sun treats me with kindness and understanding. I know it was not (and is not) easy for him, a diviner of the sun, to be replaced by me, a diviner of reflections, as the Head Oracle in The Temple of Amun. He is both powerful and a good leader. I did not want to take the post from him, but Amun-Re made His wishes clear to us, and we will always follow His will. Sun's humility and grace make me hold him in higher regards than I have any other person in my lifetime.

"How did she learn such things?" Fire asks Sun, while moving her massage from my arm to my leg. My toes twitch reflexively. "Was it a part of the life she left?" She refers to the individuality we all leave behind in the service of our God. We sacrifice everything we were, including our names, and become His instruments only. It's why we call each other by our skills, that is all we are now.

Sun winces, "No, not in her past life. I made the mistake of asking that once too. I will tell you for your curiosity's sake, but I'll try to be more delicate than she was when she told me." He thinks for a moment and moves to my shoulders, neck and head. "She says that her animal sacrifices are better to read and tastier for Amun if they're relaxed when she kills them. She experimented with them and learned how muscles like to be touched to lull the animal into a hypnotic state."

I realize that I have been lulled into a state of complicit vulnerability below their hands and they feel the immediate tension that comes with that realization. They both laugh and we all look over at Entrails, the most pleasant disturbing person you'll ever meet. She flashes us a thin smile from across the way. We all shiver and smile back in response.

"If it's disturbing to you now, imagine how it was for me being directly under her hands as she explained the different methods of trial and error she'd gone through." He makes his voice a wispy falsetto, "I found that if you can flip and rub the crocodile's belly then it doesn't even flinch when you slit it's throat." He returns his voice to normal, "Care to guess what part of me she was massaging when she said that?" We laugh as he means for us to, and my body relaxes under their hands again. They rub every part of me down until I feel like jelly, and then I return the favor.

Before I start though, I call Rune over to us. As the newest oracle, she had not been taught Entrails's ways and I think now would be a good time for her to learn. I demonstrate on Sun and she practices on Fire. From Fire's sounds, I think Rune is going to be a natural masseuse.

"So Rune," I ask drawing the shy girl out of her shell, "what did you think of your first beginning ceremony as an oracle?"

“I felt blessed and honored to witness you calling Amun’s blessing to us.” She dutifully recites. I know she thinks she’s still being tested. It’s a confusing time when you first move from trainee to oracle.

“If you want us to trust you, your answers have to sound like they’re not scroll read,” Soul comments from behind us. Soul has always been more direct than tactful. He says the dead have no patience for camel dung, and neither does he. He cautions us all to learn the ways of the dead before we join them. We tell him we’ll enjoy the ways of the living while we can.

“I didn’t mean — I wasn’t trying to — that’s not— I’m sorry.” Rune stutters. “Don’t mind him.” Particle calls from the other side of the pool. “His heart leads his tongue, he just has less of a heart than some.” Soul shrugs at her statement, none of our words really matter to him unless they’re being channeled from Amun. He goes back to his circle back massage with Sky, Number, and Omen.

Rune blushes and clarifies, “I did feel very honored to be an oracle in the ceremony,” then she lowers her voice and adds, “but I did also wonder why we don’t bring kneeling mats with us.”

“A thought we’ve all had more than once.” I assure her. “And there are reasons. The public one is that we should have nothing between us and Amun’s creation. The hidden one is that we display more power if we show how the Gods enable us to perform great acts. How many people do you think can stare directly at the sun for five days and not have their eyes ruined? Only those so blessed. We are the earthly representatives of the Gods, and our small sacrifice of personal comfort helps to empower and enforce the people’s faith.”

She gapes at me and I can see she has more questions. I wonder if she will believe in herself enough to ask them. She’ll need to find her inner strength soon. She opens her mouth, but is interrupted before she can speak.

“It is time,” Sky announces as he star gazes.

We all stand and leave the water. Rune is confused, but that is expected. The next ceremony to honor Amun-Re is kept secret from all but the fully trained and ordained oracles. I take her hand and we all walk into the secluded forest together.

We come to a small circular clearing in the brush, and the oracles sit in a pattern to form the points and corners of a five pointed star. I place Rune in her spot and then grab a branch to draw the lines that connect us. When I connect the last line to the first a burst of wind sends all the common forest floor debris out of the circular area, leaving only us and the lines undisturbed. I hear Rune’s sharp inhalation as she feels the power gathering around us. I walk painstakingly slow, heel to toe, around the perimeter of the star, making sure to

leave no space between my steps. I leave no footprints, no dirt clings to my skin. The lines illuminate as I pass them, until the entire star is glowing. I make my way to the center of the star and take my seat.

“Tonight, we are going to offer Amun-Re the free use of our bodies,” I explain to Rune. “If He chooses, He will inhabit one or more of us and use our flesh to carry out his earthy desires.”

Her calf eyes seem to take up most of her face, and she hesitantly asks, “What does that mean?”

I smile and try to let my calm and acceptance seep into my tone so that it will pass into her. “It means we’re presenting Him the option to take a respite from being a God so that He can enjoy the simple pleasures of being mortal momentarily. We offer Him the use of our bodies and accept that He has full control to do whatever He would like with them. We understand that it is always His option and well within His power to take, but we offer it as a gift freely given. It is a way to show our gratitude at being His chosen blessed, our trust in Him in all things, and our utter devotion to being in His service.”

Her eyes lose their nervousness and I see excitement start to rise from inside her. I smile at the sign. She will truly be one of us after all. “You mean, I might exist in the same body as Amun tonight?” She questions.

“It is possible, and I know the thought is exhilarating, but remember it is always His choice. If He does not choose to accept the gift tonight, He has His own reasons and we must be as happy and secure with that choice as we would be otherwise. You must be willing to completely accept His decisions as the right ones.” I hold her gaze and let that truth sink into her before I continue. “Up until now, you have said and done all the right things to rise from being a trainee to being accepted as an oracle. Amun has shown His favor upon you, as we’ve all seen, in the strength of your ability to channel His guidance. Do you now freely choose to offer all of yourself to Amun-Re for whatever He may or may not ask of you?”

“Of course.” She answers without hesitation. The shy girl has faded and the oracle beneath is shining through. She may not yet have confidence in herself, but it is clear that there is no lack in her faith.

“Then reach for your heart now. Invite His will to you as you do when you read your runes. Open yourself to being His vessel. When He guides you to, join our chant and turn yourself over.”

I stop concentrating on Rune then and turn my focus inward. I hold a note and let the sound lead me through the rhythms of my breath. I follow the flow of my breaths until they lead me to my heartbeat. I focus on the sensation of being. Time slows and I feel the pump of life through each of my heart’s four chambers. In the time between the beats, I start to hear the words. I let my heart guide my tongue and chant the words given

to me by my God. The words grow louder and louder until they drown out my breaths, then my heartbeat, then my thoughts, then me.

When I become aware again, I'm still outside of my body. I feel as though my entire spirit was being embraced only moments ago. I feel cold without it, but then I hear a voice speaking to me in low loving tones. I know that it is Him. He doesn't always speak in words, but I always hear what He says. Tonight He shows me a man in a faraway land. The man is sitting on the edge of his bedding, staring at his home's straw walls. His wife is sleeping soundly unaware. Their children are on floor mats in the same room, also lost in sleep.

Suddenly I am the man. I am worried about my family's future. There is talk of war again. I am still injured from our last battle. I do not think I'll make it back again. I look at my oldest son. He is eight. I hope he is ready for what is to come, because I cannot stop it from arriving.

My eyes open. I am back in the clearing with the other oracles. They all came back to themselves at the same time I did. We look around us for signs of change. Soul is dripping wet as if he has just this moment emerged from a large body of water. A pile of bird bones and a separate pile of feathers are both in front of Fire. Tracks is fully dressed. Other than that, we are all in the same positions and unchanged.

Entrails leans over and licks Soul's bicep. He flinches away from her, affronted by the uninvited touch. She acts as though she doesn't see his irritation. "The water lacks salt." She tells him, "It did not come from the springs." She leans back again, content to have her curiosity sated.

Sky looks up, "We have only been in this clearing for two hours." He lets us know.

Rune blinks at him, "I don't remember any of it." She thinks aloud. "I reached for my heart, heard the words, began to chant and then I opened my eyes. Did two hours really pass?"

"Yes." I answer. "We should return to the pool. The servants will come looking for us soon." The oracles stand. We walk just outside of the clearing. I turn back to face the circle, and throw the stick I used to draw the star lines into the center. The drawn star stops shining, the debris rushes back in to cover the ground, and tree tops move to fill in the opening to the sky.

"What do you remember Mirror?" Number asks me as we walk.

"Stop the sands, you all remember things?" Rune asks worriedly.

"No," Sun assures her. "Only Mirror ever remembers anything past the chanting."

"So," Number prompts, "What do you remember?"

My heart hurts as I think about that distant man's last thoughts. "I remember a little boy," I tell them, "who's not ready to be a man."

One hour before dawn, our procession is cleansed, organized, and ready to finish its journey back to the temple. The acolytes look a little worse for wear, but you can see the pride in their eyes. They all made it through the whole night, and they are grateful the Gods chose to bless them with strength and perseverance. They will make fine priests. I smile at the thought. Our little oasis is a great distance from the Nile with its populated cities like Heliopolis or Memphis, but I wouldn't trade my life here for anything. All of the people at this temple are here for the right reasons. Even the unpleasant ones, I think as Soul pops into my peripheral vision, are truly dedicated to the Gods and not merely playing petty politics and power games. I'm sure this is why we are the most sought after oracles in the region, our gifts are true, pure, and earned.

The procession starts forward. It's funny, how the beginning of the day and the end of the day can look so similar, but feel so different. I think it's the difference between looking forward and looking back. With hope and possibility speeding our way, the second leg of our journey flies by on falcon's wings. The sun is just cresting the tree tops when we approach the village homes outside the city walls.

The men working on patching the karsheef walls and olive leaf roofs are the first to spot us. They hurry down from the huts and we hear their cries as they call down to the waiting spectators. The sounds of scurrying people come from around the walls; but by the time we round the corner, the villagers and pilgrims are all kneeling in an orderly outline along the main path. They prostrate themselves as we pass. Their mass scale murmured prayers vibrate the air around us.

A small toddler stares at me and points, her mother quickly adjusts the child's behavior. "You are not to look directly at the Gods or Their vessels." She explains firmly, "You must cast your eyes down and always show respect." The child nods solemnly. "Now do you remember the morning prayer?" Another nod. The child joins the mother on the ground and they both pray.

Soon the village and the walls are behind us and we are climbing the steep steps of the Temple's stone base. The priests should be flagging under the weight of the statue, but their faces are alight with ecstasy as we finish the final steps. The statue is placed on a base in its honored alcove beside the pylon. My fellow oracles flank me as I walk to the front of the Temple's overlook and face the spectators. I raise my hands and announce to the exuberant crowd, "Amun's blessing are upon us. His ears are open to us. People of the East and People of the West, all eyes that see the sun and come to entreat the Lord of Gods, come to us. As the messengers of two lands, what you say we shall pass to Amun."

The Temple is now open to petitioners.”

Draft – Retta Bodhaine