

Onnophris Beck

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OnnophrisBeck@gmail.com

SIOUSIR IN THE HOUSE OF LIFE

by Onnophris Beck

An old man died. His death was not sad, nor was it terribly surprising. He died at the end of a long and comfortable life. The old man himself wasn't even upset by it. One day, while he was collecting honey, he suddenly began to feel very tired. He went inside to take a nap, and as he was drifting off, he realized that he was dying. He felt afraid for a moment, but his fear soon vanished. The world had not been a nice place to live in for some time, and he was content to leave it. He didn't know what to expect after he died and he didn't care. He felt that this was right. It was time to go. His only indication that something had gone terribly wrong came when he woke up.

The old man awoke in a small rectangular pit. He was curled up on his side with his knees pulled up to his chest. The bottom of the pit was cold and smelt of mold and damp. When he tried to stretch his legs, his feet pressed against a wall of packed earth. The hole was too short for him to extend his legs. In fact, it seemed to fit him perfectly, provided that he lie on

his side and curl into a ball.

Fortunately the pit was not very deep, just deep enough that his body was below the ground. He sat up and looked at the sky above him. It was blue, but not the light blue he had come to expect. This sky was dark blue. A pale sun shone in the dark blue sky as though seen from deep underwater.

He peeked over the edge of the hole. All he could see of the ground around the hole was bare earth. The forest began a short distance away--a dense and dark forest of tall palms. In the dim light of the drowning sun it was impossible to see any farther than the trees at the edge of the clearing. Beyond that was all darkness.

He pushed himself up and climbed out of the pit. As he struggled to stand, his stiff joints ached painfully with each movement. Slowly he rose to his feet and wiped the dust from his arms and legs. He wore only a dirty loincloth. His arms and legs were frighteningly thin. His skin was leathery and a few shades darker than he remembered it being when he was alive, as though he had been out in the sun for a long time.

He didn't know how he had gotten there, but he knew that he couldn't stay. He needed to find a better place than an empty hole in the ground in the middle of the woods. First he needed to decide which way to go, but every direction was the same. There were no openings for paths, and no part of the forest looked more inviting than any other. The entire clearing was ringed by the trunks of fallen palm trees, or so he thought at the time.

He chose a direction and walked cautiously toward the trees. As he neared a fallen plam trunk, it began to shuffle among the dead fronds at the edge of the forest. One end of the trunk raised itself to his level and looked at him with yellow glowing eyes. Icy fear dripped down through his bones and froze him in place. What he had imagined to be a circle of fallen tree trunks was really the largest snake he had ever seen. It flicked its forked tongue toward his face and regarded him with a terrifying--but not an entirely unfriendly--expression.

"You ssstay here," it hissed.

The old man whirled around in the dust and ran back to the pit. He dove in head first and scrambled around to look at the snake. He cautiously peeked over the edge of the hole. The snake had not moved. It still stood with its head raised off of the ground at the edge of the forest, regarding him with bright yellow eyes. It stared at him for a moment, then closed its eyes and lowered its head to the ground.

The old man sat down with his back against the wall of the pit. He now had the answer to what happened after he died, and it was even less pleasant than he had ever imagined. He was trapped in a hole in a clearing in the forest, guarded by enormous snake with glowing eyes. He tried to think of an escape plan, but if he tried to make a run for it, surely the snake would catch him before he even reached the trees. All he could do was wait.

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Siousir sat in the back of the boat, his right hand on the steering oar, his left hand shielding his eyes from the

afternoon sun that shone through the sail. The steady upstream breeze held the sail taught, except for the occasional ruffle, and cooled his back so that the warm sun was both an annoyance and a comfort. He turned his eyes to the green water of the river that flowed slowly past the handle of the oar. He moved the oar slightly, and bits of sunlight danced on the new ripples it made, but the movement was not enough to shift their course.

He knew exactly how much pressure he would need to turn the boat and how far he could move the oar in the slow-moving water without effect. He had been steering since early that morning, when his father appointed him helmsman for the day, as he had so many times before. His father, Hamashil, was somewhere on the deck ahead, untying and retying ropes, adjusting the sail, preparing for some unspoken future need.

Hamashil was a kind but practical man, not tall, but stout and strong. The bronze skin of his body and head was darkened by years spent under the divine sun of Kemi. He had insisted that his son help with the yearly voyage as soon as the boy was old enough to carry a jar of honey. "It's a family business," he had said. "Everyone must do their part."

This was Siousir's tenth journey up the entire length of the great river Yor. Though thin and awkward, he could do anything that the trip required of him with the expertise of many years' experience. He knew how to steer like a seasoned ferryman, and he could keep their course in the middle of the wide river without giving his task much thought. Now he watched the sunlight dance on the ripples around the oar. He listened to

the splash of water against the hull, the gentle creak of rope against wood, and the soft flapping of the sail.

As he sat listening to the familiar sounds of the river, the faint aroma of smoke and spices wafted over the boat from somewhere up ahead. Siousir's heart leapt as the smell brought with it vivid memories. It was the smell of a city, and he knew from a decade of traveling the same course that this city was Ne, the greatest city in all of Kemi, the greatest city in the history of the world.

He looked up to see his father picking his way over the deck to the back of the boat. Hamashil met his son's eyes and smiled brightly.

"Why don't you let me steer for a while." he said.

"Sure!" Siousir replied. He let go of the oar and squeezed past his father. As Hamashil sat next to the steering oar, Siousir clambered over their cargo all the way to the prow, where he could watch the city pass by.

As they rounded a bend in the river, the House of the Hidden Sun appeared on the left bank. Behind the magnificent boats in its harbor rose gold-tipped pinnacles sparkling with sunlight and shining walls of stone covered with colorful depictions of gods and kings. Then came the city itself, docks packed with ships great and small from the ends of the earth, and beyond these the sloping walls of multistory adobe buildings, painted with patterns of red and green, interspersed with white stone towers and domes of various sizes. As they passed in front of the docks, he heard the noise of the city, a

commotion of shouting people and rumbling carts, punctuated by the occasional complaints of overworked donkeys. The wind in the sail carried them silently past, unnoticed by the busy people on the shore. The sound faded, and the land became green again, but the wind continued to bring the smell of the city long after it had disappeared from view. For a short while, their lonely little boat was a part of something bigger, something that really mattered.

It was a comfortable boat, and his father loved it dearly. It had only a single square sail, but it was well built of fine cedar that filled the air with an earthy fragrance on warm sunny days. And it was big enough to carry everything they needed. Packed neatly in the hold were all of the trappings of a life on the river: baskets of fruit, dried fish, and charcoal, jars of barley and incense, a tent, and the carefully disassembled pieces of a cart. Most of the deck was covered with their cargo: ceramic jars of all sizes filled with honey and wax and row upon row of neatly stacked cylindrical clay beehives. But there was still room left at the back for a little cabin made of woven reeds where he and his father slept when it was cold, and a space on the deck where they slept when it was warm. It was still early in proyi, the season when the weather first started to warm, and it had been cold most nights during their journey. But now it was daytime, and Siousir was glad to be at the front of the boat, where the sun warmed his skin and the breeze cooled it.

They were going to Yev, the highest city on the Yor, which

stood on an island in the middle of the river. The banks on either side of Yev were the first to fill with water when the river flooded in the season of oshi and the first to dry out again when the flood receded. As soon as the land emerged, the fields would produce wildflowers in abundance, and the orchards would begin to bloom. The farmers would be glad to see his father bringing his bees to bless their crops, and the people in the town would pay a good price for the honey and wax that the divine children of the Sun made in their round clay houses.

They had been on the river for more than a month, sailing upstream against the current with a steady breeze in the sail, stopping to buy supplies in a few of the towns and to camp on the shore, where they could build a cookfire and place their blankets on mats of soft rushes. A week before, they had camped near an enormous sycomore tree, and some of their baskets still held the round orange figs that Siousir had climbed up to collect. They needed to sail for five more days to reach Yev at the top of the world, where the river became choked with boulders and rapids and allowed them to go no further.

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Two days after they passed the great city of Ne, Siousir lay on his belly in the front of the boat. The sun shone on his skin, the tan of his body and head interrupted only by a white linen loincloth. The breeze that was driving the boat cooled his back and brought the smell of honey from the jars on the deck. From behind him came the occasional whistle of rope against wood. He rose slightly and twisted his head around to see his father

pulling a line through a wooden eyelet, most of its length still coiled on the deck. The sail was full, and the water drifting past showed that they were making their usual steady progress, so it was impossible to guess what his father was doing.

Whatever it was, he hadn't asked Siousir for help, so it probably wasn't very important. There was always a need to be doing something, even when there was nothing to be done.

As Siousir watched the river flowing by and thought about these things, a deeply buried fear rose up and washed over him like cold water. He sat up and looked to his right in the direction of the shore. In the distance, he could see a green ribbon of land and behind it the yellow mountains that separated their world from Amenti, the land of the dead. Siousir had made the trip up and down the river ten times already. He knew the scenery by heart, but each year it seemed that the green strip of land was smaller. The river flowed among the trunks of trees and dragged against low-hanging branches.

It was the same on the opposite bank, the water seemed to reach almost to the foot of the mountains. They were sailing in the middle of the stream, the same distance from the shore on either side, yet the land seemed farther away than it ever had before. He knew that it wasn't his imagination. The river Yor had always risen and fallen, but recently it had been rising more and falling less.

What if it kept going? What if the springs of Noun had burst? Would the green valley disappear under the river? Would their boat find a place to land against the barren cliffs? How would



the bees visit the tops of fruit trees that remained forever submerged? He knew what his father would say if he brought it up, what he always said when Siousir asked questions like this, "The Yor does as he pleases. Who are you to command the gods?" Then he would be angry at his son for asking annoying questions. And he was right after all. What could they do to change the course of a great river?

Siousir had no choice but to put the worry out of his mind. He looked back into the boat and noticed a white shape peeking out from behind one of the boards near his feet. He turned around to spy on his father. Hamashil had finished pulling the entire length of rope through the eyelet. Now he was holding the frayed end, trying to feed it back through in the opposite direction. Siousir shouted to him, "What are you doing back there?"

His father looked up and squinted in his direction before going back to his work. Siousir thought he heard him mutter a reply, but he couldn't make out any words, so he raised his voice a bit more, "What are you doing?"

"Trying to fix the boat!" Hamashil shouted back.

Siousir turned around, reached behind the boards, and pulled out a wax figure. <sup>1</sup>Then he fished around with his free hand and found a short bit of reed with one pointed end, his carving tool. He glanced behind him again to check on his father. Hamashil was still busy with his battle against the rope and his

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1. This transition is too abrupt. Make him say something like "He knew there was nothing wrong with the boat."

own restlessness, so Siousir turned back and got to work.

He didn't think that he was doing anything wrong, not really, but he knew that he should hide his carving. Two years before he had spent the entire journey crafting a wax hippopotamus. It stood on its hind legs like it was rising out of the water, kicking its front feet in the air. Its body was covered with engravings of the lotus flowers that often surrounded the hippos they saw in the river. At the time, he made no effort to hide what he was doing. His father simply hadn't noticed. The night they arrived in Yev, as they sat next to the fire in their new camp, Siousir proudly showed the wax hippo to his father. Before he could react, Hamashil angrily snatched the figure from his hands and threw it into the fire. In an instant, the delicate carving melted and then burned. When Hamashil recovered his senses he said only, "waste of wax," and looked away.

Siousir suspected that his father really thought that it was a waste of time, never mind the wax. After all, they had wax to spare. They used it to patch leaks in the hull without taking much care to avoid waste, and they routinely let candles burn into the night. It had never fetched a high price in the market anyway. Even if it had, they could have put it back into the jar. It wasn't wasted until it burned.

He didn't know whether his father would be angry about the waste of wax this time, but he knew that it was better not to find out, so he carved in secret. He had been working on the figure off and on for more than a week, and it had finally begun to resemble a miniature person. The tiny man stood upright, legs

together, arms crossed over his chest. Siousir had engraved a tattoo onto the man's chest just above his wrists, a shape that he had seen on a building a few days before, like a wide-open eye staring straight ahead. He might pretend that he knew what it meant if anyone asked, but the truth was that he didn't know how to read the ancient script. His father didn't either, and there was no one else to teach him.

His carving was nearly finished, all except for the face that is, which was still a featureless white ball. He had not intended to leave the face undone when he began the carving, but somehow he kept putting it off. He knew from previous attempts that carving a face would be difficult. He imagined himself doing it so badly that it ruined the rest of his work. Yet, as the figure neared completion, his fear only increased. Now that he had made everything else exactly as he had imagined it, there was that much more to lose. But there was also no way to put it off any further. He had to press forward or give up.

Siousir leaned over the rail to look at his reflection in the water and then began to carve his likeness into the figure. As the tiny man's face slowly began to resemble his own, he felt his confidence rising, along with a sudden sense of urgency. There would be work to do when they arrived in Yev, but for now he had time to spare, and he was determined to finish his carving while he could.

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The city of Yev appeared in the middle of the river two days later. The final light of the day shone on the town, and the

adobe walls of the houses glowed a deep red to match the sunset. Hamashil steered toward the right bank, where their first customer of the season lived on a small farm. He carefully guided the boat between two partially submerged palm groves and brought it parallel to the shore. It was dark by the time they tied up and began to unload. Siousir stood on the shore cupping a small clay bowl that contained a burning candle, while his father set up their camp in the flickering light.

The sunrise woke them early the next morning. They got up and bathed in the river. Siousir shaved the stubble from his head with a bronze razor. He would not dishonor the bees by approaching them with hair on his head. His father had no need of a razor, no stubble had formed on his head for many years. They both dressed in clean linen tunics and tied braided sashes around their waists. While his father stirred the fire to life, Siousir snuck the wax figure out from under his blanket and tucked it into his belt. Soon he would see his old friends, and perhaps they would appreciate his artwork. At least they wouldn't hate it as much as his father did.

Siousir and Hamashil both set to work unloading the pieces of their cart from the hold and reassembling them on the shore. When they had finished, Hamashil looked at his son and then gestured toward the cart.

"You'd better try it out first," he said.

Siousir climbed into the bed and bounced up and down a few times. The wood creaked with each bounce, but the cart held together. Hamashil smiled proudly.

"As sturdy as a king's chariot," he said. "You do good work."

While Siousir climbed down, Hamashil picked up a bowl of incense, added a few embers from the fire, and passed it to his son without a word. Then he climbed onto the boat and stood on the deck, staring through the trees toward the mountains of the horizon. While Siousir watched and waited, Hamashil stood in silence. Suddenly he seemed to remember his intentions, and he bent down to pick up a large jar of honey. He stood up with the jar under one arm.

"I'm going to deliver this honey to Koshto," he said. "I need you to unload some of the hives while I'm gone. Follow that road." He gestured toward a gap in the reeds to the left of their camp. "Take them all the way, past the edge of the fields. You know how to do it."

"How many?" asked Siousir, hoping for a low enough number that he might finish with some of the day to spare. His father looked at the stacks of hives on the deck and considered it for a moment.

"Twenty," he said.

"Why can't we wait for the cart?"

"Because the Yor is still too high. The bees need all the help they can get. Did you have something more important to do today?"

"I guess not," Siousir replied. He had hoped to visit his friends, but that would have to wait.

Hamashil jumped down from the boat with the jar under one arm and set off. Siousir waited for his father to clear the way and

then climbed into the boat after him. He held the smoking bowl of incense near the openings to the hives and mumbled the short prayer, a sequence of meaningless syllables that his father had helped him to memorize a decade before:

Roisremire, roisremihreri, roisremiromi, resehtep,  
resemhotp

He lifted one of the clay cylinders and placed it under his arm while the bees buzzed around it. He grabbed another hive with his free arm and turned to see his father carefully making his way through the reeds. The old man turned his head to the side and shouted, "See you when I get back," then disappeared through the trees and bushes that bordered the waterlogged fields. Siousir climbed down with the hives and made his way through the reeds to the path. Then he followed the packed dirt road that led beyond the fields and orchards to the foot of the mountain.

The going was easy enough, except for one place where the road dipped into a narrow canal and he had to wade through the water. Soon the plants began to thin, the road faded from black to reddish-orange, and the land rose up toward the mountains. He walked a short distance past the edge of the trees and carefully placed the hives on a rock beyond the reach of the damp earth. He said, "two" aloud to be sure he would remember and then turned to walk back to the river.

The way back was easier. He didn't have to worry as much about falling in the slick mud where the road crossed the canal, and he didn't have the weight of the hives to slow him down. But it

was already getting hot, and the work was tiring. He wondered again why they couldn't borrow Koshto's donkey first. Then he wondered whether twenty hives were all that much better than ten. And couldn't they move much more than twenty with the cart? And if they waited for the cart, couldn't they do it at night when it wasn't so hot?

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By the time he reached the boat he had convinced himself that this work was a foolish use of his energy. He had just decided to go for a quick swim when he heard a girl's voice shout "Siou!" from the trees. He looked in the direction of the sound and saw Tekoshe and Bene scrambling through the reeds.

Bene looked the same as he had a year before. He was a thin boy, several years younger than Siousir, with a tangled mop of black hair. He wore sandals and a bulgy kilt tied tightly with a belt to keep it from falling off. The kilt, which had probably once been white, was gray and spotted with dirt and grass stains. Tekoshe was around the same age as Siousir, but she had grown since he last saw her. Now she stood a head taller than him. Her black hair hung in ringlets around her thin dark face, and her linen tunic was clean and white.

Their father, Koshto, was his father's oldest friend. Koshto and Hamashil had known each other long before any of their children were born, since they were boys themselves, when Hamashil's own father brought him along the trip upriver. Koshto's orchard at the top of the world was their first destination when they left home in proyi. Siousir had known

Tekoshe for longer than he could remember, and he had known Bene since he was a baby. Seeing them again was his favorite part of the trip.

Tekoshe reached Siousir first and threw her long bony arms around his neck. Bene crashed into them a moment later.

"We missed you!" Tekoshe shouted over the top of his head.

"I missed you too."

They broke apart and looked at each other. Then Tekoshe's face lit up.

"Do you want to come with us?" she asked. "We're going to explore the houses of the ancient ones."

"We are?" Bene asked.

"Shh" she said quickly and then smiled innocently at Siousir. "Do you want to come?"

"Sure!" he said, forgetting both his swim and the hives he was supposed to be unloading. The three of them left the camp in a hurry. But they hadn't gone far before Siousir remembered the work he was supposed to be doing.

"Wait," he said to his friends. "I have to place the hives on the other side of the orchard. I still have eighteen to go."

"Maybe we can help you," Tekoshe said. "Two hives each is only three trips."

Siousir started to check her math and decided that she was probably right. "Ok," he said. "Back to the boat."

He neglected to mention that Tekoshe and Bene were not dressed properly to approach the bees, but he added extra incense to the bowl and hoped that his earlier prayer would be



enough. It must have worked, because the bees seemed perfectly happy to be carried by Tekoshe and Bene. Soon the three friends were again on the road, this time with a hive under each arm, Bene complaining with nearly every step.

After they placed the hives with the others, Siousir turned to Tekoshe.

"So... where are we going?" he asked.

She looked at him and grinned, "The houses of the ancient ones, like I told you."

"But where are they exactly?" Siousir asked.

Tekoshe leaned over him and pointed up at the mountain. The cliffs were almost blindingly white in the sunlight, but about a third of the way up there was a black rectangular opening in the rock. "There," she said.

"Maybe we can bring the rest of the hives later," Bene said, rubbing his sore arms. Tekoshe and Siousir looked at each other and nodded. The hives could wait.

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The three friends began their journey through the dry, lifeless landscape. They were soon huffing and panting as their shoes slipped on thin layers of windblown sand. The stone exposed by Tekoshe's footprints shined brightly with reflected sunlight and left purple spots in Siousir's vision. She pointed out a thin dark line leading up the mountain, and they cut across the stones to follow it. The path was narrow, and they had to walk single file, but it was better than sliding on sand and clambering over loose stones. Tekoshe led the way. Soon it was

Tekoshe and Siousir in front with Bene lagging far behind. They had made it about halfway up when he started to complain again.

"Can't we go someplace easier?" he asked.

"If you're scared, you can go back home," Tekoshe said.

"I'm not scared!" he snapped back, but he said no more. Her teasing was enough to keep him going.

After nearly an hour of climbing, they finally reached the doorway panting and sweaty. Everything beyond the door was black compared to the bright sunlight outside. Siousir and Bene stood staring into the black as they caught their breath, but Tekoshe pushed past them. She stepped inside and stopped. After a moment, she shouted back, "You have to see this!"

Siousir hurried through the door with Bene on his heels. He stood breathing the musty air. At first it was too black to see anything. But as the walls of the room slowly became visible, he saw what Tekoshe had been so excited about.

Every surface was covered in colored figures interspersed with ancient writing, all bright and visible now that his eyes had adjusted to the dimmer interior light. He stepped closer to the wall. The figures had been carved directly into the stone of the mountain. There was paint inside of the shallow carvings, its color as bright as the day it was painted. The color palette ranged from blue to red, like the sky when the sun rested in the land of the dead. He reached up to touch the inscription. He could feel the sharp edges of the letters with the tips of his fingers and the soft flaky paint between them. He ran his finger along a line of text, hoping that it might reveal its secrets.

"What does it say?" Bene asked.

Siousir hesitated. "It says, 'I am the ancient one. This is my house. You are trespassing.'"

"I was asking Tekoshe," Bene said.

"I don't know," Tekoshe said, "But Siou doesn't either."

"Yes I do" he said as he turned to face his friends. He was ready to continue the argument, but he noticed a dark shape behind them at the back of the room, another door. "Look!" he said and pointed. They both spun around and stared.

"Let's go and see." Tekoshe said.

The three of them inched toward the back of the room together. Beyond the second door there was another space even darker than the one they were in. Again Tekoshe stepped through first. She stood just beyond the doorway for a long time staring into the darkness. All three waited for an eternal minute, then she looked back, "I can't see anything. We need a light."

"I'll go if you're scared." Siousir said.

"Go right ahead," she said. She moved aside to let him pass.

Siousir stepped through the door, but this time his eyes only adjusted enough to see the vague outline of a hallway leading straight into the mountain. The air was perfectly still. Warm and dry and oppressive. It had a stale smell that made it seem like no breeze had ever blown through here.

He continued walking into the darkness, feeling the wall with one hand to guide his way. The ridges of the carvings bounced lightly against his fingers, but the inscriptions revealed none of their color. He turned to look back at his friends and saw

Bene and Tekoshe following closely behind, their silhouettes outlined by the sunlight streaming in through the door far behind them in the other room.

"Seems like I'm not the only one who's scared." Tekoshe said with a mocking tone. Her face was entirely in shadow, but Siousir imagined that he could see her grinning mischievously in spite of the darkness.

"I'm not scared," he said. "I wanted to make sure that you two were still behind me."

Siousir turned around and confidently took another step forward. Where the floor should have been there was only empty space. His stomach jumped as he tumbled forward. He tried to slow his fall with his hand, but it only slid across the ridges on the stone wall. Something hard hit him in the head. There was a strange silence as he spun through the darkness. Then he felt a jolt as he landed flat on his back on a sandy floor. Pain roared through his body and overwhelmed his senses.

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After a few seconds, the pain faded except for a throbbing in the side of his head. He heard Tekoshe and Bene shouting his name. When he opened his eyes, he saw the upside-down silhouettes of friends framed by the dim light from the hall. It looked like they were standing on the roof of one-story house while he lay on the ground below. He touched the side of his head and felt a small pool of blood against the smoothness of his scalp. He looked at the opposite wall of the shaft, a thin sliver of sunlight highlighted the top edge. He wondered whether

he hit his head when he fell. As if in response to his thoughts, a single line of blood flowed down from the top of the wall in front of him and disappeared into the darkness.

Tekoshe and Bene were shouting louder now, the fear growing in their voices. "I'm alright!" Siousir shouted back. He pulled himself to his feet. A wave of dizziness nearly knocked him down again, but he leaned against the wall until it passed. He looked up and saw Bene still standing, but Tekoshe was now lying on the floor at the top of the shaft, one arm extended downward toward him. He reached up to take her hand, but it was out of reach. He jumped and his fingers grazed hers. He jumped again and again, as high as he could, until dizziness overwhelmed him and he had to sit. It was no use. The shaft was too deep.

Looking up from his seated position, he saw Bene's silhouette disappear suddenly and heard his footsteps fade into the distance. Tekoshe shouted after him, but he was gone. She looked down at Siousir.

"I think Bene panicked," she said. "I have to go get help."

The severity of the situation hit Siousir then, and he was afraid. He shouted up at Tekoshe, "Don't leave me alone here!"

"I'm sorry" she said, and her head disappeared behind the edge of the shaft. "Don't leave!" he shouted again. He heard her scramble to her feet. "I'm sorry!" she shouted back as her running footsteps faded into silence.

Siousir felt completely, terribly alone. He sat there feeling afraid and alone for some time. He also felt dizzy and tired. He lay down on his back on the sandy floor. After a short while, he

was no longer dizzy. The warm air wrapped him like a blanket. The floor was cool against his back, and he felt very tired. Soon he felt nothing but tired, and he fell asleep.

#

Siousir awoke to the smell of dry wood. He was lying on a thick mat of leaves and twigs in a low canopy of tamarisk bushes. He climbed to his feet and fought his way out of the tangled branches into the open air. There was no sun shining, but he could see his surroundings perfectly. From the deep blue of the night sky, the faint light of the stars lit up this strange world in a sort of twilight. In front of him lay the shore, and beyond that nothing but water as far as he could see. All the color of the land and sea faded to gray.

"How did I get here?" he said aloud to no one, because he knew (in the way that you know things in dreams without knowing how you know them) that he was completely alone.

He didn't remember going anywhere else. The last thing he could remember was falling in the tomb. But he was clearly lost. He looked up at the patterns in the stars and wondered whether they could tell him how to get home. He couldn't understand how, but that wasn't surprising. He had never learned to read the stars.

He turned and walked along the shore where there was a clear path of soft damp earth. To his right the forest grew in a tangled chaos of every sort of plant: reeds and shrubs pierced by short pomegranate and olive trees first, then by enormous palms and sycomores that towered over the rest. Every plant and tree heaved with ripe fruit, their familiar shapes recognizable

but their bright colors faded in the strange starlight. To his left the still water stretched toward the horizon.

He walked for some time following the gentle curve of the shore. The scenery moved steadily past, varying but never really changing. After walking for a short while, he spotted a set of footprints disappearing around the beach. They seemed to match his own in size, and they appeared to begin among a large clump of tamarisk bushes.

He was thirsty and tired of walking. He went to the edge of the water and scooped a handful to drink, but it was salty. He knelt down to the water and washed the blood from his head and neck. The wound was still slowly oozing blood, but the bleeding seemed to have slowed considerably, and it didn't worry him anymore.

He sat down on the shore of the island and looked out across the ocean. He wondered whether he had died in the tomb. He didn't know what he had expected to happen after he died, but somehow an island in an infinite sea made sense. In fact, it didn't seem all that bad. He would have all the time he needed to explore the forest that lay behind him. When the sun came up, he decided, he would collect fruit in the forest. He would drink pomegranate juice and figure out where to go next.

Twigs snapped behind him. He turned to see a man, the oldest man he had ever seen, struggling out of the tamarisks. The man was frighteningly thin. His dark leathery skin stretched tight over his bones, but his eyes shined with life. Siousir was not afraid of him, perhaps because he was so old and so frail looking. He watched as the man struggled out of the bushes and

hobbled over to sit beside him. They both looked out over the water.

"Strange night," the man said. He pointed to Siousir's head. "You're bleeding."

"Are we dead?" Siousir asked.

He shrugged. "It would seem so."

Siousir looked up at the stars that filled the sky. Then he turned to the man.

"Do you know the names of the stars?" he asked.

"I never learned," the old man replied. There was a resigned sadness in his voice, as though he had lost something that he never knew he had. He looked up at the sky and sighed.

An echoing voice came from beyond the water. Someone far away was calling, "Siou?" The old man and the boy both snapped their heads in the direction of the sound. It came again, louder this time, "Siou!" The old man turned to look at the boy, but he was gone.

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