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The Tree of Life

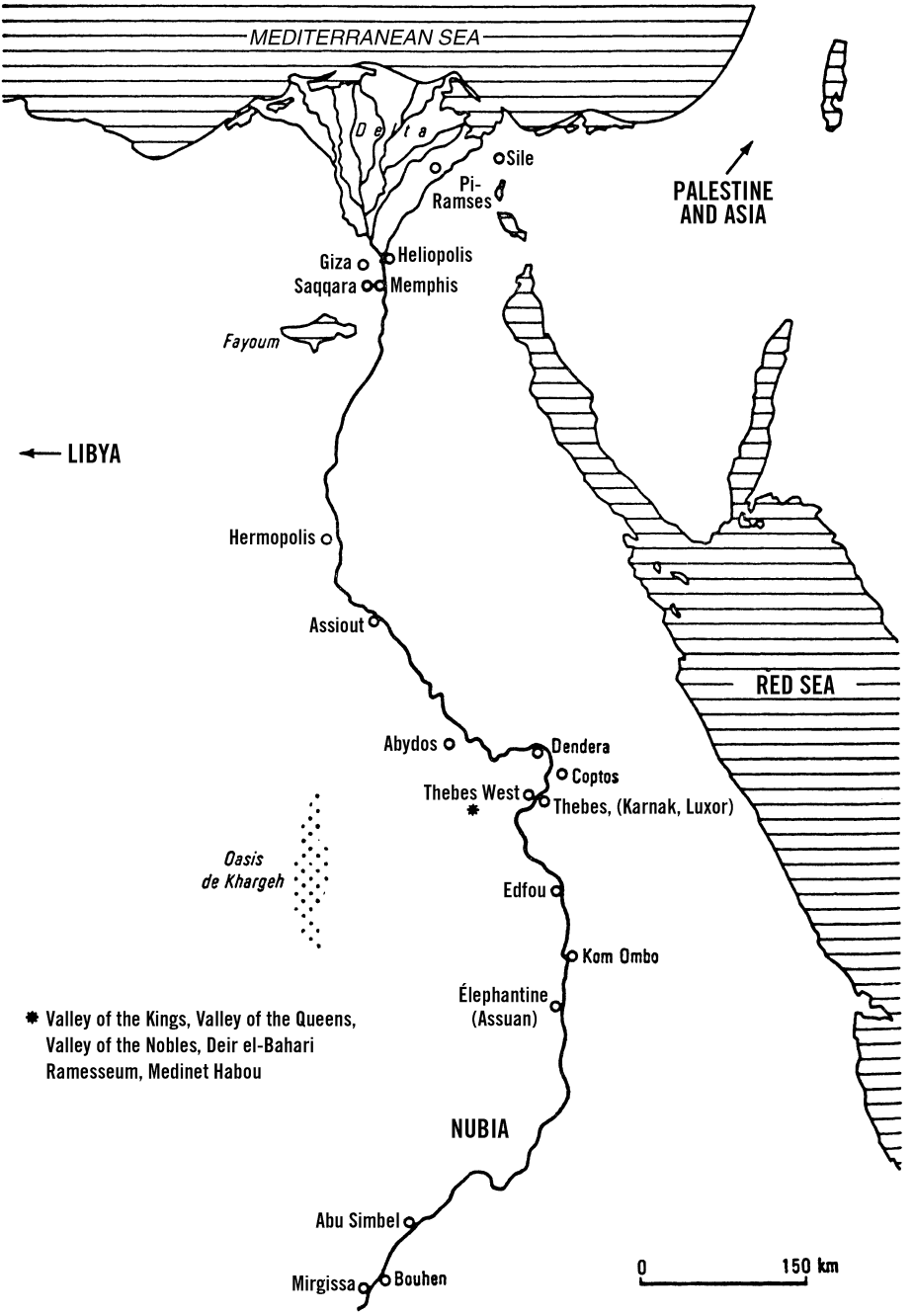
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Extract

If all remains stable and in a perpetual state of renewal, it is because the sun's course has never been interrupted. If all things remain perfect and whole, it is because the Mysteries of Abydos are never unveiled.

Iamblicus, *The Mysteries of Egypt*, VI, 7


MEDITERRANEAN SEA
Delta
Sile
Pi-Ramses
PALESTINE AND ASIA
Giza
Heliopolis
Saqqara
Memphis
Fayoum
LIBYA
Hermopolis
Assiout
RED SEA
Abydos
Dendera
Coptos
Thebes West
Thebes, (Karnak, Luxor)
Oasis de Khargeh
Edfou
Kom Ombo
Élephantine (Assuan)
* Valley of the Kings, Valley of the Queens, Valley of the Nobles, Deir el-Bahari Ramesseum, Medinet Habou
NUBIA
Abu Simbel
Mirgissa
Bouhen
0
150 km

1

Iker opened his eyes.

He couldn't move. Bound hand and foot, he was firmly lashed to the mast of a big ship, which was sailing quickly along on a calm sea.

The riverbank where he had been walking at the end of a day's work, the five men who had charged at him and hit him with clubs, blackness . . . His body was painful, his head on fire.

'Untie me,' he begged.

A fat, bearded man came over to him. 'Aren't you happy there, my boy?'

'Why have you kidnapped me?'

'Because you're going to be very useful to us. A fine ship, isn't she? She's called *Swift One*, and she's a hundred and twenty cubits long and forty wide.* I need a ship this big to carry out my mission.

'What mission?'

'Inquisitive, aren't you? But in view of what's going to happen to you, I'm prepared to tell you that we're sailing to the land of Punt.'

'The divine land? That's nothing but a tale for children.'

The captain grinned. 'Do you really think a hundred and twenty lion-hearted sailors would have set sail to conquer a

*62.4 metres long and 20.8 metres wide.

children's tale? My crew aren't dreamers; they're down-to-earth fellows who are going to get rich – very rich.'

'I don't care about riches. I just want to become a scribe.'

'You can forget about your palettes and brushes and papyrus. You see, the sea is a god every bit as dangerous and powerful as Set, but I know how to placate it when it attacks us with its storms. We'll have to make a very special offering if we're to reach Punt, so when the next storm hits we shall throw you overboard alive. By drowning, you'll win us protection.'

'But . . . why me?'

The captain put a finger to his lips. 'State secret,' he whispered. 'I can't tell anyone, not even someone who has only hours left to live.'

As the captain walked away, Iker almost burst into tears. To die at only fifteen, and not even to know why, was the height of injustice. Furiously, he tried to free himself from his bonds, but it was no use.

'Don't waste your time, boy. Those knots were tied by a professional,' observed a forty-year-old with a deeply lined face, who was sitting nearby eating an onion. 'I'm the one who tied you up, and what Turtle-Eye does is done well.'

'Don't become a murderer! If you do, the gods will punish you.'

'Listening to you is spoiling my appetite,' and Turtle-Eye went and sat near the bow.

Iker was an orphan, brought up by an old scribe who had taken a liking to him, and he had displayed a very keen taste for learning. By dint of perseverance, he would undoubtedly have been taken on by the administration of a temple, where he would have lived out his days happily.

But now there was nothing left but this immense stretch of water which was going to engulf him.

A young sailor passed close by the prisoner, an oar balanced on his shoulder.

'Hey, you!' called Iker. 'Help me!'

The man stopped. 'What do you want?'

'Untie me, I beg you!'

'And then where would you go, you fool? It would be stupid to drown yourself before the right moment. At least by dying when it's necessary, you'll make yourself useful. Now, shut up and keep quiet, otherwise Sharp-Knife swears he'll cut your tongue out.'

Iker stopped struggling. His fate was sealed.

But why him? Before dying, he would at least have liked to get an answer to that question. A state secret? How could a penniless apprentice scribe possibly threaten Egypt's powerful pharaoh, Senusret, the third of that name, who governed the country with an iron hand? The captain must have been lying. His band of pirates had probably just grabbed the first person who happened along.

Turtle-Eye gave him a little water to drink. 'It's better that you don't eat anything. You're not the sort to have sea legs.'

'Does the captain really know how to predict a storm?'

'He certainly does.'

'Supposing there isn't one? Then you could let me go.'

The captain nudged Turtle-Eye aside and said, 'Don't even think about it, my boy. Your destiny is to be a sacrifice. Accept it, and enjoy the magnificent view: is there anything in the world more beautiful than the sea?'

'My parents will organize a search for me, and you'll all be arrested.'

'You haven't got any parents, and no one will even notice you've disappeared. You're already dead.'

2

There was not a breath of wind, and the heat was becoming unbearable. Most of the sailors had flopped down on the deck and were dozing. Even the captain was drowsy.

Iker had gone beyond the limits of despair. This crew of cut-throats was determined to do away with him, whatever happened, and he had no chance at all of escape.

He was terrified at the thought of being swallowed up by the sea, far from Egypt, without any funeral rites, without a tomb. It wouldn't just be physical death, it would be annihilation, the punishment reserved for criminals.

What crime had he ever committed to deserve such a fate? He wasn't a murderer or a thief, nor was he dishonest or lazy. Nevertheless, here he was, condemned to the worst of punishments.

Far in the distance, the surface of the water sparkled. Iker thought it was just a simple interplay of reflections, but the affected area grew and grew. A sandbar emerged and began to get larger and larger, as fast as a wild beast leaping on its prey. At the same moment, hundreds of little clouds arrived from nowhere, invading the sky to form a dark, compact mass.

Jolted out of his stupor, the captain stared in disbelief.

'There was no warning of this storm,' he muttered, astounded.

'Wake up and give the crew their orders,' demanded Turtle-Eye.

'The sails – haul in the sails! Every man to his post!'

The thunder rumbled so fiercely that most of the sailors were frozen to the spot.

'We must sacrifice the lad,' Sharp-Knife reminded the captain.

'Deal with it,' the captain ordered.

As soon as he was untied, Iker decided, he'd fight. True, he had no chance of overcoming his adversary, but at least he'd die with dignity.

'I prefer to cut your throat first,' said the sailor. 'You won't be quite dead when I throw you overboard, and the sea-god will be satisfied.'

Iker could not take his eyes off the flint blade that was about to take his life.

Just as its tip was entering his flesh, a bolt of lightning pierced the clouds and was transformed into a tongue of flame, which set fire to Sharp-Knife. He collapsed, howling.

'Look out!' roared Turtle-Eye. 'There's a monster wave coming!'

A huge wall of water was charging towards the ship. None of the sailors, although they were all experienced, had ever seen such a horror. Rooted to the spot, conscious that there was nothing they could do, they stood motionless, their arms hanging by their sides, their eyes fixed on the wave, which thundered down on *Swift One* with a terrifying roar.

The fingers of Iker's right hand scratched at something soft and damp.

Sand . . . Yes, it must be sand.

So the otherworld was a desert flooded by the insatiable sea, no doubt populated by frightful creatures which devoured the condemned.

If he still had a hand, perhaps he also had a foot – even two. They moved, and so did his left hand.

The young man dared to open his eyes, then lift his head. He was lying on a beach, a magnificent beach of white sand. Not far off, many trees were growing.

But why did his body feel so heavy?

Iker found that he was still tied, by the waist, to a fragment of the mast. He freed himself with difficulty and got slowly to his feet, still wondering if he was dead or alive.

Out to sea floated the shattered wreck of *Swift One*. The giant wave had ripped out her mast, and Iker with it, carrying them to this sun-drenched island, with its luxuriant vegetation.

He had suffered only scratches and bruises.

Unsteadily, he explored the immediate area. A few sailors might have had the same good luck as he had, in which case he must be ready to fight. But the beach was deserted. The ship and her crew had been swallowed up by the furious sea, and the only survivor was Iker, the offering promised to the ravening sea-god.

Iker realized that he was hungry. Venturing into the centre of the island, he found date palms, fig trees, vines and even a garden where cucumbers were growing, close to a crystalline spring. Iker gorged himself on fruit before it occurred to him that he could not, after all, be the only inhabitant of this fragment of land, lost amid the waves.

Why was the other person – or persons – hiding and how would he behave towards the intruder?

Apprehensively, he explored further. He found no one, and not even the slightest trace of an inhabitant. His only companion was his own mind. But a boy of fifteen would soon have exhausted his supply of memories.

Worn out by so many strong emotions, he fell asleep in the shadow of a sycamore tree.

As soon as he awoke, he inspected his realm a second time,

with the same results. He saw that large fish were not afraid to swim close to the beach, so they would be easy to catch. With a branch and some strands from the rope that had bound him, he made a fishing-rod and he found an earthworm to use as bait. Scarcely had his rudimentary hook entered the water when a sort of perch speared itself on it. The castaway ran no risk of dying from hunger here.

Now he had to light a fire, and he lacked the materials usually used in Egypt, principally a bow or a drill with a bow. However, as luck would have it, he found a piece of soft wood and another piece, long and pointed, which he thrust into the first one, held between his knees. By rotating the second piece as swiftly as possible, he managed to create enough heat to produce a spark and then a small flame. He immediately fed it with well-dried palm-frond ribs and grilled his fish.

But before Iker could eat, he had a vital duty to perform: he must give thanks to the gods for saving his life. He raised his hands above the flame in a gesture of prayer, but even as he did so thunder began to roll, the trees swayed and the earth shook.

Terrified, the young man tried to run away. He stumbled, and hit his head hard on the trunk of a fig tree.

3

Bolts of lightning, a fiery sky, a gigantic snake with golden skin and eyebrows of lapis-lazuli! This time, Iker was well and truly dead, and a monstrous spirit from the other world was bearing down, intent on crushing him.

But the snake stopped and merely observed him. 'Why did you light this fire, little man?'

'To . . . to pay homage to you.'

'Who brought you here?'

'No one. It was a wave . . . The boat, the sailors . . . And then . . .'

'Tell me the whole truth, and do so at once, otherwise I shall reduce you to ashes.'

'Pirates kidnapped me in Egypt, and they were planning to throw me alive into the sea to appease it. But the captain did not foresee a violent storm. The ship was destroyed, and I am the only survivor.'

'It is God who saved you from death,' said the snake. 'This island is the Island of the *Ka,* the creative power, the sap of the universe. Nothing exists without it. But this realm was struck by a star fallen from the summit of the sky, and all was set aflame. I, the lord of the divine land, the wondrous land of Punt, could not prevent the end of this world. And what of you – will you save yours?'

A burning sensation awoke Iker. The fire had spread to a

bush and the flames were licking the young man's calves. Leaping away, he checked that in reality there was no giant serpent on the prowl. Then he busied himself putting out the spreading fire.

What a strange dream . . . Iker could have sworn that the snake was no illusion and that it really had spoken to him, with a voice which resembled nothing known and which he would remember for ever.

Once the last flames were extinguished, the young man headed for the stream.

Two chests lay on the ground beside it. Iker rubbed his eyes. When he looked again, the chests were still there. He approached slowly, as if they were a threat. Someone was playing with his mind. Someone who was hiding in the undergrowth and had just brought out this loot from the *Swift One* or some other ship. Someone who wouldn't hesitate to kill the intruder so as not to have to share his treasure.

'You have nothing to fear from me!' yelled Iker. 'I'm not interested in your wealth. Instead of fighting each other, let's cooperate in order to survive!'

There was no answer.

Iker explored the little island again, changing direction constantly, retracing his steps, suddenly speeding up or slowing down. All his senses on the alert, he watched for the smallest sign of the presence of an adversary. But there was none.

So he had to face facts: he really was the only inhabitant of the island. But these chests . . . It was probably just that he hadn't noticed them before. They must have come from a previous shipwreck, and a wave had carried them here.

All that remained was to open them. They contained linen bags and porcelain flasks from which a pleasant smell wafted, probably precious perfumes worth a small fortune.

Had Iker really escaped death? The island might be less brutal than the pirates' ship, but fate seemed no kinder. True,

he could survive for several months, perhaps several years, but solitude would eventually drive him mad. And what if the spring dried up, or he failed to catch any fish? To build a raft, he'd need tools. And yet . . . wouldn't it be suicide to sail off on this unknown sea on board a frail craft?

The young man thought constantly of the revelations of the golden snake, lord of the wondrous land of Punt. How could this tiny island be the divine land bursting with fabulous, coveted wealth? It was ridiculous.

The snake existed only in Iker's imagination. But why had it spoken of the need to save his world? A pharaoh reigned over Egypt, so the country wasn't in danger.

Egypt, so far-off, so inaccessible! Iker thought of his little village, near the shrine of Madu, a mysterious place to the north of Thebes. Thanks to the old scribe who had brought him up, he had seldom had to work in the fields and instead had devoted himself to reading and writing. This privilege had attracted much jealousy, but he had scorned his enemies, for learning nourished his soul.

In the sand of the beach Iker traced the hieroglyphs he was mastering. They made up a phrase praising the scribe's profession. Then he watched the sunset, gazed for a long time at the starry sky and fell asleep in the hope, mixed with fear, of seeing the gigantic snake again.

Iker was hungry again, and decided to catch and grill another fish. Taking his fishing-rod, he went down to the beach.

To his amazement, it had been covered up by the sea. A passing phenomenon, he hoped. He cast his line several times, but no fish took the bait. Puzzled, he dived in and swam about for a long time, but did not spot a single one.

Finding his footing again, Iker noticed that the sea was continuing to rise. Or was it that the island was sinking? He stood still on the beach, and the tide reached his calves, then his knees, then the tops of his thighs. At this speed, the Island

of the *Ka* would soon disappear.

Gripped by panic, Iker climbed to the top of the tallest palm tree, skinning his hands and feet. Panting and breathless, he thought he was having another dream when he saw a white sail appear in the blue vastness.