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«This Life and the Life After»

BEGINNING

How a single glance can change an entire life.
Our eyes met — and the world turned upside down.

KARNAK, THEBES, 332 BCE

“Ankhsumut!” my sister cried out, bursting into the palace hall, where lavish columns, carved and painted with intricate bas-reliefs, soared towards the lofty ceiling like mighty palms stretching to the sun.

In the dim light of the hall, where only the soft glow of oil lamps placed along the walls illuminated the massive doors adorned with golden patterns, leading to the temple corridor, my delicate Asenat looked herself like a golden figurine. The flickering flames cast mysterious shadows, lending the whole space an almost enchanted air.

“Why are you still here? We should have been at the temple ages ago! Look — it’s already starting to get light outside! Hekamun will be furious!” Her voice trembled with urgency as she noticed my new copper armour gleaming even in the semi-darkness.

“Furious? With the most important beings in Memphis? Unthinkable,” I replied calmly.

“The most important — *after Apis...*”

“Of course,” I said with a sly smile. “Except Apis can’t speak — and I can.”

“You speak *too* much, if you ask me! One day your tongue will get us both into serious trouble.”

“One day my tongue will *save* us. And not just my tongue — watch this.” I raised my bow, inlaid with carvings, and without hesitation loosed an arrow into the tiny red circle on a target carved into a distant column. Five arrows were already clustered there.

“That’s exactly what I mean!” Asenat threw up her hands, her silver bracelets clinking.

“Ankhsumut, your muscles will soon be bigger than the palace guards’! Oh, Mother of all living and gods — Mut — enlighten your daughter!” She rolled her eyes theatrically. “And tell me, by all the gods — where on earth did you get that armour?”

“Old Seb forged it for me,” I replied.

Asenat snorted, then grabbed my hand and began dragging me off to change.

We dressed in robes of the purest white, weaving golden threads into our hair, adorning ourselves with diadems and broad ceremonial collars. The fabrics flowed like the Nile, and gemstones glistened in the first rays of dawn.

“Take off that stone!” Asenat snapped again, her eyes falling upon my amulet — a simple dark pebble with a hole, hanging from a leather cord.

“Not a chance,” I said, elongating the words as I adjusted the talisman like the most precious of treasures.

It was my symbol of freedom — something I’d found as a child, out in the desert beyond the palace walls, on the day I made my first escape.

The first blush of morning was already tinting the golden walls with rose light as we ran, bracelets ringing, down corridors lined with the stories of gods, carved into massive stone walls.

Today — as always — we were to fulfil our duty as sacred twins: priestesses devoted to the great Apis.

FIVE MONTHS EARLIER...

TURKEY. DECEMBER 2021

I was woken by the loud call of the local muezzin — his piercing prayer cutting into my dream, where I had once again been wandering through Egypt.

Heavens, I hadn’t slept well at all. My whole body ached, as if I hadn’t been resting, but running, leaping, and firing arrows all night long.

I’d been living in Turkey for over ten years now. This was my new life, my home — and yet, I still hadn’t grown used to the muezzins. The Turkish accent in Qur’anic recitation struck a strange dissonance within me, still waking me with every *fajr* call. I simply couldn’t reconcile Arabic with a Turkish melody.

I was born in Moscow, and though Egypt isn’t my homeland, it has always been the dearest place to my soul — where I spent eight unforgettable years.

It’s been so long since I left my life in Moscow behind, chasing the gentle Egyptian sun and those blissful hours beneath the azure waters of the Red Sea.

My days in the land of pyramids followed a rhythm of their own: wake-up at 7 a.m., departure to the dive boat at 8.30 — we would sail out into the sea, complete two dives (three if there was a group for wreck diving or drifts*), and return to shore around four in the afternoon. After that, I often still had time for twilight dives, and only then would I return home by eight in the evening, collapsing from exhaustion. But I was utterly, overwhelmingly happy. And at night, I dreamed I was still underwater.

* *That's when divers are dropped from a moving boat and drift with the current until they're picked up by the anchored dive boat.*

It was a life full of joy and abundance. I moved to Turkey in 2011, just after the revolution in Egypt, in search of peace and stability. The time of Egypt's upheaval was turbulent: protests, confusion, hopes rising and crashing down. It became nearly impossible to work — and staying in the country no longer felt safe...

I left — but my soul remained in Egypt.

Since childhood, I'd had vivid dreams of ancient Egypt. Sometimes I was riding a camel through endless deserts, other times hiding in winding canyons or gliding down the Nile on a felucca. Sands and palms... giant corridors adorned with painted reliefs...

I devoured every book I could find about the land of the pharaohs. I memorised the names of the gods and learned every hieroglyph I could. There was a fire in my heart — a dream to see with my own eyes everything I had dreamed of.

I was fifteen when it finally came true. My parents came to collect me from my grandmother's house at the end of spring break — and imagine my delight when they told me that instead of going back to school on Monday, we were heading to Egypt.

And — *I would celebrate my birthday there.* I could hardly believe my luck!

I remember trembling on the day of our flight. Not from the cold — though it was early April and snow still blanketed Moscow, with a blizzard sweeping through the city the night before our departure. But in the airport terminal it was warm. My thoughts swirled in anxious excitement, and I had to summon every ounce of willpower just to appear calm and not faint at the passport control desk.

One of my most vivid memories is the moment we landed in Hurghada. I stepped out of the plane, onto the stairway, inhaled the salty, spiced air — and knew: I was home. In that instant, all my trembling vanished.

Among landscapes that were unfamiliar yet deeply known, I felt perfectly at ease, perfectly safe.

Since then, every time I land in Egypt, I feel the same. I am home. Because it *is* my home.

And all the while I wasn't in Egypt, I kept seeing it in my dreams. It was astonishing! I saw the lives of ordinary people, palace intrigues, grand celebrations and competitions. I loved watching the way people danced — their movements were vibrant and rhythmic, full of energy. The music sounded as though each note transported me to another world — closer to the gods.

I saw rituals — priests in their magnificent robes performing sacred rites, their voices full of fervour as they called upon the gods. Torches burned all around, and the flickering flames danced across the walls, bringing the carved hieroglyphs to life — as if they themselves were retelling the stories of the pharaohs.

Outside, there were parades filled with people carrying offerings and rejoicing. They wore light, flowing fabrics, and their laughter and the joyful murmur of voices filled the thick summer air with happiness. I could feel the evening breeze caress my skin, carrying with it the scent of spices and blooming lotus flowers. It was as though I was being immersed in an entire world.

In those dreams, I wasn't merely a spectator — I was a part of it all. I felt the rhythm of their lives and revelled in the beauty of their culture. It seemed as though the spirit of ancient Egypt wrapped its arms around me and carried me into its time, where every sound, every movement, and every fragrance created an extraordinary atmosphere.

But there is one dreadful ritual that I often dreamed of — and I cannot bear it. The dream always begins the same: we are lined up in a particular order in a vast hall with columns decorated in vividly painted reliefs. The priests and officials are gathered, richly adorned and fragrant with oils. The air is thick with smoke from censers. My twin sister and I are holding a golden ring threaded through the nose of a massive black bull.

In front of us, a group of girls begins the procession, carrying baskets of lotus flowers. They are followed by priests with burning censers. After the priests, we lead the bull — and behind us comes a palanquin carrying the pharaoh, surrounded by a host of priests and officials.

The procession reaches the hall where the barque of Amun-Ra stands. All junior priests and officials remain outside, not daring to enter.

Inside, only the high priests and the pharaoh stay. The girls place the lotus baskets before the barque and then leave the chamber as well.

At that moment, the priests begin to chant, interpreting every movement of the barque's veil. They read the shadows on the fabric and the sounds of the wind as signs and prophecies. The Pharaoh bows and gives thanks to the gods, his face filled with reverence and fear before the mystic rite.

Then the High Priest takes the bull's ring from our hands and leads it into a dark chamber, where the statue of Amun stands. Three senior priests and the Pharaoh himself follow. From inside the chamber — completely shrouded in darkness — terrifying sounds begin to echo. And it is at this point that I always wake up, drenched in cold sweat, gripped by a vague sense of dread and unease.

This ritual is the only one of my dreams that I truly hate. All the others — my dreams of Egypt — I adore. They are always vivid and full of life. At some point, I began to write them down, and gradually I realised that these dreams were forming an enchanting story — full of adventure, travel, and boundless love.

Just last night, for instance, I dreamed of my twin sister — and the ache of longing for her wrapped tightly around my heart again. But what inspires and delights me most are the dreams of my husband — a tall and striking Roman warrior.

Strangely, during all my years living in Egypt, I never had these dreams. Ninety percent of the time, I dreamed of the sea. But after I moved to Turkey (which is a story deserving a book of its own), my dreams were still filled with the Red Sea — unsurprising, really, as I had spent eight years diving into its depths almost every day.

But then, three years ago, after a trip to Izmir, my Egyptian dreams returned — like long-lost friends.

I should tell you now about that trip to Izmir — a journey that shook my entire world. What happened in the ancient city of Ephesus stunned me to the core. I experienced my first episode of what in English is called *day-dreaming*, though in Russian it might be clumsily translated as “сон наяву”. Not the most expressive term — but the phenomenon itself was breathtaking.

So there we were — my mother and I — walking along the marble main street of the once-glorious city of Ephesus. Past white columns and houses with mosaic floors, we reached the amphitheatre. My mother climbed the steps up into the

stands, while I turned off the main street and stepped into the corridor for performers, leading directly to the arena...

And at that moment — I felt I had walked that corridor before. I could physically feel the pull of light leather armour across my chest. There was a helmet on my head, and in my hand — the weight of a heavy sword hilt. It was surreal. The roar of the crowd swelled in my ears. I stepped out into the arena and saw, at once, both the ruins... and the roaring masses.

They were shouting my name — or rather, they were chanting: “Bennu! Bennu!” And I knew they meant *me*.

I could hear the terrifying growl of a lion — or a tiger. My heart pounded beneath the metal, slow and thunderous. My whole body pulsed in rhythm with the cries of the crowd...

And then — my mother called out to me. And it all dissolved. The stones returned to their familiar shapes. The crowd vanished.

This vision shook me. It felt as though two different filmstrips had been laid one over the other, creating an incredibly strange perception.

That night my dreams of ancient Egypt returned — though I had long forgotten them. And suddenly I remembered everything: how, as a child, I dreamed of leading a huge black bull by a massive golden ring through its nose; how my twin sister walked on the opposite side of the beast; the rituals, the dances, the parades, the palace, the handsome warrior...

I decided to look up Ancient Egypt on Google and typed “sacred bull of Egypt”. A torrent of links about the bull Apis appeared. Among them I found a documentary that spoke of sacred twins who served as priestesses of Apis! Imagine my shock. Everything I had seen in my dreams had once truly happened. From that moment I began to write down every dream and study what had taken place in those times. Gradually a coherent picture emerged — an entire story.

Just this morning I dreamed of my sister again. I woke with a crushing longing for her, for Egypt, and with an indescribable ache in my chest — a yearning for my husband. How I wish I could see him more clearly! In the dream he is vivid, but on waking only a hazy image remains, and the soul-piercing gaze of enormous blue eyes.

But first, let me share what I unearthed in encyclopaedias and popular-science films about the sacred twins.

The sacred twins — young priestesses of the divine bull Apis — led a rather carefree life. They had their own apartments with great couches beneath canopies and a multitude of cushions. A household of attendants cared for them: they were bathed, dressed, anointed with fragrant oils, their long hair combed and braided with strings of beads and blossoms. They lived like princesses and looked like goddesses, their unrivalled beauty inspiring universal admiration. They ate only the most exquisite delicacies prepared in the palace kitchens and spent their days in light-hearted games and merriment.

Every morning in Karnak the ceremony of the birth of the god Ra took place — a gentle, harmless ritual I often saw in my dreams. The sisters would walk gracefully behind the High Priest, carrying bowls of offerings for the bull — fresh sugar-cane and fragrant lotus buds. Behind them came Apis himself who, once inside the temple, devoured the gifts while the High Priest watched him intently, interpreting his every movement. Scribes noted it all on papyrus: “Our great Apis has turned his divine gaze upon the lotus!” A momentous event indeed, for the bull usually satisfied his hunger with sugar-cane first. “He is swishing his tail! Oh, great Apis desires that we stage a splendid spectacle in honour of the glorious goddess, beloved Isis!” — and so on. These readings unfailingly provoked genuine delight among all present. The priests always interpreted the bull’s actions to their own advantage: to decree a festival, exact tribute from the people, elevate their standing, and so forth.

Selecting the sacred twins was as weighty a task as finding a suitable bull. They had to be two absolutely identical girls, so alike their own parents confused them. They were required to share the same birthmarks and have white leaf-shaped spots on their buttocks, as well as other signs known only to the priests. The girls were taken from their families, who regarded them with reverence, while their parents received gold and honours that secured comfort for the rest of their lives.

To offer Egypt a sacred being — whether bull, priest, or the sacred twins — was to become a messenger of the gods themselves, bringing immeasurable esteem and fabulous wealth. As for the twins, their fate depended on circumstance. If they reached the age of twenty while the bull still lived, they were lavishly rewarded and sent home to their families. They generally became much-sought-after brides, married happily, bore children, and were respected by their neighbours.

But if the bull died, his entire retinue was buried with him, the sacred twins included. After all, who would serve Apis his beloved sugar-cane and lotus buds in the next world? The bull could not live beyond twenty-five years, for the gods must not grow old and weak. If he did not die naturally, then on reaching twenty-five he was to be drowned, together with his entourage, and the funerary rites would be conducted with full honours — a golden sarcophagus enamelled with bright colours and filled with everything he might need in the realm beyond.

And now, according to my dreams, my sister and I have just turned eighteen, while the bull is already twenty-four and a half! Less than a year left... I was desperately plotting an escape. I had no wish to serve Apis in the kingdom of Osiris — or wherever he was supposed to sail upon his celestial barque.

Of course, ordinary mortals were strictly forbidden to touch the twins. Only maidservants — and they had to be virgins — were permitted to bathe us, dress us, comb our hair, paint our bodies with intricate designs and inscribe spells between the motifs. Even the Pharaoh and the highest priests could not lay a hand on us. We belonged to the supreme god, not to this world. And naturally no man was allowed to touch us — that was utterly forbidden, beyond the bounds of existence itself.

And yet, I had a husband. How could such a thing possibly be?

And once again I have that dream. Again I am running down the corridor with my sister... How I long to uncover the twins' story. Did they ever find happiness? Were they killed with the bull? And what became of the handsome warrior of Alexander — the husband of the fierce priestess Ankhsumut?

Enough! I must go to Luxor, to Egypt, visit Karnak Temple and... I'm not even sure... try to discover what binds me to Egypt. What is it that draws me to Karnak? I have to sort all this out. I've already booked a flight to Hurghada for mid-January — three weeks away! I'll wrap up every urgent task and then be off.

Another puzzle: what was the dreadful ritual I dreamed? It was certainly not the gentle morning birth of Ra. Only once did I manage, in the dream, to peer into that final hall with its altar through a shaft of sunlight: four priests stood around the Pharaoh, torches in hand. The bull was tied to the base of Amun's statue, and a man lay on the sacrificial stone. The High Priest pierced beneath the man's ear with a sharp knife, filled a bowl with blood, whispered for a long while, and forced the Pharaoh to drink it. Then the Pharaoh began to behave strangely, arching his back, tip-toeing, speaking in a deep voice in a tongue I did not know. And then it dawned on me — this was an Amun ritual. At last, when the sun reached its zenith, a beam of light entered through the roof opening, the Pharaoh collapsed, and the torches went out. That dream left me thoroughly shaken for a fortnight, a chill racing down my spine each time I remembered it. After all, here I am now, and there are the rituals of ancient Egypt — worlds apart, one would think.

I set about researching the Amun rite. I read that Pharaoh Akhenaten, in the fourteenth century BCE, after undergoing such a ceremony, called Amun's priests demon-worshippers, abolished Amun's cult, and introduced monotheism centred on the god Aten. If what I saw was true, I too would have thought it pure satanism. Various sources claim that black magic arose from the rites of Amun — hardly

surprising. Within Amun's religion practical magic, alchemy and every form of divination flourished. The priests summoned the required spirits at specific hours of day and night, using their knowledge.

The priests of Amun blended their Egyptian magical practices with those brought by the peoples who arrived with the Hyksos.* They employed the names of Egyptian gods and Egyptian religion to hide a far older faith. Evidently that ancient creed, with its gruesome rituals, had often been condemned and persecuted, so its followers learned to mask their essence beneath beautiful myths, adapting to local cults.

** Hyksos — a Semitic people who conquered part of Ancient Egypt in the 18th–16th centuries BCE (during the 13th–17th dynasties). Called “shepherd-kings” by the Egyptians, they re-equipped the army with chariots, helmets and composite bows, and introduced their own cults, beginning with the city they built, Heliopolis.*

Originally the religion of the ancient Egyptians was monotheistic, though dual in nature. For example, the cult of the goddess Mut, who initially embodied the feminine principle of creation, was transformed in Karnak into a paired cult. She was made an appendage to Amun — regarded at once as his mother, wife and daughter, the mother of her own creator and the daughter of her own son, an expression of divine pre-eternity. She was portrayed as a woman wearing a crown.

Then the Amunites came, turning the mother-goddess Mut into a deity who ruled the “great furnaces” in which magical figurines of the enemies and detractors of Amun's cult were burned. In depictions Mut became a woman with three heads — a lioness with the *shuti* crown, a woman with the *pschent* crown, and a vulture with the *deshret* crown — and, moreover, with wings and a phallus. Thus she appears in the ancient Egyptian *Book of the Dead*.

By the period that appears in my dreams, Mut had regained her earlier form, and the cult of Amun had made peace with the cult of the sun-god, though only in the guise of Ra; Aten was reduced to a mere solar disc driving away the serpent-darkness Apophis.

Incidentally, in Phrygia (modern Turkey) at that time the same cult was attached to the goddess Cybele. Today one of its best-preserved witnesses is ancient Hierapolis, the city above Pamukkale's travertine terraces. A peaceful place now. Yet once, in its amphitheatre, rivers of blood flowed: people worked themselves into trances and then mutilated themselves, men were publicly castrated... a truly blood-thirsty goddess. And this horror the Hyksos brought into Egypt, though draped and disguised.

HURGHADA-LUXOR, JANUARY 2022

My ticket was for the end of January. I used to fly into Hurghada at this time when I was at university: I would finish my exams and escape to swim and bask in the sun — it was always warm. Even when a cold wind blew at night, you could walk about in a T-shirt by day. Not this time. The year had turned bitterly cold, both in Turkey and in Egypt.

I travelled via Istanbul, where our departure was delayed for three hours because it was so cold the turbines had frozen. We waited our turn for de-icing; then, once we were thoroughly coated in reagent, the aircraft shot skywards. I had never taken off like that before: no announcement, no “fasten your seat belts” — we simply burst from the de-icing spray straight into the sky.

I shook in the plane just as I had at fifteen: the whole flight passed in an odd flutter of nerves. Egypt, Hurghada — as though for the very first time! And, amazingly, when I reached the row of bank kiosks to buy my visa, I began to speak Arabic. How? I had not used the language for ten years, yet the moment I opened my mouth, Arabic words poured out of me like a river.

Outside the airport my driver — sent by the hotel — was waiting. The poor man had stood for hours in that icy wind. There is no arrivals hall for greeters, and getting into the terminal is a feat in itself: without a ticket you are refused entry. Wrapped in his jacket, he had waited the full three hours. Still, he greeted me with a beaming smile: “I decided to stay; in this wind, where would you have found a taxi?” The gesture touched me deeply.

The night-time streets of Hurghada were deserted, yet the doors of little supermarkets and cafés glowed invitingly. After a modest inflight snack and hours of sitting, I was ravenous. In Egypt one can never go hungry, even at night.

How does one befriend an Egyptian? I disarmed him with a single question: “Is anything edible open right now? I fancy taameya.”

“Taameya?!” He burst out laughing. “Where on earth did you spring from? Very well, let’s go and eat taameya.”

Taameya is the Egyptian falafel, but here it is made not from chickpeas, as in other Middle Eastern countries, but from large fava beans. It is the most popular Egyptian breakfast, second only to *ful* — mashed beans.

First I dropped my bags at the hotel. A quick glance round my room — delightful! Clean, stylish, comfortable. And then I dashed off... for breakfast? It was five in

the morning, but never mind, an early breakfast would do. To the infectious beat of “Dance Monkey” we headed to a small locals’ restaurant called Abu Aya.

At the entrance a counter with grills greeted me; behind the glass sat pickled aubergines, salads and other treats. Metal tables and chairs gleamed as though fresh from the polisher. The dining room was quiet, though people darted in from time to time for takeaway orders. A dignified, bearded man arrived with small children — astonishing, five a.m. and they were wide awake, come for taameya. The cook behind the counter filled countless paper cones with delicacies, and the children jostled to see who would carry the bag.

How I had missed Egyptian food! They brought us a whole mountain of little dishes: taameya, tiny pickled aubergines, peppers, potato wedges, assorted pickles, fresh salad and my beloved local bread, *aish baladi*. And, of course, chips — though I never quite grasp why they appear, yet for Egyptians they are sacred. No spoons, no forks — eat with bread! Flatbreads substitute for every utensil, and Egyptians handle them so deftly they can even eat soup as easily as with a spoon: simply pinch off a piece of pita and voilà — a spoon!

By the end of breakfast we were fast friends. His name is Mustafa. He is from Qena, has lived in Hurghada for several years and works as a private driver. He complained that life in Egypt has grown hard, the people are impoverished. I replied that Turkey and Russia are much the same.

All in all, I possess one marvellous quality — common, perhaps, but too often ignored. I can sense future friends simply by their energy. Sometimes you meet someone and know at once: “All right, this is for the long haul.” With others, a single glance tells you to keep your distance. I read people’s intentions.

Mustafa had an unusually clear energy about him. He was shy and open, always ready to help. And I can say, even jumping ahead — I was never once mistaken about him. Our friendship only grew stronger.

“Shall we watch the sunrise?” he suggested. “Half an hour won’t ruin your day, and you can always nap on the beach later.”

“Why not!” I agreed. I’ve always regretted wasting time on sleep. Yes, my dreams are sometimes wonderful — but the world is so full of interesting things, and this was a sunrise — in Egypt! It’s a marvellous sight: the sun quite literally leaps from the sea, so bright and full of joy, and so very fast.

The promenade along Sheraton Street sits high above the water, and it’s a perfect place for watching the sun rise. We parked the car on an empty lot and turned on some Brazilian music. It was freezing cold, and we danced just to keep warm.

“Who even *are* you? Where do you come from? I’ve never met anyone like you!” Mustafa kept repeating in amazement, listening to my story — why I was here and what had brought me.

Despite the dancing, we were utterly frozen waiting for dawn. The winter sun doesn’t warm anything until ten o’clock at the earliest. But oh, the beauty of it! In golden light, everything seems dressed up and at peace — eternal somehow. One could stare forever. And then — there it was. The cold disappeared, lost in the sheer brilliance of that moment. We watched, entranced, as the scarlet disc rolled swiftly out of the pale sea into a pale sky, and in seconds flung out blinding, joyful rays, painting the sky and water in turquoise and ultramarine.

Back at the hotel, I barely made it to the shower, and after washing, collapsed into bed and fell asleep instantly.

I dreamed I was running from someone through corridors lined with frescoes. I darted into my room and bolted the door. Suddenly, I saw the broad back of my husband at the window.

He turned to me and said, “Were you waiting for me? Did you call me? I’m here — with you.” He opened his arms for an embrace. I ran to him. He held me tightly... and I woke up.

Outside, the wind howled, rattling the windows. The sun was already high in the sky.

“I’ll sleep for another hour, then grab breakfast and start figuring out how to get to Luxor,” I thought, and drifted back to sleep.

One advantage of staying in an apartment hotel is that you don’t have to race to breakfast like in all-inclusive resorts. Technically, no hotel forces you to eat three times a day — but something about that setting makes you feel like you must. In an apartment, there’s more freedom.

So I got up only at 10:30 a.m., took my time getting ready, and set out in search of *taameya* and guava juice. Yes, yes — again! I think I could live on *taameya* and guava alone.

On Hurghada’s main street there’s a cosy little place with a name that sounds musical to the Russian ear — Gad. It’s something like the Egyptian answer to McDonald’s — a chain of Egyptian fast food restaurants. I bought a freshly baked pita stuffed with a huge portion of *taameya*, cucumber and tomato salad, all generously drizzled with tahini sauce — pure heaven!

It's especially delicious with sweet black tea and fresh mint (or as they say in Egypt: *shai bil na'na*).

Then I strolled over to Cherry Street, where one of the little corner shops sells freshly squeezed guava juice. That was it — *bliss*. After such a delightful second breakfast, I was ready to begin the search for a way to reach Karnak.

What were the options?

Car hire? To be honest, not the most practical option. In Egypt, the roads are ruled either by the fearless or the completely unhinged. I might be a bit of both — but not to the degree required for venturing beyond the tourist zone. I once had the dubious honour of driving in Cairo — never again, thank you very much! I truly thought I would lose my mind. Cars go in every direction at once, and pedestrians weave between them without so much as a glance to either side. In their defence, it's the only way to cross the street in Egypt: you look straight ahead and zigzag your way through moving traffic. Just don't make eye contact with the drivers — if they think you've seen them, they won't slow down.

Option two — a guided tour. But there's a catch: you're tied to the group. Plus the constant detours to papyrus workshops and perfume factories... Not for me. Especially since I wanted to stop in Dendera on the way. It has a stunningly preserved temple — I'd love to see it — but not all excursions make that detour.

The best option by far is a car with a driver. That's what I settled on. Besides, Mustafa had given me his phone number and promised to take me wherever I wanted to go. So I called him:

“Mustafa, I need to get to Luxor. Urgently. Two days.”

He was thrilled, and happily agreed to drive me south, through his hometown of Qena, and show me Luxor through his own eyes.

But, as it turned out, it's not as simple as just hopping in the car — at least not when heading south.

To get from Hurghada to Luxor, you have to submit your documents to the tourist police and obtain something like an intercity travel permit. In the morning, with all papers in hand, you must arrive at a designated checkpoint at the southern exit of Hurghada and join a convoy of other travellers headed to Luxor. Along the way, you must stop and register at each checkpoint — and there are quite a few!

Your route is recorded in a special logbook, together with your driver's phone number.

And if you enter Luxor but fail to leave at your stated time, your driver will be in serious trouble. And so will you, of course.

These regulations were introduced after the horrific massacre at the Temple of Hatshepsut in Luxor in 1997. Sixty-two people were killed in a terrorist attack, and the government responded by tightening control.

In principle, such measures are bearable — after all, they're for our safety. Egypt is, after all, a country that exists in a permanent state of military readiness.

We set out from Hurghada at dawn. Mustafa arrived at 4:30 a.m. sharp. The night was still deep and dark as we stopped to refuel and stock up on food and drinks for the road.

“What do you need in Luxor?” Mustafa asked, narrowing his eyes with curiosity.

“Oh, just a little matter stretching back a few millennia,” I replied with a smile.

“Are you insane or something? Am I even safe travelling with you? Listen, my brother's the police chief for the Red Sea region. He'll find you if anything happens to me!” he said suspiciously.

“What do you mean ‘if anything happens to you’?” I laughed. “Relax, you're not my type.”

“Excuse me?” Mustafa looked at me, deeply offended.

“I mean I'm not planning to kidnap you,” I clarified. His face fell — clearly, some part of him had been hoping to be abducted by this mad blue-eyed woman.

And so we arrived at the convoy assembly point. There were rows of large buses from different tourist companies, most notably the enormous blue ones from the Russian company TEZ Tour — the ones Egyptian drivers have been laughing at for years.

Imagine: bright blue sides with giant yellow letters spelling “TEZ” — which, in Arabic, happens to mean “arse”.

Elsewhere, private cars and minibuses clustered together. Most of the people travelling in them were locals heading home or running errands. For instance, if someone works at a hotel and gets time off, they'll come here and join the convoy to reach their village. The roads remain closed overnight.

Show your documents to the police officer, register at the booth at the city's edge, stamp a hundred and fifty forms... and only then may you leave the buffer zone.

I'll skip over our stop at the Temple of Dendera in Qena. My story begins two centuries before that temple was built. In short: it is the temple of the goddess of love, beauty, and the morning dawn — Hathor. Its construction began roughly a hundred years before the birth of Christ. Some say it was Cleopatra who commissioned it. Who else but she would build a temple to the goddess of love? You know her tragic fate. With her, the era of the pharaohs ended. The temples were abandoned, buried by sand, and forgotten.

The Temple of Hathor stood hidden beneath the sand for centuries, which is why it's so well preserved. I wholeheartedly recommend visiting it. There are corridors, stairways, underground chambers, and everything is still covered in vivid colours — it's simply magnificent.

On the ceiling is a glorious depiction of the majestic goddess Nekhbet in flight, a zodiac map, and the birth of Hathor, goddess of the morning star, from the sky goddess Nut. The walls are adorned with bas-reliefs showing the pharaoh feasting and celebrating.

But there's one thing worth mentioning.

As you head south, you begin to realise how restricted Egyptians are within their own country. My driver wasn't allowed to enter the temple with me. I had to argue with the guards:

“Are you serious? He's Egyptian — this is his land, his heritage! You're telling me, a foreigner, that I may walk freely here, while he is denied entry? How is that possible?”

The guards — a mix of police and military — were flustered by my indignation.

“It's just the rules...” they muttered.

But I quickly found the magic words: “He's my husband. You have no right to stop him.”

And voilà — the phrase worked like a charm.

Suddenly, from “just another Egyptian”, he became “the husband of a foreign woman”, and every door opened before us. They didn't even ask for documents.

Maybe they thought that if I spoke Arabic, I must have been here many times before. Or perhaps they simply didn't want to deal with a bold, defiant woman.

Still, the whole incident was baffling — safety is one thing, but surely there must be a limit.

After enjoying every nook and cranny of that marvellous temple complex, we continued on toward Karnak.

When most people think of Egypt, the first images that come to mind are the Great Pyramids and the Sphinx. Yes, they're impressive and mysterious, but personally, they never moved me much.

The Sphinx, in fact, was a complete disappointment — far smaller than I expected.

It's usually photographed from an angle that makes it seem colossal, like it could swallow the pyramids whole, but in reality, it's not such an imposing sight.

In Arabic, the Sphinx is called “Abu el-Hawl”, which literally means “Father of Terror”.

To be honest — not that terrifying.

If you want goosebumps, better visit the Oracles of Memnon in Thebes. Just stand between them, close your eyes, and ask a question — that's where the real chill will run through you. But I'll get to that later.

It was always the South of Egypt that called to me.

The North feels more modern, more cosmopolitan — cultures blended together and time racing at the speed of light.

But in the South, as Cleopatra herself once said: “Here, time is thick and slow, like molasses.”

In Luxor, time seems to stop altogether.

When I first visited Karnak in 2000, I could hardly believe my eyes.

How could such a place have been built at all?! Everything there is astonishingly vast: the obelisks piercing the sky, wide passageways... Even in their weathered state, the structures are breathtaking — massive walls adorned with hieroglyphs, monumental gates, and elegant rows of timeless columns. Among it all, you feel like a grain of sand in the cosmos.

In this palace of stone, time truly stands still.

In Luxor, two temples lie quite close to each other, and many visitors confuse them due to their similar architecture.

The Karnak Temple is the largest temple complex in the world, and its construction began as far back as the second millennium BCE.

It housed the very first oracle of Amun — and the most awe-inspiring in size.

This oracle, the voice of Amun, took the form of stelae carved with the god's ears.

All important state matters were decided only after consulting the Karnak oracle.

It also confirmed candidates for priesthood and selected the High Priest of Amun.

The temple complex is divided into three parts. In the centre stands the Great Temple of Amun. On one side is the temple dedicated to his wife, the goddess Mut, patroness of queens. On the other is the temple of their son, Khonsu.

The Luxor Temple was built in Amun's honour during the reign of Pharaoh Amenhotep III and later expanded by the pharaohs of the 15th–13th centuries BCE.

Together, the two temples form a single complex, connected by a paved avenue of ram-headed sphinxes, along which ritual processions once passed.

During the Opet Festival — the ceremonial marriage of Amun and Mut — the images of the gods were carried in barques from Karnak to Luxor and back again.

And, as I mentioned before, parades were also held here as part of the morning birth ritual of the sun god Ra.

The moment you enter the temple, you can feel how carefully its architecture was designed.

Everything is laid out to impress, to overwhelm the psyche with sheer scale.

The deeper you go into the temple, the denser the space becomes, the air thinner, and the massive stone figures surround you from every side.

The level of mysticism is off the charts.

The hypostyle hall at Karnak covers a full 5,000 square metres. It holds 144 columns, sixteen in every row. In the centre rise 12 “papyrus columns”, each 21 metres high with a girth of over 10 metres. The remaining 132 columns reach 13 metres in height and about 9 metres round. Their shape and arrangement create an astonishing play of light and shadow, which is why Karnak is still deemed an unrivalled architectural masterpiece. Even on a scorching summer day, the hall is half-dark and cool, though the temple has long since lost its roof.

The Amun complex was laid out with meticulous attention to time and space: sunrise, sunset, the solstices, the phases of the moon — everything was considered. Did you know that the altars of temples worldwide, whatever their era or location, are set to the east, facing the rising sun? Yet in Amun's temples the priests faced west, their backs to the east, when observing the dawn. Gates and obelisks were lit by the rising sun, signalling the start of the mass.

In Karnak the main entrance stands to the west, with no obelisks beside it. In the Luxor temple, the entrance is on the east, flanked by two obelisks. The ceremonial procession set off from the obelisks inside Karnak and moved along the avenue of ram-headed sphinxes westward to the western altar — a journey from Ra, god of the sun, towards Osiris, lord of the afterlife. Prayers facing west do rather suggest that the Amun rites might indeed have touched upon the darker arts.

This time I entered Karnak with a noisy group of British pensioners. Our guide — a plump, merry fellow calling himself Ramses (pure showmanship, of course) — rattled away in English with such an accent that even I sometimes struggled to follow. He enthused about the columns: their number, their height, their diameter, while the tourists snapped imaginary shutters on their smartphones.

Slipping away, I climbed onto the base of one column, leaned my head against the carved ankh and closed my eyes. At once I fell out of reality again. A gust of hot wind swept over me. I opened my eyes and began to watch. Vivid colours — every shade of ochre and lapis — adorned every corner of temple and palace. Gods and pharaohs on the reliefs wore garments of pure white, gold and azure. Airy curtains of the finest cotton billowed, and exquisite wooden shutters stood like frozen lace.

Life in the palace was wonderfully comfortable: rooms devised by ancient architects kept the morning cool even in fiercest heat, while stones warmed by day gave out their heat through the chill nights. How do I know? Have you forgotten? I live here. It is the year 323.

South of Karnak lies the sacred lake of carp, where the processions with Amun's barque were held. On the bank stands a huge granite scarab, Khepri, sacred insect of Egypt. Guide Ramses led his tourists in a ring around the statue, promising the fulfilment of their every wish.

Spellbound, I made for my favourite inner garden with its pond. Lush greenery and masses of flowers flourished there, and wonderfully coloured fish swam in the water. Legend says these are the very fish into which Moses turned the Pharaoh's guards. The garden was a haven of peace even in times of war, drought or the Nile's flooding. All around now is sand, yet I see palms, fish, curtains

stirring in the breeze... and myself in a silver mirror — three strands of turquoise, lapis and jasper beads, a menat necklace, threads of beads and golden drops braided into my hair. In my hands is a beautiful sword.

Menat — a necklace-instrument, originally the symbol of Hathor; in Amenhotep III's time it became linked to the cult of Mut.

Suddenly a man came up behind me, kissed my neck, gently took the sword and whispered, "Beloved, surrender your weapon." Goose-bumps ran down my spine — and the vision vanished.

I caught my breath as though after running. Such visions can be exhausting, yet I had to explore further.

"Right," I thought, "next stop — the altar."

According to my dreams it lay near the shrine of my patroness, Mut. On that altar we burned offerings of baskets filled with perfectly arranged lotus blooms.

I went the way I had seen in the dream: through the right-hand aisle, across the garden to the far end, past the distant shrine of the "Listening Ear"... and my eyes widened in astonishment. Incredible! There stood the altar exactly as in my dreams: a narrow stair inside, up which I had carried gifts to the goddess, and the sacred fire. Something turned over within me — never had I been so close to answers.

I climbed the altar by the narrow inner staircase and knelt on the final step, placing my palms on the centre of the offering stone, which smelled suspiciously of resin. It felt as though I was in two places at once — here and there — two thousand years ago.

In this world, I wore an orange shirt and carrot-shaped linen trousers. In that one — a snow-white toga with golden clasps. The only thing that remained unchanged was the multitude of silver bracelets on both my arms.

Here, there were crowds of tourists, sand and dust. There — vivid corridors of palaces and temples, priests and guards... I was at our final mass.

A portly priest was delivering a speech, proclaiming how the people of Egypt were bidding farewell to their sacred twins and the great bull.

He said celestial barques had been prepared for us, and that at dawn we would set off for Memphis.

We walked through the great halls, my sister and I holding the golden ring through the bull's nose with one hand, and bowls of incense and fragrant resins with the other. The junior priests followed us, carrying the barque, veiled in translucent fabric. It gave the illusion of drifting downriver through a mist.

In the crowd, I caught familiar eyes — my husband's. He looked at me and silently mouthed: "Do not be afraid. I love you."

My head spun. I stood from my knees — and the vision vanished.

That evening at dinner, Mustafa and I discussed the plan for tomorrow. The temples of the Valley of the Living were behind us — it was time to venture into the Valley of the Kings.

I was starving! A stuffed pigeon with rice, a bowl of pickled aubergines, baba ghanoush, a curious green molokhia soup, a bowl of salad, and an enormous flatbread — I inhaled it all in a single breath.

Even that feast didn't stop me from devouring a generous portion of Om Ali — a delicious milk pudding layered with flaky pastry.

Mustafa watched in disbelief.

"Alex, are you going to eat the plates too? You'll be too full to sleep! What time are we getting up tomorrow?"

"Let's meet at breakfast at 8:30," I suggested.

"You'll still be able to eat again after all that?" he laughed.

Well yes — yes, I would!

Our hotel in the centre of Luxor, not far from the bazaar, had tiny rooms. The building was historic — it had been built by the French during their influence over Egypt. They liked to call it a protectorate, but in truth, Egypt was little more than a French colony, and of course, they built their little "iron-shaped" buildings here, just like in Paris. And yes — with micro-sized rooms to match Paressian style.

I remembered my first time in Paris — the hotel on Montmartre, the whole cliché. But the rooms were so small, even my 162 cm frame could stretch wall-to-wall with arms out. And that was a "luxury suite", which came with a bathroom barely a metre wide, pipes groaning like some ghost from the sewers.

The climate in this Luxor hotel seemed to be left over from Akhenaten's day. The room was stuffy and hot, though it was January and should have been cool.

As for the size — I've said enough.

The ancient ceiling fan only added noise, not relief, so I simply turned it off. To this day I have no idea how I managed to fall asleep. And just like that — I slipped through time...

THEBES, 332 BCE

My sister and I were dashing through the temple corridors, racing to reach the ceremony where the High Priest impatiently awaited us. We were always rushing through the temple — and it was always entirely my fault. Poor Asenat constantly had to drag me down from walls, fish me out of rivers; she could never quite keep up with my endless mischiefs. And the stern High Priest Hekamun would grumble, “You’re late again! How is it even possible that—”

“Forgive me, O great priest!” I interrupted him, “but this morning I had a vision just before dawn!”

The scribes immediately seized their scrolls. “I saw boats coming down the Nile from Upper Egypt. They’re due to arrive today.”

The scribes’ styluses began to scratch hurriedly, while the priest stared at me grimly, then sighed heavily and waved his hand. The ceremony finally began.

Imagine the astonishment when, not long after, the sentries brought word of the approaching guests. By sunset, nine large feluccas moored at the riverbank.

How did I know? I had climbed onto the palace roof — you wouldn’t believe how far you can see from up there! White triangles of sails drifted among the lush palms, gliding slowly — the wind was faint, so the rowers were doing most of the work. I figured they’d arrive just after the ceremonies, and they did. But that moment was recorded as the fulfilled vision of a priestess.

No one would have imagined that the gentle, flower-like priestess of the great Apis could scale walls and columns like a monkey.

From the feluccas stepped the rowers — handsome young men with swords gleaming in the sun. The swords weren’t Egyptian in style, and I *longed* to hold one in my hands.

Then came the new ruler of Egypt, Ptolemy, flanked by his closest companions. *In June of 323 BCE, following the death of Alexander in Babylon, Ptolemy was appointed satrap of Egypt. That autumn, he arrived to take control.*

A feast was held in honour of the arrivals. All the nobility of Thebes was invited — magicians, musicians, dancers. But their dances were nothing like ours.

To the deep rhythm of the drums, our bodies melted into motion. Energy flowed from our fingertips to the crown of our heads in waves. We simply let it pass through us, mirroring every curve and swirl of the sound waves.

The new ruler requested to see the dance of the sacred twins — a performance he had heard much about.

The drums thundered. My sister and I stepped forward, clothed in white togas and adorned with turquoise and lapis. In our hands were weightless veils. The dance portrayed the birth of the god Ra, the cycle of day and night — and all eyes were on us.

Then came the moment where I offered the sun's blessing to our honoured guest. I scooped a star from the sky with my right hand, cleansed it with my left, passed it through my heart, and extended it with both arms toward one of the warriors...

Our eyes met — and the world turned upside down. We both flushed red. Thankfully, the dim torchlight didn't betray us. But I was so close I couldn't help but notice his blush.

He was unspeakably handsome — powerfully built, with golden curls falling over his shoulders. His face was clean-shaven, his gaze sharp and intelligent. *That gaze!* It burned into me like a glowing coal pressed to my chest.

He was unlike anyone I had ever seen. As the dance ended, I grabbed my sister's hand and dragged her away from the celebration, back to our chambers.

My face was aflame. My body was feverish, shivering hot and cold in turns. We lay down to sleep — and inside my chest, it felt as though stonecutters were hammering away...

PRESENT DAY

You know, questions like these are usually for past-life regression therapists. They take you back into your previous lives, trying to figure out how old your soul is, how many reincarnations you've had, and what your mission is in this lifetime. Logically, if we fulfill our karmic purpose, something bright awaits us—most likely, heaven. But here's the thing...

Why didn't I go to a regression therapist to understand my dreams and visions? Honestly, I never believed in past lives. I had my own theory: I think each of us carries a kind of "black box" where everything that happens to us is recorded. And this box is inherited, passed down genetically to our children. Maybe that's why so many belief systems claim that children "pay for the sins of their parents." It's like we're continuing the story of our lineage.

From the moment a child is born, they inherit a set of traits, skills, and knowledge intended for them by their ancestors. And if that's really the case, then I'm undoubtedly from a line of witches and alchemists. In my family, everyone was either a herbalist, a seer, or a scholar. In the past, such people were automatically labeled sorcerers.

So, if a person evolves and grows spiritually, the entire energy of their ancestral line evolves as well. Those who are especially attuned to their roots may be able to open that "black box." They're the ones who see past lives—stories of their great-great-great-grandparents. Now I believe there are actually two such boxes. One for the soul and its incarnations, and another for the body, where the wisdom and energy of the family line accumulate. And when the soul's program aligns with the family's program—that's when a new person is born.

Why do some people open these boxes and others don't? Probably for the same reason some people can meditate while others never even think about it. Some are mathematicians, some are poets. Everyone has different settings, different ancestral frequencies connected to the universe, each with their own mission.

I know exactly where my story comes from—my mother's side. It's no coincidence that in Jewish tradition, lineage is traced through the mother. After all, it's the mother who passes down knowledge to her daughter. My mom has exactly the right "settings." Sometimes it even scares me how perceptive she is. We come from a line of warriors, although my mother herself is a pure creator. But if you push her too far, she turns into a true Amazon, ready to scorch the earth.

And apparently, our ancestral history is tied to Egypt. I have dreams about the desert, palm trees, and palaces—and my mother has had similar dreams. As proof of my theory, I have white birthmarks on my buttocks—commonly called "Arabian stars." These marks only appear on those with Arab blood in their veins.

An interesting fact: my great-great-great-grandmother was a foundling. She was discovered and taken in by a village in the Meshchera region, somewhere between Moscow and Vladimir. Imagine this: among tall, fair-haired, blue-eyed giants, there appeared a tiny dark-skinned girl with black hair and dark eyes. She grew up petite, with tiny size-35 feet and slender ankles and wrists...

THEBES, 332 BC

I would rise long before dawn — I had so much to do. On today's list: archery training, a quick swim, steal a sword from the guards and slash up some half-rotten palm tree, or climb up somewhere high. Of course, these activities weren't exactly safe — or appropriate for someone of my status. As my sister always said, these were the kind of things that "wouldn't end well."

That morning after the feast in honor of the foreigners — by the way, I hadn't slept a wink all night — I had already shot my arrows and headed out to swim. I'd long ago found a perfect riverbank path, hidden from prying eyes by a small cluster of trees. I often bathed there without a care: we always paid tribute to Sobek* in the form of chickens. Why would he need me?

But that day, a crocodile had crept into my sacred grove.

*Sobek — ancient Egyptian god of water and the Nile flood, a crocodile god.

I had enjoyed my swim and was already making my way back to the shore when I heard a rustling in the reeds. Only a few steps remained, and I was already ankle-deep in the dark, marshy silt at the water's edge... The crocodile moved surprisingly fast. They may seem sluggish, but when needed, they show shocking agility. I rushed forward, got stuck in the mire, fell, and frantically searched for anything that could save me — but there were only thin twigs around me, nothing solid to grab onto.

Everything seemed to happen in a slow, dreamlike haze, though in reality, it was a matter of seconds.

Suddenly, a man darted past me — judging by his muscles, he was a warrior. A struggle broke out: the crocodile's tail lashed the water wildly. The warrior kept his head above water, striking repeatedly with his dagger. The water frothed around them. Finally, the crocodile stopped moving and went limp.

My rescuer came to me and held out his hand to help me up. I stood, filthy, wearing nothing but my bracelets. And it was our guest from the night before! Our eyes met — and I did something unthinkable: I hugged him tightly — just as I was, practically naked. The bracelets clinked, and for a moment, the world went still. It was the first time I'd ever touched a man. We weren't supposed to! His arms held me just as tightly. It felt like only his embrace was keeping me from fainting and falling right back into the swamp.

I don't know how long we stood like that, but slowly I began to come back to my senses. My mind cleared, and I stepped back...

The warrior gently lifted my clothes and wrapped me in them.

“Thank you. You saved my life, foreigner.”

“For you, I’d fight off a horde of crocodiles and twice as many wild lions. But what is your name? Who are you?”

“I am Ankhsumut — priestess of the god Apis, sacred twin.” I bowed to him, even though we were not allowed to bow to anyone but Apis. Even the high priests were never honored with our bows. “And who are you, my savior?”

“My name is Mark. I am a warrior of Alexander. Our emperor has left this world, and we are here to establish a new order.”

The sun had begun to rise, its rays touching the tip of the tallest tree.

“Oh, gods, I have to run!” I exclaimed.

The warrior grabbed my hand firmly. “Promise me I’ll see you again!”

“I’ll see you at the palace!” I shouted as I pulled my hand free and ran.

That day’s mass went terribly. My thoughts were far from the ceremony, and I struggled to stay focused. The image of the warrior — his eyes, looking straight into my soul — wouldn’t leave me.

Even after the mass, his image kept haunting me, and it began to worry me.

First — he was a foreigner. I had never left Thebes, and the rest of the world felt distant and unreachable.

Second — he was a warrior, which meant he was always off to war. I’d heard that warriors spent their evenings with hetaerae... Great. Jealousy now gripped my heart.

Third — duty. Sacred twins weren’t allowed to even look at men until they left their service. But that part I could let slide. This very duty had once demanded that my sister and I give up our lives for the gods. And I always thought the gods would be far happier having beauties like us remain on Earth.

And above all — the burial of Apis was approaching at a terrifying pace. I needed to come up with something fast if I wanted to avoid joining him on the heavenly barque!

The garden of the Karnak Palace was an oasis of serenity and majesty, hidden from the bustling streets of Thebes. At its center lay a magnificent pond, covered in white lilies, their delicate blooms floating on the surface, sending gentle ripples across the water. Around the pond grew tall palm trees, their curved trunks reaching toward the sky, casting welcome shade from the scorching sun.

Between the trees bloomed vibrant bushes of red, yellow, and purple flowers. Their scents blended into the air like luxurious incense. The soft grass spread beneath one's feet like a green carpet, filling the space — everything was immersed in greenery.

On one side of the garden stood a small pavilion entwined with vines, where priestesses and guests could shelter from the heat and relax, enjoying the cool breeze. The rustling of leaves and the gentle songs of birds hinted at the world beyond this sacred place — a boundless world... It's amazing how you can feel eternity in a tiny pavilion*.

**By the way, it didn't survive. And I felt that same sense of infinity again a few months later — in the heart of the desert. But more on that later.*

A winding path, scattered with colourful stones, led to the opposite side of the garden. The way passed through an avenue of statues depicting gods and pharaohs. Their stone faces gazed skyward, as if awaiting the celebration in their honour. The gardens of Karnak Palace were a living reflection of the high standards of Egyptian culture and faith, where nature and art intertwined to create a space filled with sacred harmony. And among this splendour, we had our own little corner.

In the evening, I took my bow, sword, and dagger and headed to our courtyard to torture some palm trees. Tying a date pit to a trunk, I stepped back to the far end of the yard, drew the bowstring, exhaled, and let go. The arrow touched the pit with grace, slicing it in half.

A surprised gasp came from behind me. I instantly drew my dagger from its sheath and turned, falling into a combat stance. Behind me stood my warrior, his face filled with indescribable astonishment. I had never seen anyone in such deep shock; his puzzled expression made me laugh out loud.

“Oh gods, you're a warrior! You should know how people shoot arrows!”

“I've seen it, but only from soldiers, men, warriors! Not a woman! Let alone... practically a child!”

(“...A child?! Perfect!” flashed through my mind.)

“I didn’t know priestesses were trained to fight,” said Mark.

“Priestesses aren’t trained. But if a priestess wants to continue her earthly path, instead of sailing down the rivers of Osiris, she has to learn a lot.” I switched to his language: “Including how to talk to foreigners and defend herself.”

“What do you mean? Is someone trying to kill you?”

“When the Bull Apis dies, his entire retinue is sent with him to the other side. Apis turns twenty-five in three weeks. And a journey to the realm of Osiris isn’t on my list of plans.”

He looked at me questioningly, about to say something, but then my sister entered the garden. Upon seeing the warrior, she froze in place.

“Asenath, don’t be afraid. This is Mark, he’s from Rome. Asenath is my twin sister,” I introduced them.

“Peace to you. Alright, you’ll explain everything to me later,” said Asenath slowly, her wide eyes still fixed on our unexpected guest. “For now, we must prepare for tonight’s feast.”

“See you at the feast!” I shouted as I ran off to get dressed.

PRESENT DAY

I woke up to a knock at the door. “Alex, it’s already 8:45 — where are you?”

I’d overslept! Seven minutes later, fully dressed, I came down for breakfast. Mustafa grinned broadly as he watched me load up on taameya, omelette, and salad from the buffet. “You’ll burst!” he laughed, throwing his head back.

But I needed to regain my strength — so much had happened overnight. My body remembered every movement, as if I were still walking those ancient halls.

Dreams... Waking from them is always so strange. When I was about six, I used to dream of sleeping in lavishly decorated chambers. From the dense fog of sleep, I would be pulled out by the sound of heavy footsteps. Someone was approaching the doors of my bedroom quickly. In the darkness, my hand would fumble along the headboard. Where is my sword?!

Once, when I was about sixteen, I had the same dream again. I was searching under my pillow for a sword when suddenly the lights snapped on. Squinting, I opened my eyes and saw my grandmother standing over me.

“What are you doing? What are you groping for? Planning to escape?” she asked sternly. “Go to sleep already. I told you, I’m not letting you go to that disco.”

“Where am I?”

Grandma’s flat in a quiet Moscow suburb. I looked around: my bed with a pile of cosy pillows, Grandma’s fold-out sofa, the wardrobe, the sideboard, the dining table... All so familiar. And yet, a moment ago, I had been somewhere entirely different — a spacious chamber with an enormous carved canopy bed, air scented with incense, silhouettes of palms beyond the carved window shutters.

“So, what is this 2,000-year-old story of yours? What are you looking for?” Mustafa asked.

“I’m looking for my husband,” I replied without blinking.

“Ha! A husband?” Mustafa burst out laughing. “Marry me then, if you need a husband that bad! I’m single!”

“You’re not my type. I told you that already,” I laughed. “Besides, I’ve loved this man for over two thousand years. I simply must find him.”

We arrived at the Valley of the Mortuary Temples. I descended into every tomb, crawled through every passageway, explored every nook and cranny — but found nothing. No visions. No sensations.

The day slipped by unnoticed, the sun turning toward evening, bathing the landscape in golden light. But we had to leave Luxor strictly by 19:00. I’ve mentioned, haven’t I, that all tourists are required to leave the city by that time? Otherwise, the driver could get into serious trouble. They could confiscate the vehicle, detain him at the checkpoint, revoke his licence... anything. And naturally, that wouldn’t bode well for me either.

“Alright,” I said, pulling myself out of my thoughts. “Final stop — the Colossi of Memnon. Then dinner and off to Hurghada.”

There was no one by the columns; all the tours had already departed. Just the desert, distant mountains, and the setting sun. They say the lower part of the colossi contains a series of cracks and holes leading to chambers of intricate shapes. As air passes through these cavities, the statues emit strange sounds, like singing.

It’s said the statues sound around 5 a.m. in summer, and around 7 a.m. in winter — as the rising sun heats the air currents. But no one has yet determined exactly

how the sound is produced. And here's the real mystery: the tone of the statue's "voice" was once considered the reference pitch for tuning musical instruments throughout the ancient world.

The name "Memnon" means "Ruler of the Morning Dawn." That's why the statues are said to "sing" at sunrise. The sounds are described as a soft moan or whistle.

Most guidebooks claim the columns no longer sing. According to history, the statues have been silent since the year 199, when the Roman Emperor Septimius Severus tried to please the oracle and ordered the cracks repaired — sealing them up with mortar.

I don't know. I haven't seen it, haven't heard it. I can only tell you what happened to me.

It was five in the evening. Not morning — not even close, as you can imagine. I stood between the two giants and felt cool air threads creeping through my clothes to my skin. By then, I was already layered like a cabbage. Winter 2022 had turned out unusually cold, windy — and even snowy! Yes, that year it snowed in Egypt in early January. Can you imagine? Snow on the palms in Hurghada? Generations had never seen snow there! The poor Egyptians were in shock.

So there I stood between the columns, and the wind moved freely through my jacket, hoodie, cashmere sweater, and linen shirt — and don't even ask about my legs. The breeze swept over them, chilling me to the bone. And yet it felt as if I wasn't wearing any clothes at all. Strangely, I wasn't cold. I felt incredibly light. Gradually, it seemed like the streams of wind were passing *through* me — as if I were completely transparent and weightless.

And then I heard it. Not loud, but clear and resonant — a steady high C, fourth octave. Then came an A-sharp and a lower A-sharp underneath it. The harmony was astonishing — a perfect triad, delicate and profound. And all of me — no longer a body, but something pure and formless — tuned itself to those vibrations. I felt peace, balance, and I fell into a vision...

LUXOR, THEBES, 332 BCE

The pharaoh's guests, dressed in finery and cheer, chattered in many tongues, tambourines rattled, and the sounds of harps and flutes wove intricate melodies. Wine flowed freely, and the tables were heavy with food, creating the sense of a true feast.

My sister and I, wrapped in colourful shawls, stepped into the centre of the room. The buzz quieted down, and we began the Dance of the Seven Veils. Our hips moved in smooth figure eights, loosening the tight knots of the scarves until, one by one, they slipped from our bodies — revealing not just our skin, but our souls.

Through the dance, we told the story of how each person is clothed in many layers that hide their true essence. Only by shedding all that is earthly — hurt, sorrow, and other “stones” — can one appear before the gods.

First, the scarf around the throat — symbol of resentment — dropped. Then the one at the waist — fear. Then from the chest — distrust. The ties beneath the bust came undone, and a scarlet veil unfurled to the floor like a bridal gown — the sacred union of man and woman. At last, it too fell away, leaving only a tender white semi-transparent toga — the symbol of family. Family meant full renunciation of sin; within it, one was purified, growing spiritually through union with a partner.

We were now ready to stand before the gods, faces unveiled. We pulled the sharp combs from our hair. The final strip of fabric fell from my face, and thick waves of dark hair tumbled freely over my shoulders.

I glanced at Mark. His piercing eyes burned into me, and my cheeks flushed. He rose from the table and left the room. I did not see him among the guests again.

The rest of the evening passed strangely. On one hand, it was festive — we listened to travellers share stories of distant lands, of life and food and fashion, of battles fought and victories won. Yet I couldn’t shake the unease. Where was Mark?

Back in my chambers, I closed the door behind me — and suddenly someone grabbed me from behind and covered my mouth with his hand.

“Shh, it’s me,” he whispered.

“What are you doing here, stranger?” I asked, my heart pounding in my chest.

“Don’t call me a stranger. I’m not a stranger to you,” Mark said — and then he kissed me. I melted in his arms. “Say my name.”

“Mark...” I whispered, and he hungrily kissed me again.

“You are in danger. I won’t let that happen,” he said, his voice firm. “We’ll get married and leave for my country.”

His words stunned me. My thoughts raced, tangled — but deep inside, something settled. Everything had unfolded as fate intended. A return to life, freedom from all that was familiar — it was all there, in that one moment, in his words, in his promise.

I understood that this dance had changed both of us. On the horizon, a new life appeared — full of the unknown, of anticipation, of hope.

We talked until morning. About everything.

Mark told me how he ended up at the palace in Pella, about his childhood, how he trained with Alexander, and how he spent years studying languages, strategies, combat arts, and precise sciences.

I told him how I became a priestess, how one day we were taken — my sister and I — in a gilded chariot to the palace, how we were taught rituals, the sacred language of priests, music, dance, and poetry.

We came from different worlds, from entirely different cultures. He grew up among the wild greenery of Macedonia, I — among the sands of Egypt. In his land, cities were dressed in gleaming white marble; ours — painted in every imaginable colour. He had travelled the world. I had never left my city, not beyond the temple of Hatshepsut. He was a warrior, hardened by battle. I was a priestess wrapped in silks and golden plates.

And yet, despite all that — inside, we were the same. Two children raised far from home. I had Asenath. Mark had only his sword, his dagger, and his bow with arrows.

But from that moment forward, we decided never to part again.

In the darkness of my chamber, two people gave each other a vow — of loyalty and eternal love. We exchanged rings, completely naked under the gently swaying canopy of my bed. He became my husband. In the name of light and truth. In the name of the infinite universe. Before all the gods — and the one Creator, Atum.

Every time Mark stayed with me, the first thing he'd do was remove all my jewellery.

“I want to be with *you*,” he’d say softly, unclasping the bracelets on my wrists. “Not with these amulets. Not with these false gods who steal life from people for the pleasure and profit of priests.”

I would turn around and he'd gently undo each of my necklaces. "Now, I see only you," he'd whisper. "This is how your body feels most real. My love."

And it truly *was* the most natural thing in the world — being with him, naked, heart to heart, arms and legs intertwined, sharing one breath between us. There was something magical in the energy flowing between us — from him to me and back again, filling us both and spinning into a soft vortex that lit up the whole room. It felt like we were glowing.

Then a wave of indescribable bliss crashed over me. Startled by the intensity, I opened my eyes...

The room was filled with the soft light of dawn. Mark stood before me, his eyes shining like stars — reflecting the boundless bond between us. My heart swelled with warmth and joy. In that moment, I knew we were truly one — two worlds merging into perfect harmony, ready for whatever came next.

"Will you always be with me?" I asked, trying to hide my vulnerability — but my face gave everything away.

"Always, my love," he replied, leaning in to kiss me with such tenderness it felt like the entire world disappeared.

In his embrace, I finally understood: this feeling wasn't just romance — it was devotion. A connection that would live forever, no matter what fate tried to place between us. We were ready to face it all — hand in hand, heart to heart — and nothing could tear us apart.

PRESENT DAY

I was still standing between the giant oracle statues when I heard Mustafa exclaim: "What are you doing?! You've been standing here with your eyes closed for fifteen minutes! Shall we go? I'm starving and we've got a drive ahead."

Fifteen minutes?! All of that... in fifteen minutes?!

"Alright, let's eat!" I called back, shaking my head to clear the remnants of the vision. "Where to?"

"I know a great spot just across the way. But hurry — it's already nearly half past five!"

One of the perks of local Egyptian restaurants: there's never much of a wait. Everything's already prepped — just needs to be grilled, sautéed, or plated.

We quickly tucked into grilled meat patties — *kofta*, as they're cheerfully called — dipping them in tahini and washing it all down with fresh mango juice.

And then the phone rang.

“Mustafa Setar? Where are you? What’s happened to your tourist?” It was the tourism police. “You’ve got twenty minutes to get out of Luxor.”

Eighteen-forty?! And the checkpoint was far.

Mustafa drove like a man possessed. But we were running out of time. I closed my eyes — and suddenly the world began to slow. The tuk-tuks drifted past the car like clouds. People froze mid-step. Cars crept by at a snail’s pace, and the dust hanging in the air stood still — like in a slow-motion dream.

When we finally reached the checkpoint, Mustafa held the documents out the window. The officer stamped them. The clock read: 18:59.

We made it! Defying physics and all common sense.

Suddenly I felt bone-tired. Mustafa stared at me, wide-eyed: “Was that you? Did you do some kind of... spell? You *did*, didn’t you?!”

The road to Hurghada was long and dark. There was nothing to see anymore, and I had no energy left. I fell asleep...

THEBES

I’m walking down a corridor, its walls lined with ancient hieroglyphs. I wear sheer robes and heavy jewellery of silver and stone. I’m leading my husband by the hand toward the bedchamber. He is tall, broad, his perfect body half-hidden beneath leather armour. Behind us follows his old nursemaid, Lipa.

We married without temples, without ritual — bound by a vow that needed no witness. We were wildly in love. And yet, I was uneasy.

I was forbidden to touch ordinary mortals — let alone *have* a husband. I was one of the sacred twins — priestesses of the Apis Bull. By joining in this union, we had broken the law. And if anyone found out, we would be punished severely.

But did it matter?

Not really. I was doomed either way. In just ten days, the Apis Bull would be led to his rest — and his entire court would be sent into the afterlife with him.

When the bull is drowned, my sister and I are to be the first to die.

I put my trust in this foreigner who already feels so close. It seemed I was under the surest protection, as though Isis herself had descended and wrapped me in her wings.

We entered a massive carved doorway. He took me by the shoulders, turned me toward him and looked straight into my eyes. “Fear nothing. I will never leave you. Wherever you are, I will find you — I swear it! We shall be together always — in this life, in the next, and in all the ones to come,” he said, kissing me.

“My love, I leave you with Lipa. She will help us. The only soul I can truly trust. If anything goes wrong, she’ll let me know at once.”

Lipa nodded wordlessly, yet her gaze stayed fixed on me. We began to prepare our escape: gathering what we would need, packing jewels for Lipa to carry out in her chests. We exchanged only brief, practical words. After Lipa had taken away a couple of bundles, I lay down to sleep, my mind still whirling.

Deep past midnight I felt a hand on my shoulder. Instantly I whipped the dagger from beneath my pillow, flipped the intruder flat on their back and pressed the blade to their throat.

“Lipa!” I hissed, startled. “Are you tired of living?”

“O sacred Ankhsumut, I must speak with you,” Lipa pleaded. “I could find no time by day to raise this, and my question is of the utmost importance.”

I released her and sat her on my bed. “What did you need to discuss?” I asked.

“It concerns my son Mark. You are his wife, which makes you as a daughter to me, so I can reveal all my secrets. My true name is Meda — I am the wife of Philip II, a Thracian princess. Philip married me for my wealth, which in the end saved both my life and my son’s.

The king spent only one night with me, and I conceived a child — Prince Karan. But to be Philip’s wife is perilous. To be Philip’s son is twice as perilous. The mothers of princes feud ceaselessly, each trying to edge her son nearer the throne, above all Olympias and Philinna — they’ve gone mad with it. I understand Olympias: she is Alexander’s mother. But Philinna, with her half-wit Arrhidaeus — why does she bother? But to the point...

My son and I were living in my homeland, Seuthopolis, in the Odrysian kingdom. When my husband died, Karan and I were summoned to the court in Pella. He was only six, unfit to rule, especially without a regent. He had elder brothers, and I did not wish to risk his life.

No one in Pella knew me, and I understood Olympias would never let us live. I bribed every member of our entourage generously so they would attest that the princess and her son had fallen ill on the road and died. I took the guise of the prince's wet-nurse, declaring that my own boy — Mark — was his milk-brother.

When we arrived at court with our fabricated tale — and the servants and guards vouched for it — Olympias rejoiced. She placed me close to Queen Philinna, and Mark became fast friends with Alexander and Eurydice. He had a blissful childhood. He never went on serious campaigns until he was grown; nothing troubled him, and he received an excellent education. Ptolemy took him only on Alexander's final march into Egypt — where you and he met.”

“So Mark does not know who he is?”

“No one knows anything,” Lipa replied. “If two people know a secret, it's no longer a secret. But I had to tell you. You are his wife, and you love him. I believe you two will be happy. You have my mother's blessing.”

Lipa embraced me tightly. “I will guard you like the apple of my eye, my daughter.” At that moment, tears welled up in my eyes.

I took a deep breath, realising the full weight of what she had revealed. My mind swirled with emotions — joy and sorrow, worries about the future and fear of the sharp edges of the past. The life I had longed for turned out to be veiled in secrets, and now it was my task to unravel them.

What now, knowing the truth about Mark? How do I carry this knowledge and protect him from dangers he doesn't even know exist? Even if we leave Egypt, the threats to our little world of two will not disappear. The palace intrigues, the mad widows of dead kings, Alexander's former comrades fighting for power... I realised I must be cautious, no matter what. First and foremost, I had to find a way to protect my husband and the love that had filled my life with meaning. But that would come later, once we left Egypt...

HURGHADA

Mustafa let me sleep and called around three in the afternoon. “How are you feeling?”

“Thanks, I slept wonderfully.”

“Let’s go out tonight. I’ll treat you to some fish, and you can tell me your plans.”

“Deal. Pick me up at six.” I hung up and headed to the beach.

Swimming was out of the question — the cold was unbearable. The sun was shining, but the icy wind ruined everything. I built a barricade from sunbeds and towels, settled in, and started reading about the history of Ancient Egypt.

And here’s what I read: indeed, when Alexander died, a bull in Luxor was already nearing its end. It was taken to Memphis for burial in a special tomb called the Serapeum. In 322 BC, after Alexander’s death, Ptolemy took his place. He paid for the burial of the Apis bull — they say it cost fifty talents of silver. He came to power in January, and the burial took place in April. Can you imagine? It all matched! All my dreams turned out to be historical events recorded in chronicles.

So... I need to go to Memphis.

“Memphis?!” Mustafa placed a fish in front of me, laid out on foil and roasted in the oven, covered with vegetables.

“Alex, eat and calm down already. Why do you need to go to Memphis?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I just feel like some answers are waiting for me there.”

“It’s a sin, you running all over Egypt like this. What are you even looking for?”

“I told you — I’m looking for my husband. He promised to find me, but I can’t just sit and wait. What if in this lifetime, he’s forgotten about me? I can’t know.”

“You’re mad. Totally mad. So when are we going?”

“The day after tomorrow.”

Interestingly, we didn’t need any permits to travel between cities. Just get in the car and drive north. The only places with police drama and visa checks are on the road to Luxor.

Memphis lies south of Cairo — on the western bank of the Nile, about 20 kilometres from the capital. Long ago, it marked the border between Upper and Lower Egypt. The temple of Apis once stood there. It was here that Alexander the Great was crowned Pharaoh of Egypt in 332 BC. His body was brought here after his death, and embalmed in Memphis.

It was here, too, that the Apis bull was sent to the afterlife. Meaning — this place was the critical point where the twin priestesses would either die... or be saved. Naturally, I decided to go and find out which it would be.

The whole day I planned our route, booked hotels, studied historical references and sunbathed. That night, in my sleep, I sailed once again — in Ankhsumut's body — aboard a lavish barque from Thebes to Memphis.

EGYPT, 323 BC

Night. We are sailing aboard a magnificent barque bathed in moonlight. The Nile stretches before me like a shimmering ribbon, reflecting the light of the stars. The riverbanks, lined with lush green palms and dense papyrus, seem to embrace the water, shielding it from time itself. The air carries a freshness mingled with the scent of wet earth and reeds.

To one side, temple silhouettes rise against the night sky. Their timeless columns stand as guardians of history, ready to whisper their secrets. Torches flicker along the shores, casting a warm and mysterious glow on the faces of locals fishing by night. Their laughter and conversations deepen the sense of a living, ancient world.

Our barque glides over the sparkling surface, adorned with vibrant, painted motifs, each telling its own tale of gods, of triumph, of flourishing life. The sails, caught by a gentle breeze, gleam gold and azure, and at the prow, a carved golden ram's head — symbol of the sun god's strength and protection — leads our way. As the Nile carried us closer to Memphis, I felt the shift — soon, everything would change forever... or else, another barque awaited, this one with Anubis at the helm.

By day, my sister and I sat in full ceremonial regalia on gilded, jewel-inlaid thrones placed at the centre of the flower-decked barque. As we passed the refined riverbanks, crowds of people lined the shores — joyfully dressed and cheering, waving to us. For them, it was a celebration — a chance to see the sacred twins and the god Apis himself before their rebirth. Children squealed with delight, adults tossed lotus wreaths into the river, and a mood of ecstatic reverence filled the air.

At our feet sat handmaidens, attentively watching over us. Mark stood beside my throne among the nobles. His composed face revealed nothing of the whirlwind of thoughts racing through his mind, nor the storms of feeling surging inside him. Yet he was mentally running through each step of the plan to abduct the sacred twins, again and again.

Upon our arrival in Memphis, my sister and I were immediately escorted to our chambers. There, the maidservants bathed us, unbraided our hair, removing every bead and thread of gold. We were wrapped in snow-white togas, free of any jewellery or brooches. The ceremony was about to begin.

Trembling with anticipation, we entered a vast hall with majestic columns and a massive sphinx in an altar alcove. The priests brought forth the bull, and we followed the procession along the avenue of obelisks leading to the riverbank, where the path into the water had been lined with palm leaves and flowers.

I had told Mark that the priests were meant to give the bull a special herbal draught to calm him for the ritual, but Mark had somehow managed to swap the potion in the bowl. As the bull approached the water, it balked, began to buck and thrash, creating panic. The priests tried to drag him into the water with ropes, but the animal resisted fiercely, determined to preserve its life.

I took trembling Asenath by the hand, and with whispered prayers, we stepped into the water. The priests, thrown into confusion, crowded around the thrashing bull, and my sister and I were pushed behind the reeds. Suddenly, an upside-down clay jar was placed over my head, and I felt myself being pulled along. My head remained inside the large pot — I could breathe, but I had no idea who was dragging me or where.

I don't know how long it lasted. But when it became hard to breathe, I felt the riverbed beneath my feet — soft, slippery clay into which I sank up to my ankles. The jar was removed, and I squinted against the blinding sunlight. As my eyes adjusted, I saw my terrified sister beside me — and Mark's overjoyed face. Nearby stood several warriors from my husband's guard, and Lipa; they had brought thick linen sheets to wrap us in as we emerged from the river.

On the shore, elegant horses awaited us — the kind used by messengers sent to distant rulers. Which meant they were strong and extremely fast.

Mark pulled me into his arms. "My love, this is where you must say goodbye to your sister. Be strong. She will depart for Rome at dawn. I swear, not a single hair on her head shall be harmed. She will have a wealthy home and a life of abundance. Lipa is going with her."

Tears streamed down my cheeks as I ran to my sister. Asenath was sobbing. We had never been separated — I couldn't even imagine what it would feel like. It was horrible. A tearing of the soul. But I found comfort in knowing she was in good hands, protected by the mother of my husband herself.

By morning, as ships departed from the port of Alexandria, we received word that throughout Egypt it had been declared that the crocodile god Sobek had taken the sacred twins under his protection and personally escorted them to the realm of Osiris. We were safe. No one would think to search for us — the matter was considered closed.

And just to reassure you in advance: Asenath lived a long and happy life. She became part of an ancient and noble Roman family, married a handsome nobleman, and bore him three beautiful children. So don't worry about her fate. But as for Ankhsumut... well, her trials had only just begun.

PRESENT DAY

The journey from Hurghada to Memphis takes around six hours, including a coffee and toilet break in Zafarana. You can leave at any time, without permits or escorts. We left at six in the morning and arrived just after noon.

As soon as we arrived in Memphis, we began exploring the landmarks from south to north. That day, I saw so many pyramids it made my head spin — the White Pyramid, the Red one, the Black, the one with rounded edges, the stepped pyramid, and even some that looked like nothing more than heaps of rubble. Each one was surprisingly different, each with its own history. But they were all tombs, lacking any living energy, so they didn't evoke much emotion in me. What I needed to find were oracles — the places that served as portals to other worlds. Though now long dead, the oracles had been destroyed, their ancient knowledge either lost or deliberately hidden.

When the pyramids were originally built, they were topped with granite or basalt pyramidions inscribed with messages about the Creator God, wrapped in gold or copper leaf. At dawn and dusk, these pyramidions gleamed brilliantly. You can draw a parallel with modern temples — radiant domes, crosses, stars, or crescents on the spires remind us that God exists, that He is one, and that He is everywhere.

Do you know what was written on the pyramidions? No worship of random minor deities. They bore reminders that we must become more conscious, more in tune with the world and ourselves — to truly know the Creator and come closer to Him. As I've said before, despite Egypt's multitude of gods, there was originally a concept of a single divine source. The priests deliberately led the people astray, crafting a pantheon of gods to represent natural phenomena and human actions — but in truth, all of it was simply the many faces of the Creator Atum.

Eventually, we made our way to the vast underground Serapeum.

The Serapeum is a funerary complex where sacred animals were laid to rest. Inside, there are numerous corridors and chambers with niches housing gigantic basalt sarcophagi of bulls. The walls are covered with dense frescoes depicting various rituals. In one of the halls, I saw a sphinx that looked just like the one from the Apis temple — the same indifferent gaze that had watched my sister and me being led to sacrifice. This sphinx, by the way, looked nothing like the Great Sphinx of Giza: temple sphinxes were smaller, carved from very durable stone. That granite sphinx resembled more a statue of a pharaoh than a guardian beast.

In ancient times, within the temple, stood a dreadful basalt monster with a fashionably styled beard, towering three times my own height. But I couldn't find it anywhere, and I longed to lay eyes upon it.

After we had explored every corner of Memphis, we finally reached the pyramid of Sahure — the northernmost point of the Saqqara necropolis. I walked all around, but something was missing. No visions, no sensations. It felt as though I had lost the thread...

We sat down at a small restaurant on a side street near the pyramids. I was so disappointed that I didn't even want to eat. Nothing brought me joy — not the taameya, nor the stuffed pigeons, nor the fragrant kebabs. I agreed only to have some Om Ali with Nescafé.

By the way, if you ask for Nescafé in Egypt, they'll bring you instant coffee mixed directly into hot milk — no water, but with a shockingly large amount of sugar.

“All right, enough,” I yawned sharply. “It’s getting dark soon, and we’ve been at it for four hours. That’s it for the search for truth today. Let’s find a hotel and just wander around.”

“As soon as I check in, I’m going to bed. You can wander off on your own, if you must. Normal people need rest,” Mustafa declared, his face full of indignation. I couldn’t help laughing — so many emotions flickered across his expression. “And now you’re laughing! After all these days on the road! Back and forth — for what?!”

What a bore! Let him go to bed and stop interfering.

We found a lovely little place called “Saqqara Inn” — clean, cosy, and very affordable. We checked in, and Mustafa, grumbling and snorting, disappeared off to sleep. I decided to go out in search of answers.

I wandered through the surrounding area, past horse farms and cemeteries. After about half an hour of walking, I reached the ruins of the Sun Temple of Nyuserre.

The sky was glowing violet with a pinkish hue at the horizon, where the sun was setting. I found a once-majestic obelisk, now just a dark heap of stones upon the plain. There were no guards, which meant I could explore the site freely.

A long row of bowls stood where sacrificial blood was once collected, and beside them — piles of carved stones. Oh! An altar! But it wasn't like the one in Luxor, where we had kindled the sacred fire. This one was meant for blood rituals — shaped like a compass, so that the blood would stream in rivulets toward all four corners of the earth.

As I approached the altar, my blood froze from a mixture of awe and dread — it felt like watching a really good horror film, unable to tear your eyes away. I climbed up and stood at its centre. I saw visions of rams being slaughtered in halal fashion, along with quails. Then someone brought out a golden basin, and the gathered crowd began tossing money into it. The priest — who also appeared to be a pharaoh — encouraged the people: “Bring more, bring it all! Rid yourselves of the worldly, and I shall ask the gods to grant you gardens and homes — tenfold what you have given today!”

“What a cheek!” I thought.

Suddenly, a handsome young man in a galabeya and keffiyeh approached me. He studied me intently, then asked, “Bennu?”

“What?” My eyebrows shot up — that was the name they had chanted in the amphitheatre in Izmir.

“You look like Bennu. You know that? You shine,” he smiled — and with his smile, it was as if hundreds of lights lit up around us. “In Heliopolis, near the airport, there once stood the Temple of Bennu. Ah, you've come back too late — your temple is utterly destroyed now. Nothing remains.”

I couldn't tell whether he was a vision or a real person. The conversation felt surreal. He went on, “Heliopolis now is just a mess. People rushing about, everything is expensive, no one cares about history, or truth, or anything sacred. It's pointless to go there. You need to go to Siwa. That's where your stone is.”

“What stone?” I stared at him in bewilderment.

“The Benben Stone. Ah, you've forgotten your purpose,” he said, with a smile that suggested he knew more than I could fathom. “The stone that will lead you to the truth.” He gave me a sly look with those dark eyes under long lashes. “I'll see you in Siwa.” He turned and walked away, tossing over his shoulder: “And by

the way, *this isn't your era*" — and gestured to the 'slide show' still playing all around me. And then, suddenly, he vanished — and with him, the entire vision.

"What was that...?" I whispered into the silence. Time to find out more.

Back at the hotel, I showered, changed into my pyjamas, and climbed into bed. I began reading...

First, I looked up the Benben Stone: "During the time of the first pharaohs, a stone fell from the sky."

"Aha, a meteorite," I smirked. "I can imagine how ancient people must have felt seeing one fall."

Then I read: "The stone had an unusual conical shape with rounded edges. The Egyptians discovered it in the Temple of the Phoenix."

"Wait, what?" I frowned. "They *found* it in a temple? A meteorite didn't *destroy* the temple?"

"The celestial stone became one of the most sacred objects in Ancient Egypt and was named the Benben Stone. It was originally kept in the Temple of the Phoenix, presumably located in Heliopolis. During the reign of the early pharaohs, Benben was one of the central objects of worship, but was eventually lost. A column was later erected on the site to remind Egyptians of the loss of the Benben Stone."

So basically, someone stole the stone, and it never resurfaced in any historical accounts. The Egyptians were deeply distressed by the loss and tried to recreate it, at least symbolically. For instance, those very pyramidions atop every stele and pyramid in Egypt — which I've already mentioned — were also called *Benben*. Covered in gold, they would shine so brilliantly under the sun that they could be seen from miles away. Where the original stone is now — no one knows. There is almost nothing left of ancient Heliopolis. I searched the entire internet but found no clues as to its whereabouts. A real mystery.

But why did that handsome man call me *Bennu*? And why did the crowd in my vision back in Izmir chant "Bennu"? Why? Why?

I googled *Bennu*, and here's what I found: "The Bennu bird was worshipped in Heliopolis, where it was believed to dwell upon the Benben Stone. When Bennu grew old, it would fly to the lands of the sunrise, build a nest of dry branches, self-immolate, and burn to ashes. From those ashes, a new Phoenix would be born, who would then collect the remnants, wrap them into an egg-shaped form, and carry it home to the Benben Stone in Heliopolis."

In other words, Bennu was the Egyptian version of the Phoenix.

Ancient texts describe this mysterious bird as the soul of the god Ra. The name *Bennu* is thought to be linked to the Egyptian word *wbn*, meaning “to shine.” That makes it our own Firebird.

Several legends surround the appearance of Bennu. According to one version, it emerged from the flames that burned upon the sacred tree in Ra’s temple courtyard. Another tale claims Bennu burst forth from Osiris’s heart at the moment of his death. The bird symbolised resurrection, the annual flooding of the Nile, and solar energy. Some even said Bennu had the power to reverse time.

Bennu was often depicted as a grey, blue, or white heron with a long beak and a crest of two feathers, or as a yellow wagtail or an eagle with red and gold plumage. Some depictions show a man with the head of a heron.

I also read a bit of history about Heliopolis: Heliopolis, once the spiritual and ceremonial centre of Ancient Egypt, lies just forty kilometres northeast of Memphis. Today, Memphis is a sleepy village, while Heliopolis has become one of Cairo’s upscale districts. But once upon a time, an entire civilisation’s mythology was born here.

The geographical location of Heliopolis was chosen with utmost care, so that the first rays of sunrise would fall directly upon its obelisks and temples, making them appear even more majestic. It was here that the priests developed a unique cosmology, constructing the Egyptian pantheon. Instead of the single god Nun, they invented his “children” — Atum, Khnum, Neith, Ra, and Amun, as well as Osiris and Isis’s grandchildren — Shu and Tefnut, and many more. They even granted divine status to animals, birds, insects, and natural forces.

This city also gave birth to detailed descriptions of the afterlife and elaborate guidelines for navigating it — so that people would know how to reach a blessed place and avoid eternal torment. At the centre of it all stood the cult of the Sun God, earning the city its nickname: the “City of the Sun.”

However, the number of gods created became so excessive that even the priests themselves got confused by all the family trees — who was whose brother, husband, daughter? There was no logic! Archaeologists have uncovered texts in which Memphis priests argued over whether Ptah was the father of Atum the Creator, and therefore, who held the higher rank in the divine hierarchy.

It was also from Heliopolis that magic — including black magic — originated. In the ancient world, Egypt was seen as the land of sorcerers, with Heliopolis priests and sages considered the most powerful. Instead of following the commandments

of the One God, they began “playing gods,” developing sinister rituals and incantations that summoned forces best left undisturbed. They even had entire teams of alchemists and illusionists to create flashy spectacles to validate their doctrines.

Against the backdrop of all this, a meteorite falling from the sky was seen as a divine gift. Everyone had witnessed it streaking across the heavens — the very realm of the sun god himself. That celestial stone became a sacred relic, and the legend of the flaming Phoenix suddenly had tangible proof.

Sadly, my trip to Egypt was coming to an end. Why on earth did I only book for one week? In any case, I still had to figure out how to get to Siwa. I had a rough idea where it was, geographically — but how to actually get there? No clue.

"Right. Enough. *Khalas*. We're heading back to Hurghada," I declared in the morning.

"Finally!" Mustafa cheered. "Shall we go to a disco tonight?"

Well, you never need to ask me twice. We got back to Hurghada without any trouble — not even tired. Mustafa fed me delicious fish again, and in the evening we went out clubbing. I adore dancing. I dance everywhere, all the time, like in a Bollywood film — any excuse will do.

Now picture this: I'm dancing in the middle of a crowd, and Mustafa is leaning against a wall nearby. The moment any handsome guy tries to dance with me, Mustafa appears out of nowhere like a genie from a lamp. I can't help but laugh. His face was priceless: "You came with me, you can't just go off dancing with other people."

"And says who?"

"That's just how it is! Whoever you came with is who you should dance with" — complete with wild gesturing and flaring nostrils. Hilarious.

"Well then, dance with me," I offered.

"But I can't dance."

"Then don't get in the way of those who can."

"Nope, not allowed."

And so he spent the entire night guarding me, not letting a soul come close. But what a night it was — the lights, the sound, the atmosphere...

When I dance, I dissolve into the music, scatter into atoms, and become the rhythm itself. It's my ultimate form of meditation. I went to bed at 4 a.m. and by 8, I was fresh as a daisy. All my friends are baffled — how can I bounce around for hours and still wake up bright and energised? But dancing recharges me like nothing else.

The next evening, I was flying home. Mustafa drove me to the airport: "Come back soon, please. I'll miss you. I've never met a madwoman like you before."

We hugged tightly. "I'll finish my season," I said, "and we'll meet again in November."

This time, leaving Egypt didn't feel sad. I had formed a new kind of bond with it — something deeper. And on the flight, I had a strange and vivid dream...

332 BC, HELIOPOLIS. TEMPLE OF ATUM-PHOENIX.

After my sister and I were separated, she headed for the port in Alexandria. I remained with my husband, and we made our way to Heliopolis, to the Temple of the Phoenix. It was quite close to Memphis, and before long, we had arrived.

We entered the temple through a hidden tunnel known only to the priests. I had guessed its existence and found it myself. Noticing that all the temples shared a similar layout, I figured it would be on the north side — and I was right. The temple was enormous. Having grown used to the pillars and obelisks of Thebes, I thought I'd seen it all — but this was something else entirely. Everything here was five times grander, more powerful, more awe-inspiring.

Inside, it was quiet. All the priests and nobles had gone to Memphis to attend the great ceremony for the burial of Apis. Only the guards remained at the gates. The sacred bull's body was to be lifted from the water and embalmed. The entire temple staff was working on it, while the aristocracy celebrated the rebirth of Apis. Everyone knew he had merely shed one form to enter another. Search parties had already been dispatched in different directions to find the new Apis.

There was a special embalming chamber in the temple. In its most sacred heart lay several sarcophagi: some richly decorated, one plain wooden one, and one magnificent golden coffin — it was meant for Alexander himself.

On a table, wrapped in aromatic cloth soaked in oils, lay a body. Clouds of incense smoke drifted in the air.

"That is the body of Alexander the Great," my husband said. "They want to smuggle it to Macedonia in secret. Even though he specifically asked to be buried in Siwa. They even prepared a tomb for him there, just as he wished. His mother convinced him he was the son of a god, and made the Macedonians believe it too. If his body reaches Pella, it will spark wars beyond imagining. His name will be used to justify unthinkable evil."

"Why are we here?" I asked.

Mark said, "I came to say goodbye... and ask your forgiveness. I grew up beside Alexander — he saw me as a brother and treated me as such. He wanted to be buried in the oracle's temple in Siwa, and I failed to honour his last wish. Now that we're together, I can't risk losing you..."

"But we're safe now!" I interrupted. "And anyway, how would you get his body out without me? There are only guards and priests around. I've got an idea."

"You? You're going to steal the body?" Mark asked with a mocking grin.

"Well, you're going to regret laughing," I shot back.

"But how?!"

"Mark, you know I'm a priestess. We got here by reading signs. I can read both our language and the sacred tongue of the priests."

Mark stared at me, mouth slightly open in stunned silence. Then he snapped out of it. "Why am I even surprised? I knew exactly who I was marrying."

"Right, here's the plan — it's simple. We'll take the body out the same way we came in. We need to exit through the most remote corridor to avoid any patrols. And we'll need a cart that's least likely to be inspected."

"Impossible. We won't make it," Mark muttered with a smirk. "If the body disappears, the alarm will go up. The truth is, Ptolemy wants Alexander to be buried in Egypt — they even built a tomb for him in Memphis. But the other strategoi will never agree. The conflict will erupt again. He must be buried where *he* wished — somewhere no one would think to look. We have to stop this mad cult Olympias is using for her own gain. You don't know what she's truly like. She's devoted to dark forces and wants to turn this madness into a full-blown religion. But how do we stop it?" His face was dark with worry.

"Then we simply redirect the body to where we need it to go," I suggested.

Each time Mark looked at me, his face lit up — a mixture of wonder, admiration, and sheer disbelief. “Well, after what I saw in your garden... I should’ve expected nothing less from you. You’d follow me into any madness.”

But our plan wasn’t meant to be. Suddenly, heavy footsteps echoed around us. I froze for a heartbeat — then, without thinking, I slipped a copper coin between the wrappings on Alexander’s chest. “Just in case,” I whispered.

We ducked into a hidden passage and slid the stone door shut. It was pitch dark. We could hear the voices of priests chanting sacred hymns. I don’t know how long we stayed like that — my arms and legs had gone numb from sitting cramped for so long — but the warmth of my husband’s embrace calmed me, and the stiffness seemed irrelevant.

When the voices faded, we waited a bit longer, then crept back into the embalming chamber.

But the body was gone. So was the plain wooden sarcophagus.

We hurried up a hidden staircase to the temple roof. A covered cart with the coffin, unlit and unguarded, was already rolling along the road toward the Alexandrian highway.

“Quick!” I whispered. Mark untied our camel from where we’d hidden it near the secret exit, and we sped off in pursuit.

Mark caught up with the cart, leapt forward and yanked the reins from the driver — knocking him down mid-gallop. But just then, a hand with a knife lunged from the cart. Mark pulled sharply on the reins, throwing the guard backward into the wagon. As he fell, three more guards scrambled out and surrounded Mark.

A fight broke out. Mark dealt with them swiftly — disarming and disabling all four.

Meanwhile, I climbed into the cart and opened the coffin. My hands fumbled through the darkness, feeling for the wrappings on the chest. Blindly, I searched — until I found the coin.

“Well?!” Mark shouted, peering in.

“It’s Alexander,” I said quietly.

Mark jumped onto the cart and cracked the reins. I swung myself onto the camel, and we galloped westward, leaving the battered guards in a heap behind us.

We made our first stop at the edge of a vast oasis on the way to Siwa. Palm trees stretched out in all directions, bright yellow sands glowed beneath the moonlight, and the air was sweet with fresh cane and herbs. I believe that must've been the edge of modern-day Fayoum.

I watched Mark as he carefully lit a fire. His movements were steady and sure. The dry twigs crackled and sparked, and soon the warm scent of woodsmoke filled the air. In the flickering glow, his face looked especially noble. I pulled a pouch of dates from my satchel and sat by the fire, trying to keep my mind off the dangerous road ahead.

“I don’t get it,” I began, watching the strange, hypnotic dance of the flames. “If Alexander’s body ends up in Pella, the cult around him will thrive. But what happens if he’s buried in Siwa?”

Mark shook his head. “Then the gods will accept him as one of their own. There’ll be no cult in Pella. That’s why he must stay in Egypt — at least in Memphis. But as we saw... the priests there have all been bought.”

I paused, considering his words. “Maybe we should try explaining this to Ptolemy? Maybe *you* should head to Thebes, and *I* can take the body to Siwa,” I suggested gently.

“How could I leave you? No. We go to Siwa *together*,” he said firmly, his eyes flashing with emotion. We embraced, and, drained by the tension and everything we’d been through, we fell asleep beneath a sky full of brilliant stars.

PRESENT DAY

I woke up buzzing with anticipation. The thought of Siwa stirred something deep inside me. Questions circled in my mind: *What remains of that ancient oasis?* *What kind of experience awaits me there?* My morning coffee helped me shake off the sleepiness, and I began preparing for the journey. I booked tickets to Hurghada for two weeks in November and threw myself into researching everything I could about Siwa.

First things first — I checked where it was located. I already knew it was an oasis, so, obviously, it had to be somewhere in the desert. But when I found it on the map, I froze — more than nine hours from Cairo, just 40 kilometers from the Libyan border. “Hmm,” I thought. “What even *is* out there? And *how* do people get there?”

A flicker of anxiety passed through me as I recalled my experience among the Bedouins in northern Sinai. “If Siwa’s anything like that... this might be less of a spiritual retreat and more of a full-on survival test.”

I opened a map and studied the region more carefully. And suddenly — it clicked. I realized what connected the temples of Luxor and Siwa: the Oracle of Amun.

So let me break it down — who was this god, and why were oracles dedicated specifically to *him*? What follows is a distilled essence of teachings from the *Book of the Dead* and the *Nag Hammadi texts*.

According to ancient Egyptian belief, everything in the universe was created by the Supreme Being from primordial Chaos, using dual creative forces — masculine (Amun) and feminine (Mut). Within that Chaos, three divine pairs of forces acted: Infinity (the absence of space and time), Non-being (the absence of substance), and Darkness (the absence of light and vibrational fields).

The interaction of these forces gave rise to the four elements — fire, earth, air, and water. Acting upon Chaos, the elements generated life-supporting fields — gravitational, electric, magnetic, and acoustic — and thus, space and time came into existence. From these fields, the Supreme Being created divine embodiments of itself — the gods — by imbuing them with its *Ka* or Holy Spirit.

Thus emerged the Ennead — nine principal deities:

- Ra, the sun god
- Shu, god of air and light
- Thoth, god of time and knowledge
- Nut, goddess of the sky
- Geb, god of the earth
- Osiris, lord of the heavenly and underworld Duat
- Isis, goddess of fertility
- Nephthys, goddess of absence and lack
- Set, god of war

Interestingly, these deities were originally androgynous, reflecting the primal unity and harmony of both masculine and feminine essences.

In essence, the Supreme Creator formed nine divine aspects — creative extensions of itself — to carry out the work of shaping the universe, balancing physical laws, and governing the elements.

Now here’s where it gets intriguing: Originally, oracles were dedicated to the destructive god Set. The rituals performed to appease the war deity were, without

exaggeration, black magic — brutal, blood-soaked ceremonies devoted to the forces of darkness.

But over time, something changed. Pharaohs began to replace Set with a more neutral elemental god — *Amun*, the god of fiery force. For a while, Set and Amun were even depicted together. Yet, during coronation rituals, pharaohs began including Amun’s name in their royal titles instead.

The name *Amun* means “the hidden” or “the unseen.” In temples, he was often paired with the sun god Ra — creating the composite *Amun-Ra*. Which raises an interesting question: “*The unseen sun*” — *what does that even mean?*

There was the visible, physical sun — the solar disk *Aten* — and then there was Amun-Ra, a devouring force of pure fire. In that sense, *Amun* was essentially *Set* in another form. Egyptian mythology, it turns out, is far more layered than it first appears.

So — there was a temple of Amun-Ra with an oracle in Luxor, and another oracle in Siwa. It might’ve been some sort of natural phenomenon — like the “Gates of Hades” in Hierapolis (modern-day Pamukkale, Turkey), where deadly concentrations of hydrogen sulfide would kill anything that came too close. Or take the Temple of Apollo and its famous Oracle at Delphi — when scientists tested the waters of the Castalian spring and the underground fissures feeding it, they found methane, ethane, and ethylene — gases that cause intense hallucinations.

So now I was wondering: *What natural phenomenon lay beneath Siwa? What allowed them to build such an enormous temple and house an oracle there?*

Against that backdrop, a meteorite falling from the heavens was seen as the gift of destiny. Everyone had watched it streak down from the sky — the very realm of the sun-god. That celestial stone became a relic, and the fiery-Phoenix legend gained tangible proof.

Sadly, my Egyptian trip was drawing to a close. Why on earth had I booked only a week? In any case, I still had to decide how to reach Siwa. Theoretically I knew where it lay, but how people actually got there — I hadn’t the faintest idea.

“All right, *khalas*: back to Hurghada,” I announced next morning.

“Hurrah!” Mustafa cheered. “Disco tonight?”

I'm always into, game on. We reached Hurghada without incident, hardly tired at all. Mustafa fed me splendid fish once again, and in the evening we hit a club. I adore dancing; I dance everywhere, like a heroine in a Bollywood film.

Picture it: I'm dancing in the middle of the crowd; Mustafa leans against a wall. The moment a handsome chap tries to join me, Mustafa materialises beside us like a genie. I can't help laughing. His indignant refrain: "You came with me — you can't dance with others."

"Says who?"

"That's just the rule! You dance with the one you came with," he insists, nostrils flaring.

"Well then, *you* dance with me."

"I can't dance."

"Then don't block those who can."

"No, that's not allowed."

And so he guarded me all night, letting no one near. Still, the party was fabulous — lights, sound, atmosphere. When I dance I dissolve into the music, scatter into atoms, become the rhythm itself. It's my greatest meditation. I went to bed at four; by eight I was fresh as a daisy. Friends marvel: how can I leap about for hours and wake up bright-eyed? But dancing recharges me.

Next evening I flew home. Mustafa drove me to the airport: "Come back soon, please. I'll miss you — I've never met anyone as mad as you."

We hugged tightly. "I'll finish my season — see you in November."

This time there was no sadness in leaving Egypt; I felt a new, deeper bond. And on the plane I dreamed...

332 BC, HELIOPOLIS — TEMPLE OF ATUM-PHOENIX

After my sister and I were parted, she headed for Alexandria's harbour. I stayed with my husband and we travelled to Heliopolis, to the Temple of the Phoenix. It was close to Memphis; soon we arrived.

We slipped in through a secret tunnel known only to priests — I had deduced its position, guessing every temple shared a similar plan, and the north side proved

correct. The temple was colossal: used as I was to Theban columns and stelae, I thought nothing could astonish me — but here everything was five times grander.

Inside, silence reigned; all the clergy and nobility were in Memphis for Apis's funeral rites. Only gate-guards remained. The bull's body was to be raised from the water and embalmed; the temple's forces toiled at that while the elite celebrated his rebirth. Everyone knew he had merely shed one form and taken another; search parties were already roaming for the new Apis.

There was a special embalming chamber. At its heart lay several sarcophagi: some richly painted, one plain wooden, and one majestic golden coffin — prepared for Alexander himself.

Upon a table, wrapped in fragrant cloth steeped in oils, lay a body; clouds of incense smoke curled above it.

“That is Alexander the Great,” my husband said. “They mean to send him to Macedonia, though he begged to be buried at Siwa. His mother put into his head that he was a son of the God, and made the Macedonians believe it. If his body reaches Pella, wars will erupt beyond imagining. His name will be wielded for monstrous deeds.”

“Why have we come here?” I asked.

Mark replied, “I’ve come to say farewell... and to beg forgiveness. I grew up beside Alexander; he deemed me a brother. He wished to rest at Siwa, and I failed him. Now that we are together, I will not risk losing you—”

“But we’re safe now!” I cut in. “And anyway, you can’t move him without me. There are only guards and priests here. I have an idea.”

“You? You’ll steal the body?” Mark scoffed.

“Are you kidding? Of course,” I said.

“But how?”

“Mark, I’m a priestess. We came in by reading the signs. I can read both our tongue and the priests’ sacred script.”

Astonishment, admiration, disbelief flitted across his face. “After what I witnessed in your garden, I should expect anything. You’ll follow me into any adventure.”

We formed a simple plan: use the same corridor to take him out, find a cart unlikely to be searched. Yet heavy footfalls interrupted us. I slipped a copper coin between Alexander's chest bandages — *just in case* — and we hid in a secret passage. When the chanting priests had gone, we emerged: the body and plain sarcophagus were gone.

From the roof we spied a covered cart heading for the Alexandrian road. We mounted our waiting camel, pursued, seized the cart, fought off four guards, confirmed by my coin that the corpse *was* Alexander, and fled westward.

Our first halt was at the edge of a vast oasis — palms, golden sand, the sweet scent of cane. Mark kindled a fire; in its glow his face looked especially brave. I offered dates and tried to still my thoughts.

“I don’t understand,” I said. “If the body rests in Pella, his cult will flourish. What if he lies at Siwa?”

“Then the gods accept him,” Mark answered. “No cult will grow in Pella. He must stay in Egypt — at least Memphis — but those priests are bought.”

PRESENT DAY

I pondered his words. “Perhaps you should explain this to Ptolemy? You could return to Thebes, and I’ll take the body to Siwa.

“How could I leave you? We go to Siwa *together*,” he insisted.

We fell asleep beneath the stars.

I woke excited: Siwa! What remained of that ancient oasis? Coffee revived me; I booked two weeks in Hurghada for November and dived into research. I found Siwa on the map — nine-plus hours from Cairo, forty kilometres from Libya. “Hm. And *what* awaits there?” Memories of Bedouin Sinai surfaced. “If Siwa’s similar, this could be... challenging.”

Studying the map, revelation struck: Luxor and Siwa shared one thing — the Oracle of Amun. I delved into the *Book of the Dead* and *Nag Hammadi*: primordial Chaos, Amun and Mut, the Ennead, the shift from Set’s dark rites to the hidden fire of Amun-Ra, the complexity of Egyptian theology — and wondered what natural phenomenon at Siwa powered its oracle, the way sulphurous vapours powered Hierapolis or hallucinogenic gases Delphi.

I read on: the Oasis of Siwa housed the greatest oracle in the ancient world, Ammonium. In 524 BC Cambyses’ 50-thousand Persian army vanished in a sand-

storm en route to destroy it. Its reputation soared. When Alexander came in 331 BC the oracle declared him son of Amun, legitimising his rule. Thereafter his coins bore ram's horns of Zeus-Ammon.

Scrolling Instagram under “#SiwaOasis”, I froze at a post: a jeep full of laughing friends, a beaming young man up front whose radiant smile stopped my heart. A tour advert: “Siwa trip — lodging, meals, safari, permits — and more.” I messaged at once. He replied almost instantly. His name was Mohamed; we were friends within minutes, and he undertook to organise everything.

Eight months flew by: travels, hikes, gatherings. I found companions — an Irish couple, Sean and Mary, great friends and allies. Plan: fly to Hurghada, three days’ diving; bus to Cairo, overnight, sightseeing by day; night bus to Siwa for four days; then back by night to Cairo and on to Hurghada to recover.

We landed in Hurghada; ecstatic Mustafa met us at the airport. “Taameya first, or straight to the hotel?”

“Sleep,” we chorused — seven-hour Istanbul layover had worn us out. As we walked, I noticed a huge quilt in Mustafa’s trunk.

“Seriously? Three travellers, three big cases — and *that*?”

“*Maalesh*,” he said, whisking everything into the boot, quilt included — proof yet again that Egypt defies physics.

My friends had only stayed in the fenced resorts of Taba.

“Nothing special at all! No colours of the country. Could’ve been any Hilton anywhere,” they told me.

“Ooo, with me you’ll see *all* Egypt’s colours,” I declared, miming a long cigarette holder with a biro.

And so it began: endless car horns, insistent vendors, taameya for breakfast, *shai bil nana'a* to wash it down; the azure Red Sea depths, melodious calls of muezzins (no Turkish accent, thank heaven); taxis for less than a dollar; prawns the size of lobsters...

On “Day X” we caught a Go Bus from old Hurghada’s Dahar district to Cairo. From the high coach seats the sea, the houses, the vast sprawl of Cairo all lay in full view. Cairo greeted us with thick exhaust smog; the sun sank into tawny haze. At Giza the air tasted unbreathable.

Our hotel was a fifteen-minute walk from the pyramids. Night had fallen; we dropped our bags and ventured out to glimpse them and find dinner. Darkness, stables, exhaust mingling with manure; we took an inner path — pitch black, stray dogs, horse droppings every step; occasional daredevil youths galloping past on horses or camels.

Reaching the square in front of the Giza complex, we were utterly exhausted and began searching for *any* halfway decent restaurant. The two most recommended ones on TripAdvisor looked like bomb shelters: one seemed halfway demolished, the other as if it had never been finished at all. At that point, Mary gave up.

“Guys, is there a Starbucks or something around here?”

In the end, we opted for Pizza Hut. At least you knew what you were getting. And it turned out to be quite good, actually — especially with a view of the Sphinx looming outside the window, dimly lit and slightly menacing.

After dinner, we had to make our way back. We unanimously decided: no more side alleys in the dark. So we stuck to the main road. My Irish companions were already half-used to the chaos and nonstop honking of Hurghada, but Cairo had taken this cacophony to a whole new level. On top of the usual cars, there were tuk-tuks, donkey carts, camel caravans linked by chains, and stalls spilling right into the road — the whole scene buzzed and boiled. By the time we reached the hotel, we were dazed, stunned, and completely wiped out. We agreed to go to bed early and place all hope in the promise of a decent breakfast.

I’m used to sleeping with the window open, but as soon as I tried, a thick cloud of exhaust gas curled into the room.

“Nope. Sorry, Alexa. Tonight you’re sleeping with the windows *closed*,” I mumbled to myself, climbed into bed, opened a book — and fell asleep by the second sentence.

All night I dreamed of soft sand dunes, and I was walking across them barefoot. In one of the visions, I saw my old friend from the altar of the Sun Temple of Nyuserre — the one in the galabeya. He kept turning back to me, smiling warmly and teasingly, and saying: “We’re almost there.”

In the morning, we gathered for breakfast on the hotel’s rooftop terrace. The buffet was simple, but everything was fresh and well-prepared. Best of all, the pyramids stood in full view beyond the terrace.

I went looking for taameya, but there was no tahini sauce. The chef melted when I asked in Arabic where the tahina was. “I don’t have any at the buffet,” he said, “but I understand now — you’re Egyptian. I’ll bring you some.”

He dashed off and returned with a little bowl of tahina. A moment later, he brought another bowl filled with something that looked like oatmeal. “Try this too. You’re Egyptian — and all Egyptians love this for breakfast. It’s *belila*.”

Actually, it was quite good — barley porridge, with a taste somewhere between oatmeal and Turkish aşure.

We had plenty of time. Our transfer to Siwa wasn’t until 10:30 PM, which meant we had the whole day to explore Cairo. Naturally, the first stop was the pyramids.

What can I say? The pyramids are genuinely awe-inspiring. You look up at these sky-high blocks of stone and think, *How?* The whole Giza complex had a cheerful atmosphere: crowds of tourists, camel trains with happy riders, vendors hawking keffiyehs and a hundred helpful “guides” offering to snap your photo for a 50-pound baksheesh.

We chose not to go inside the pyramids. I feel those are charged places. Their true purpose remains debated — and some researchers believe they were energy accumulators or transmitters. Nikola Tesla believed that, and I believe *him*.

And did you see that BBC experiment with the meat and razor blade? Mind-blowing! They built pyramid models: one contained something like an altar, the other was left empty. With all other conditions equal, the meat in one pyramid rotted while in the other it dried out. Same with the blade: in one pyramid it dulled by itself. And these were just small-scale pyramids, built to the exact proportions of the Great Pyramid and properly aligned to the cardinal points. No thanks — I’m not signing up for experiments on *myself*.

And besides, those narrow corridors are not my thing. Although the underground cities in Cappadocia don’t bother me at all — I went deep into those narrow passageways without the slightest hint of claustrophobia. But those are cities. This? This is... *something else*.

Our next destination was the Cave Churches. Had we known what kind of neighbourhood we’d be passing through, we might’ve thought twice. The complex of three churches is located in the Zabbaleen district — the Garbage Collectors’ quarter. *Zabbaleen* literally means “garbage people,” from the Arabic *zabbala* — trash. The district is mostly inhabited by Orthodox Christian Copts. How did their lives end up tied to trash?

They're descendants of farmers who migrated to Cairo in the 1940s looking for work. At first, they kept their rural ways: raising pigs, goats, chickens — living quietly in a tight-knit community. But the cruel Caliph Al-Hakim, who conquered Egypt, stripped the Copts of everything and forced them into the dirtiest, harshest labour. That's how they came to sort and recycle garbage.

For centuries, they were persecuted and lived in temporary shelters, afraid of being displaced — until a large group finally settled beneath the cliffs of Mokattam mountain on the city's east side, half an hour's walk from the Citadel.

We were already shaken by the grinding poverty and debris we saw around the Giza highway. But this? My God. Piles of garbage stacked and spilling everywhere. Massive bales of trash blocked roads, hung from balconies, filled every corner. Towering columns of worn-out tyres. Swarms of flies. And above it all, tiny cardboard chapels floated on string lines, adorned with holy icons — because divinity must never touch filth.

And yet, the park around the churches — and the churches themselves — were spotless. Perfectly clean.

Two little girls, about seven, ran up — Jana and Jomana. They each grabbed a hand and began leading me around: "This is Papa Jesus, and here is Mama Mary. You have to kiss your palm and touch the icons. Here are the Holy Shrouds — write a name or a wish and tuck it behind the glass!" they chirped, talking over each other.

They read aloud the inscriptions on the frescoes and the giant bas-reliefs carved into the rock — in Arabic and English.

"I adore you two," I said. "How about coming to live with me in Turkey?"

"Of course not!" they shook their heads. "This is our homeland. This is our family."

"One of my brothers lives in Paris," said one of them. "Have you ever been to Paris?"

"I have," I said.

"It must be so beautiful," Jomana sighed. "We've never even left our neighbourhood."

It's astonishing to think how Cairo would survive without its garbage collectors. The city produces 6–7 *tons* of trash a day — and more than half is sorted and recycled by the Zabbaleen.

Their district is vital. But how do they live like this? They don't even have glass in the windows. Still, they've moved from cardboard huts to brick buildings. True, they're unfinished — but at least they're homes.

As we stepped out of one of the chapels, a stunning young woman in a sand-coloured skirt-suit with bright makeup greeted us. Yes, the makeup is always *very* bright here.

"Hello, and welcome to our Christian centre! If you need anything, don't hesitate," she said in perfect English.

"Thank you!" we smiled. "We already have two utterly charming guides."

We loved the churches. They were spacious and majestic, especially the one built in an open grotto that descends into the mountain like an amphitheatre. St Simon's complex at Mokattam is the largest cave-church ensemble in the Middle East.

At parting the little girls were crestfallen. "But we've only just become friends!" they wailed. We tried to slip them a bit of money, but they wouldn't take "such huge sums."

We finally coaxed them: "We have more than enough already," they protested, shaking their heads.

As my favourite Russian comedian Zadornov once quipped: "I know a certain official who never has enough—though his wife "never has enough" even more than he does..."

"How old are you, by the way?" I suddenly remembered to ask.

"We're both eleven, we are classmates," they said.

"Wow!" Sean exclaimed. "I'd have sworn one of you was six or seven and the other no more than eight."

Next, we headed for Hān el-Khalili.

Hān el-Khalīlī is a maze of medieval market alleys hemmed in by tight sixteenth-century houses—essentially Cairo's counterpart to Istanbul's Grand Bazaar. Long ago the spot was a Fatimid cemetery (tenth century). When a new dynasty took over, the emir ordered the tombs razed and the bones thrown out. Caravanserais—

khans—sprang up; in the early 1500s an entire quarter was rebuilt as a Turkish-style market.

Half the bazaar is touristy; the other half sells every imaginable trinket—mostly from China. In the older lanes I used to buy belly-dance costumes from the then-trendy designer Yasser. In those days there was no Amazon, no endless choice. I'd stuff suitcases with costumes, hip scarves, sabres, tabla, candelabra—everything—and it all vanished instantly in the dance world. So I know this neighbourhood well.

Surprisingly few shops were open, yet it was plenty. In the lanes that were operating, the assault on the senses was glorious: mounds of spices, clouds of incense, flashing silver and gold, touts setting handbags alight with lighters to prove the leather was genuine.

We stopped first at the famous Naguib Mahfouz restaurant: carved walnut doors and panelling, antique murals, stained glass, mosaic floors, photos of illustrious diners on the walls—delicious food, immaculate service.

After stocking up on aromatic oils and incense sticks, we sank down for mint tea at legendary El Fishawy, Cairo's oldest coffee-house (since 1710). Dark carved wood everywhere, tea served the old-fashioned way in little pots, huge mirrors in heavy frames—the ambience is special. But sitting there undisturbed is impossible: vendors endlessly circle, offering beads, bracelets, rosaries, henna designs—and, improbably, AirPods (Sean bought a pair for Mary) and baby clothes. The parade of hawkers never stops.

Street musicians plop onto stools and start playing right at your table. I couldn't resist; I began to dance, and within twenty seconds a crowd of twenty had ringed me with phones. Look for me in every Egyptian TikTok now!

When I dance to Middle-Eastern music, I echo our temple movements. What people now call belly-dance was once performed by priestesses: we gave sound a visible form so people could *see* the music. The dance always carried positive energy for dancer and watcher alike—a real exchange. I often slip into visions: blinding sun, hot sand, bustling stalls of souvenirs, endless dunes with camels on the horizon. I'm dancing before a white pavilion and everyone claps. The music ends, the sands dissolve, and I'm back in a packed café with applause and questions about where I learned. I simply answer that I love Egypt. It's true: I've never studied formally—I just follow instinct and dreams.

Next stop: Siwa. By 10:30 p.m. we had to be on Tahrir Square. Good thing—I'd been coughing badly since lunch from the polluted air. Inhale, and nothing seems to go past the throat. The cars here are so ancient it's a wonder they run at all.

First we needed to swing by our Giza hotel for the luggage, then back to the Go Bus terminal. I checked the map: eight to nine hours to Siwa—north-west toward Alexandria, along the Mediterranean coast, then inland from Marsa Matrouh almost to the Libyan frontier.

Sean, clever man, popped a sleeping pill half an hour before departure to snooze the whole way. Lucky him!

Convincing Mustafa to drive us had been comical. Remembering our previous marathons he rebelled: “Absolutely not! Do you know who lives there? The S-i-w-a-n-s!” — he pronounced it in syllables — “They’re not even Egyptians! They’ll kill us. I mean, kill *you*, because I’m not going! La-la-la-la-la!” “If you want trouble, go alone,” he concluded.

I did almost reconsider. But Mustafa offered a fallback: if I changed my mind he’d collect us in Cairo and race us back to Hurghada—he had a brother there (naturally). Egyptians seem to have relatives everywhere: mention any town and you hear, “Oh, my brother lives there,” or “My uncle’s from there.”

Fine—let him visit whichever brother or uncle. I’d manage. Over months of planning we’d truly befriended Muhammad, our Siwa guide, chatting by video and text. When we first arrived in Hurghada he video-called to confirm our hotel and transfer.

A message pinged from Mustafa: “Girl, have you come to your senses yet? Crazy!” —with a Red Sea photo. I hadn’t. On the contrary, I was determined.

So here we were on Tahrir, waiting. Muhammad phoned: “Alexa, you speak a little Arabic, right? OK, you’ll sort it.” Brilliant. And if I didn’t? Turned out we were waiting in the wrong spot—at the car park, not the office. How would I have known? The driver spoke only Arabic and Berber Amazigh. Egypt being Egypt.

It all worked out. A small minibus collected us. Four more passengers joined—husband and wife, and two very chatty Egyptian girlfriends.

Pulling clear of Cairo’s choking smog felt wonderful. My cough had worsened; I seemed to breathe only with the top of my lungs. The city rolled past—ragged brick blocks with rusty rebar, laundry like sails, trash everywhere, ceaseless honking... Then desert. At last I breathed full, deep breaths. Bliss.

I took the front seat beside the driver, wrapped myself in a jumper, and instantly nodded off—only to wake frozen. The driver had set the AC to 18 °C. Night, dozing, blood slowed—without a blanket it was torture.

At a fuel stop the Egyptian girls noticed me shivering. One—her name was Monica—offered her jacket: “You’re alone; you need it more. We’re two—we’ll keep each other warm.”

I saw the tiny cross tattoos on their wrists—orthodox Copts. They wore no head-scarves, and their look was nothing like Muslim girls: fishnet tights, shorts, ringlets, vivid fuchsia lips—straight out of Madonna’s late-’80s phase.

In 2008 I visited Zagazig, home to one of Egypt’s oldest churches and, tradition says, a spot where the Virgin Mary rested with the infant Jesus and Joseph during their flight into Egypt. A sizeable Christian community lives there. I didn’t grasp the difference straight away when we wandered into the Coptic quarter. In that town the girls normally wear full-length galabeyas and the latest-style hijabs; yet here—surprise—everybody sported short skirts and shorts, young couples strolled hand-in-hand. They live much as people do in Europe; only the backdrop is different: rough brick houses with no finish, windows facing windows across narrow alleys, groceries hauled up to the flats in wicker baskets on ropes.

Monica and Justiana—Cairo girls—had booked exactly the same “four days, three nights in the oasis” package as we had. It was good to see Egyptians travelling in their own country. I remembered how, down south, guards had tried to bar poor Mustafa from the sites: clearly attitudes towards fellow countrymen change the farther one strays from Upper Egypt.

We persuaded the driver to turn the air-conditioning from “arctic” to merely cool and life improved. We thawed out, fell fast asleep and only woke on the outskirts of Siwa. Mohamed phoned the driver:

“How’s my group? What are they doing?”

“Fine. We’ll be on the square in fifteen minutes. They’ve slept the whole way,” came the reply.

Sure enough, fifteen minutes later I saw the radiant smile of our guide—the very smile that had led us to Siwa in the first place.

Mohamed is a true Siwan. Ethnically the Siwans are Berbers—fair-skinned, fine-featured. They wear galabeyas and turbans like Bedouins, yet they are settled folk. The nomadic Berber Tuareg roam the southern deserts of Tunisia, Morocco and Algeria; the Egyptians cultivate dates and olives and keep livestock.

Siwans speak their own Berber dialect, Tamazirt-Siwi. Local lineages can trace the male line back more than two thousand years. Imagine it: a place soaked in

legends whispered from generation to generation, steeped in millennia-old customs.

Mohamed is ridiculously handsome: big eyes with thick lashes, sculpted lips, a snow-white smile, adorable curls and a body worthy of Apollo. After we climbed down from the coach we piled into a tuk-tuk—not the black Cairo or Luxor kind, but a little blue motorcycle with a square cargo bed.

Mohamed stacked our cases in the back and we wedged ourselves in between them. My Irish pair were clearly alarmed—this was not what they'd imagined—but they clambered in without fuss, and off we rattled along bumpy tracks between palms.

“Are we going to travel *everywhere* in this thing?” Sean muttered, half panic, half disappointment. (Spoiler: by the end of the day they were gleefully leaping onto tuk-tuks and zooming round the oasis.)

Our lodge lay on the eastern side of the oasis amid thick date palms. Really it was a traditional Siwan house built the old way. You step straight into a snug sitting room with cushions and rugs on the floor and a low table—just like a local home. A plain little kitchen with plastic crockery. Doors right and left led to two bedrooms, each with its own loo and shower.

We dropped our bags and went to meet the owner. A handsome slate-grey 4×4 pulled up and out stepped—yes—the same striking man from the Sun Temple altar, the one who'd told me I must come to Siwa. I was momentarily speechless.

“Welcome to Azuzer,” he said, studying me with interest. “I’m Hemeida—let me put my name and number in your phone, so you don’t forget me.”

Mohamed grinned. “What’s the programme? What’s for breakfast?”

And Sean and I answered in chorus: “Taameya and *shai bil nana*.” The lads smiled.

“Right then,” Mohamed said. “We’ll nip into town for supplies. Coming along?”

“Of course!” we sang back in unison.

Siwa’s town centre lies beneath the crumbling mud-brick citadel of Shali. There are no chains here, only little shops. I bought fruit: mangoes the size of my head, tiny sugary bananas, and *ishta*—custard apples. Sean grabbed milk and snacks; our guides picked up vegetables, feta, a bag of taameya and a stack of ‘aish *baladi* flatbread.

“That’s our bank, Alexa—look how cute it is! We have the prettiest bank in the world. It’s eco-friendly,” Mohamed beamed. Indeed, the bank occupied a traditional mud-plastered Siwan house—utterly charming.

The smiles everywhere, the easy warmth, made us feel instantly at home. I realised Siwa isn’t just a dot on the map: it’s a unique pocket of culture and history, ready to unfold for anyone who comes with an open heart.

Siwans really do build with eco-materials. The frame is palm-trunk, which, they say, never rots, grows damp or harbours insects. Hemeida and his friends told us the palms used for beams had been felled by their grandfathers and great-grandfathers. The timber is fibrous and honeycombed; it must be thoroughly dried and allowed to settle before it’s fit for construction. Then the walls are daubed with local clay, reputedly harder than cement.

Our lodge had been built that same year, following all the traditional rules of Siwan construction: a palm-wood frame, mud plaster, wooden doors and shutters. Inside, it felt wonderful—fresh and breathable. The color of the walls matched the sands of the Sahara, and the exterior was adorned with wave-like patterns. I asked the owner what they meant.

“Nothing was ever done without reason,” he said. “These are protective symbols. It’s believed that a hand can stop evil. So when we run five fingers across the wet clay, we place a shield on the house.”

And indeed, the entire house was covered from top to bottom in those flowing lines—wave after wave, each one drawn with careful precision.

The grounds were enclosed by a fence made of clay and palm fronds, decorated with the same wavy patterns. Inside the house, just beneath the clay ceiling, I noticed some crystalline stones poking out.

“What are those?” I asked. Hemeida, without batting an eye, replied,

“Ah, that’s not stone. It’s salt from the lakes. It wards off jinn. They hate salt.”

“Brilliant,” I thought. “Anyone listening in would think we’re mad. There are airplanes and satellites in the sky—and here we are, keeping demons away with salt.”

But something about it made perfect sense. I had landed in a place where magic was a natural part of life. Maybe—just maybe—this was where I’d find the Benben stone.

Beside the house, a shaded terrace with cushions and a low table had been set up for breakfast. I noticed the whole terrace was paved with chunks of salt—our fortress against the jinn.

Hemeida gave me a half-smile. “Do you believe in magic?”

“That’s why I’m here,” I said. “I’ve got a lot of questions.”

“After breakfast, I’ll show you something. But you must promise me one thing: next time, you stay at least a month. Four days only lifts the veil. You’ll need time to find real answers.”

He looked at me from under his long lashes. I couldn’t read his gaze. It was as if he knew everything, and I didn’t know a thing—and he was thoroughly amused by it.

I could feel it—this was just the beginning of something incredible. That feeling of standing on the edge of discovery filled me with impatient excitement. It’s the closest I can get to describing what I felt.

Breakfast in the lodge was pure joy: taameya, tomato salad with feta and basil, ‘aish baladi, omelets, and fresh cucumbers. We sat outdoors, under a salt-paved canopy by the pool, which made everything taste even better. Oh, and yes—we had our own pool, fed by an underground spring, which only added to the bliss.

I learned how Hemeida salted his food: he would take a large, translucent chunk of natural salt the size of a fist and grate it directly into the dish! It surprised and amused me.

After breakfast, it was time for tea. Siwans love to build a fire and boil tea on it, no special occasion needed. A Siwan might be riding through the desert, get tired, scratched by thorns—and boom, the kettle’s on.

Tea is served in tiny glasses, no bigger than a shot glass. They add tea leaves, lemongrass, and other fragrant herbs to boiling water, let it steep, and test it by pouring a bit into the glass and pouring it back.

“With sugar?” Hemeida asked.

Sean declined and received a delicate stream of tea from a kettle held high above his glass.

“So it won’t be too hot,” Hemeida explained. “Pouring from a height cools the tea as it falls.”

“And *you* want it sweet, I know,” he added, pouring strong brew into a glass already half full of sugar. We burst into laughter.

“Care for a little tea in your sugar?” Sean joked, clutching his stomach from laughing.

Hemeida mixed the tea and sugar by pouring back and forth between the glass and the kettle until it reached the perfect hue.

The tea was delicious—rich and aromatic. I couldn’t tell what all the herbs were. Lemongrass, sure, that was the base.

“If you come again, I’ll make it for you every day,” Hemeida grinned with a sly squint.

“So what was it you promised to show me?” I asked.

“Come,” he said, and led us out of the lodge to a neighboring plot.

“This is a field you’re not allowed to cultivate,” he said, pointing to a wide open space where piles of dates lay drying on mats. “There are tombs buried underneath. The government forbids digging here. For generations, Siwans have dried dates and grain in this spot. But when there’s no wind, things don’t dry well and start to rot. That’s when we jump in the magic spring to summon the wind.”

Near the field was a fenced-off area with a small pond ringed by reeds. According to local belief, jumping in that water brings the wind.

“Never fails,” Hemeida nodded solemnly.

“I wanted to see what was under the water,” he told us. “So I brought a pump, cleared the reeds. The pond is only about a meter and a half deep, and I uncovered three tomb entrances. But before I could go in, the water came rushing back. I drained it again. It returned. I did it over and over—same thing.”

“Then I got mad,” he said with a grin. “I decided to fill the pond in. Came back the next day—and the pump was gone. They drowned it in the pond.”

“Who are *they*?” I asked, intrigued.

“Who else? The djinn!” Hemeida replied with wide eyes. “I decided not to mess with them. If they want to guard that pond—so be it. Otherwise how would we dry our dates?” He shrugged, as if it were the most logical thing in the world. “So, the pond stayed as it is. Want to test it? Jump in, and the wind will blow.”

“I don’t need to jump,” I said playfully. “I’ll just *ask* the wind.”

With that, I stretched my hand out over the little pond and whispered: “Wind, please.”

And suddenly—*just like that*—a breeze swept through.

“Oh my God!” gasped Hemeida, his eyes round with shock. “You’re friends with the djinn! I *knew* you weren’t here by accident!”

“Next time you come back,” he added, as if it were the most casual thing in the world, “you’ll retrieve the magic ring from the pond.”

“A magic ring? What do you mean?” I asked, suddenly overflowing with questions.

“There’s a magic ring at the bottom,” he said solemnly. “I swear it. A sorcerer once gave it to my friend. But it was too strong for him—made him dizzy, weak, messed with his head. So he took it off and threw it into the enchanted pond. It’s waiting for *you*. But not now. You’ll only be able to retrieve it once you solve the mystery of Siwa.”

That conversation felt more *real* than anything else I’d experienced in a long time. So I asked, “Hemeida, is magic common here?”

“Oh, very,” he nodded. “It’s actually a *huge* problem in Siwa. When people argue, they start casting spells on each other. Everyone uses different magic—just to win their fights.”

“Like Harry Potter?” I laughed, picturing Berber tribesmen flying around on brooms, waving wands.

“Exactly,” he chuckled. “No fighting, just cursing. But the worst is *buried magic*—that’s the darkest kind.”

“What’s that?”

“When someone wants to harm someone, they take something that belongs to them, speak dark words over it, and bury it. The curse gets hidden so deep, no one can ever find it. And the person it’s meant for... they’ll never be the same.”

“That’s black magic... Is there such thing as white magic?” I asked, truly curious.

“There is, but very few use it,” he said seriously. “And really, all magic is dangerous—white or black. You shouldn’t tamper with it. Magic can change fate,

and fate belongs to God. We're not God—why take on what you can't handle? We've already been given free will to shape our lives. Why break the lines of destiny? You never know how it might come back to you. And once you interfere, you won't have a choice anymore."

His words struck me. I was full of thoughts. "That's fascinating," I said. "Let me tell you something," and I began to share my dreams with him.

But this time, Hemeida didn't look surprised.

"When you come back, I'll take you to a place... about 200 kilometers from here. You'll learn a lot there," he promised.

"Why later?" I insisted.

"Patience," he laughed. "Everything in its time. Today, Mohamed will take you to the lake to watch the sunset."

When we returned to the lodge, Mohamed greeted us with questions. "Where were you?"

"Visiting the magic spring," Hemeida replied, his voice tinged with mystery.

We climbed into the tuk-tuk.

"Alright, now let's go to the Mountain of the Dead and watch the sunset!" Mohamed said, buzzing with excitement.

"OK, but I need to buy something warm first," I said, slightly embarrassed. "Your nights are way colder than Hurghada. I didn't bring enough warm clothes."

We stopped by a shop that sold rather unattractive faux-leather jackets. "Nooo, Mohamed, what is this?" I said. "I need something warm, local, traditional—like wool."

"Then let's head to the Shali market," he suggested, spinning the tuk-tuk around.

At the bazaar, I browsed with fascination: keffiyehs, cloaks, traditional wedding dresses... and then I spotted *it*—a woolen cloak with a hood, deep midnight blue, richly embroidered with protective symbols and bright thread.

"Wow, so much detail! So many symbols... I wonder what they all mean?"

"You'll find out tomorrow," Mohamed said. "We're going to the library. It has all the answers."

Of course, I bought it—even though it cost twice as much as the simpler cloaks. But the energy it gave off was so strong, so *right*. That's totally my thing—symbols, archetypes, protective signs, all of it!

It was still warm outside, so I folded the cloak and tucked it into my backpack. We hopped back in the tuk-tuk and zoomed off toward the lake to watch the sunset. But first, we stopped at Mount Mut—the Mountain of the Dead, home to countless carved tombs.

Surprisingly, it wasn't grim at all. The mountain, with its pale yellow sandstone, felt almost cheerful. To me, yellow stone can't possibly be spooky.

“Alexandra!” a familiar voice called out. I turned—and saw the two girls I'd met during my transfer earlier.

“Szaiek?”*

(*“How are you?” in Egyptian Arabic)

“Monika! Justyna! I'm so happy to see you!” I said, hugging them.

“We love it here. It's incredible!” Monika replied, and the two of them, along with their guide, launched into a frenzy of selfies on every rock.

The view from the Mountain of the Dead was breathtaking: a sea of palms stretching in every direction, mountain ranges wrapping around Siwa like protective arms. Scattered within the oasis were several standalone mountains, layered and crumbling, like frozen waves of lava.

One tomb even had a little door; inside, the walls were covered in faded images of gods and pharaohs. Sadly, most of the tombs had been looted centuries ago, and many frescoes were lost. Still, I couldn't help but wonder: what secrets were buried deeper inside the mountain? And more importantly—would anyone ever admit they existed?

I climbed to the very top and realized these mountains had once been much taller. They'd eroded over the centuries, melting down like sugar. Everything felt hauntingly familiar. I had seen these landscapes in my dreams.

But questions still churned inside me: Had Mark and I really buried Alexander in Siwa? What happened to Mark afterward? And what about me—Bennu? Where should I look for the Benben stone?

“Alex!” Mohamed waved from below. “The sun's almost down. Let's go! You *have* to see this!”

We had grown quite fond of Mohamed's tuk-tuk. Hopping back in, we whizzed toward Lake Siwa.

Along the way, some clever Siwans had laid gravel paths out to little islands, where they'd set up cozy cafés. It was peaceful, magical.

We sat in a row of chairs, all facing the setting sun. Mohamed brought us each a special Siwan cocktail—banana, fresh dates, a spoonful of instant coffee, all blended with milk.

It was divine.

We chatted, laughed, raced to finish our drinks, soaking in every sip, every word, every moment. Around us, groups of tourists did the same: some snapping pictures, others dancing to the rhythm of the fading light.

And then the sunset began.

The sun seemed to roll briskly towards the horizon and, in a blink, dipped beneath it with astonishing speed. The sky exploded with colour. As soon as it disappeared and dusk began to deepen, hundreds of fairy lights lit up, and the restaurant owners lit their torches. The mood of the place instantly shifted — from romantic to festive and joyful.

The temperature dropped sharply — I wrapped myself in my new cloak and realised just how warm and cosy it was. Without it, I'd have turned into an icicle.

“Mohamed, when are we going to visit Alexander’s oracle?” I asked.

“Patience — not yet. We’ll leave that for the final day. For now — dinner?” he offered, smiling, patting the seat next to him in the front. But I still climbed into the back of the tuk-tuk — it felt safer there.

I sighed. “Ah well... Will there be mahshi for dinner?”

Hearing that, Mohamed burst out laughing. “You know *mahshi*? That’s brilliant. Not tonight, but I’ll ask my mother to make some especially for you.”

Back in Shali, Mohamed took us to a small restaurant — all carpets, cushions, and low tables. You had to take off your shoes at the entrance. The place felt slightly scruffy: cats roamed the kitchen, people were smoking, and food was served on plastic plates and metal bowls. But the food itself? Exceptional. The dishes were simple — soup, salad, rice, a chicken leg — but everything was cooked with such care and flavour that nothing else mattered. It was utterly delicious.

And do you think I went to bed early after that? After all, I'd travelled all night... But of course not. The idea of simply going to bed? No chance. Mohamed asked, "Shall we go to the hot springs?"

Any sane person would have gone to sleep — including Sean and Mary. But I went off with Mohamed to the hot springs.

We dropped Sean and Mary off at the lodge.

"Come sit up front with me," Mohamed said. As I mentioned, there's a tiny passenger seat beside the driver. I was nervous, but decided to give it a try.

Madness!

Riding up front in the tuk-tuk was a completely different experience. He tore through the oasis, bouncing over every stone, practically taking flight. Clutching his shoulder, I shrieked at every turn — some of them so terrifying, I squeezed my eyes shut. None of this fazed him — he flew through the night, chatting away on his phone and answering messages, totally unbothered.

We sped past the Cleopatra Pool, all aglow with fairy lights, and finally made our way towards the mountains. There, beside fences woven from palm branches, we found a campsite. Tents, sleeping bags, fire pits, toilets, and showers — everything was there. But the main attraction was the pools of hot spring water, naturally heated to around 38–39°C.

Torches lined the space, fires crackled cheerfully, and the full moon — a massive glowing disc — lit everything with a soft blue light, like a neon lamp. I dipped my fingers into the hot water, stroked the surface, and as my hand sank deeper, I slipped into a dream.

SIWA. BC.

We arrived at the Temple of Amun in Siwa. From the temple gates stepped a handsome young man with a dazzling smile.

"Greetings, travellers. Who are you? What brings you to our lands?"

"My name is Mark, and this is my wife, Ankhesenamun," said Mark. "We have come to fulfil the last will of the Great Alexander and lay him to rest in this temple — to prevent a war so devastating, few would survive."

"Welcome," the young man replied. "I am Badis, of the Hammadid lineage — High Priest of the Temple of Amun." Suddenly, he fixed his gaze on the pendant around my neck — my simple little stone.

His eyes met mine. “The Benben Stone? What did you say your name was?”

“My name is Ankhesenamun. I am one of the sacred twins — a priestess of Apis, O great Badis. Please, help us,” I said, feeling a surge of power from the place and from those around me.

His face lit up. “So you *are* Bennu?”

“Bennu? That’s the sacred bird of Heliopolis,” I replied, confused. I couldn’t see the link between me and Bennu. The legends of the Phoenix were childhood echoes — and now they seemed to gather around me like smoke turning to flesh.

“I will explain everything,” said the priest calmly. “Do not fear — you are in safe hands.”

The younger temple priests stepped forward and carried Alexander’s body into the preparation chamber. Meanwhile, Badis led us out of the temple toward his dwelling.

We walked through the palm groves, drawing closer to a vast mountain that looked like a giant anthill, dotted with little houses clinging to its slopes, all lit by torches and glowing windows.

“Welcome to my home,” said Badis, leading us inside.

His dwelling was marvellous — its walls, made of pink clay, were adorned with patterns traced by fingers, like someone had painted an endless sea of sand with their bare hands. We entered a room layered with bright carpets and woven rugs. His mother and sister were already pouring fragrant tea, and the servants quickly arranged a light dinner for us.

“Try our dates,” said Badis’s sister warmly, pushing a bowl of dried dates toward me. “You won’t find these even at the Temple of Karnak.”

“I can confirm that,” I smiled. “We don’t have anything like these.”

“There are only twelve of these palms in the whole oasis,” said Badis. “Very difficult to grow. I have just one in my garden.”

His family lit up when they learned of our mission. Their faces filled with reverence and hope.

“You’re doing something noble,” Badis said. He told us how the priests of Heliopolis had declared Alexander a god, pushing aside the local priests and threatening them with bloodshed.

“Olympias and the Heliopolitan priests have set something dark in motion. We *must* stop the madness to come. His tomb is ready. Once the stone slab is sealed, the burial site will never be found.”

“But that’s not all. Sacred Ankhesenamun — do you know what pendant you wear around your neck? Where did it come from?” Badis looked closely at the simple stone on a leather cord resting on my chest.

“I found it in the desert when I was a child, after fleeing the temple. Why?” I attempted to explain, but his curiosity only deepened.

“That is no ordinary pebble—it’s a fallen star, the Benben stone. Legend says only the earthly incarnation of the Bennu bird can discover it.” His eyes gleamed. “I have something for you. We have been waiting. In my family a prophecy is kept: one day a Phoenix will appear here in the form of a young woman, and we safeguard her ring.” Excitement made his breath catch; this moment was clearly long-awaited.

“Long ago,” he continued, “my ancestors received that artefact from the wise ones. The legend tells that the Phoenix, reborn from its ashes, will return as a girl with a heart full of wisdom and compassion. This ring is the token of her return. When she appears, harmony will be restored to the world.”

He seemed to forget how to breathe, yet pressed on, telling this tale:

“In the days of Ramesses II there lived a fearsome chieftain named Munatas, a nomad of brutal ambition. He raided other tribes, seized strong boys and forged them into warriors. Egypt, prosperous and well-defended, long deterred him; but once his army swelled, he set his sights on Heliopolis, whose temple of the sacred Fire-Bird blessed the land with prosperity—and was said to hold more gold than the rest of Egypt combined.

Munatas’s warriors wreaked unspeakable havoc. Bursting into the sanctuary, they found a priestess—radiant Bennu—kneeling before a column. When she rose and swept back her veil, her beauty stunned Munatas and his cut-throats. ‘Priestess,’ he declared, ‘you will be mine—wife or concubine: choose.’ He strode toward her.

‘Stand where you are, Munatas!’ she answered. ‘You are a disgrace to mankind. You shall never have me.’

‘Shall we wager?’ he sneered, seizing her wrist. But Bennu drew a dagger from behind her and plunged it into his heart.

His band howled with fury. As he died Munatas rasped, ‘Make them all suffer.’ His brother Udad knelt over the body and vowed to devise the most terrible punishment for the priestess.

Within days the nomads seized Memphis and its surrounds, plundering so much treasure that camels could not carry it all. Seeing no point in hauling spoils away, Udad resolved to claim all Egypt. His forces shattered Pharaoh’s armies, captured the king himself, and decided to execute him alongside the priestess—whereupon Udad would proclaim himself Pharaoh and rule unopposed. The chosen torture was cruel: ‘You worship the sun,’ Udad jeered. ‘Let the sun destroy you.’

Pharaoh begged them to spare the priestess. He dearly loved her beauty, mind and kindness, though fate forbade their union—she served Atum, untouchable even for a son-of-Ra king. Yet their love was true. Pleas, threats, entreaties—all in vain. The brigands only laughed. Udad ordered Ramesses and Bennu taken deep into the desert, their limbs staked to the sand so the sun would burn them alive. It was the height of the drought. By night they were bound hand and foot.

Dawn’s first pale ray brushed their helpless bodies.

‘My love, sweet Bennu,’ said Ramesses. ‘I thought the worst torment was to be parted from you forever. I never dreamt I would watch your death. At least I shall not outlive you long. Forgive me—I could not protect you.’

‘Sesu, my beloved,’ Bennu replied. ‘We have not yet lost.’

As the first weak beam touched them she began a prayer: ‘Father, great Atum! You who formed all things and wear many faces—help your faithful children. Darkness must not smother the righteous. Evil must not rule the earth. Save us. Take my life if you must, but restore peace to Egypt!’

Suddenly the heavens split, an unbearably bright shaft of light pierced the dawn and struck Bennu’s heart. For an instant all was still; then a thunderous crack resounded. A shock-wave flung Ramesses far away, snapping every rope. He hit the sand and lost consciousness.

All around, the ground seethed. Fiery fountains leapt skyward; where he lay, lush palms burst forth, springs gushed, and an oasis bloomed. When the Pharaoh came to, Bennu was leaning over him, gently stroking his cheek.’

“What happened?” Ramesses asked. “Are you all right?”

“Everything will be fine now, Sesu. Look,” she said and pointed—at an army! Cavalry, infantry, catapults—everything needed for a victorious battle.

“Go and free our land. Wipe evil from the face of Egypt,” Bennu sparkled. “Rule wisely, my love, and be happy.”

Ramesses watched her form begin to fade and realised in horror that he was losing her. “Don’t disappear—gods, don’t take her from me!”

In despair, he tore the ring from his own finger and slid it onto hers. “By the power vested in me as ruler of this land, I release you from the burden of being a priestess of Heliopolis and name you my wife.” He kissed Bennu. They both wept, but what had begun could no longer be stopped.

“In our next life, we shall be together, my love,” Bennu whispered, and transformed into a flaming heron that soared skyward. The ring slipped from her claw and fell into the spring.

The Pharaoh ordered all the captured nomads to be brought before him and said: “You were all taken from your families and raised as warriors. But your tyrants are gone. You may now live as you choose. Live in peace, true to your nature. I gift you this wondrous oasis and will help provide everything you need to start a life of your own choosing.”

And thus our oasis was born—Sekht-Amu, meaning “Field of Trees”.

Many dived into the spring trying to find the Phoenix ring, but no one ever did. Only the legend remained, passed from generation to generation. Time passed. The eldest son of a chieftain once found the ring while swimming in the spring. Since then, it has been kept by our family—waiting for its Bennu to return.”

“The prophecy has come true! Bennu and Ramesses are here!” Badis burst out of the house, rugs flying behind him, wall-hangings flapping in his wake.

Fifteen minutes later, we heard a rumble outside. We stepped through the doorway—and it seemed like the entire town had gathered. A palanquin was brought forth, we were seated in it and carried through the narrow streets to the main square, which was bursting with people. Beautiful cloaks were thrown over our shoulders, and we were led to the centre of the crowd. Badis walked towards me, carrying a beautiful box.

“O wondrous Bennu, accept your ring. We have kept it safe for two thousand years,” he said, opening the box to reveal a heavy silver ring.

“You know, this ring was passed down from father to eldest son for more than two thousand years. My ancestor found it at the bottom of the spring when he was a boy. He was the only son who could carry on our lineage—the rest were eight daughters. He was the last child.

While swimming in the pond, he discovered the ring and put it on. That very day, he was bitten by a cobra—but suddenly the ring began to glow, and before him appeared the Bennu bird. She transformed into a beautiful woman and healed him with her magic. She asked him to keep the ring safe until her return, when she would become a woman of the earth once again and no longer belong to the gods. This ring would free her and her entire line from service to Atum.

My ancestor grew up, married, and had children. My great-grandfather told the story of him and Bennu to his own children and instructed the eldest son to guard the ring and pass it on when he turned fourteen. That’s how old my forebear was when he met Bennu and was healed by her. And every forefather believed she would return—because she is the Phoenix. And everyone knows, a Phoenix burns to ashes and then is reborn from them. Each son was strictly commanded to await her return and return the ring to her.”

“I thank the gods that this honour fell to me. I gave you the ring. I did! And now you’re reunited with your Ramesses,” he finished, his face alight with pride. In the starlight, he looked even more handsome than by day. His radiant white smile gleamed in the dark.

“But are you ready to give up your divinity—for a mere mortal?” Badis teased with a glint.

I looked at Mark and smiled. “I think I gave up my divine status the very moment I saw him.”

Oh, what a celebration they gave us! A true wedding feast. Bonfires roared to the heavens, a lamb roasted on a spit, drums pounded, hands clapped, and songs rang out: “Our divine Bennu has returned and reunited with her Ramesses. She will bring us blessings and prosperity.” People didn’t go to sleep until nearly dawn.

Mark and I sat wrapped in warm woollen blankets on the rooftop. The eastern sky glowed a soft blue. I felt both peaceful and a little sad. Tomorrow we would bury Alexander’s body—and leave Egypt forever.

Our time:

“Fancy a dip? Did you bring your swimsuit?” Mohamed’s voice pulled me from my memories.

The water felt around 38 degrees—hot and steaming, a cloud of mist curling over everything.

“Changing rooms and toilets are over there. We can swim.”

But honestly, I was feeling exhausted. Around the central firepit, a dozen men of different ages had gathered. I wasn’t sure how appropriate it would be to strip down to a swimsuit in this setting. The Bedouins of Sinai, for example, would never understand.

“Not tonight,” I said.

“Then come by the fire.”

A fair-haired foreign woman speaking Arabic caused an absolute sensation among the Berber men. They all started asking me questions, eager and wide-eyed. One of them—a mute named Shezli—gestured that his grandfather had served in the Ottoman army, had been to Turkey, wore enormous moustaches and carried a sabre at his side.

Then, as if to win me over completely, the group began to sing local hits in their crackling Berber tongue. The slow, winding melodies seemed to rise into the starry night along with the tongues of flame, filling the air with living joy.

A small bottle was passed around. Mohamed explained it was local alcohol—very strong moonshine. The emptier the bottle became, the more piercing and soulful the singing grew. At some point a tablah drum appeared, and the music intensified.

Soon, we were all swept into something like a collective trance. I was hearing the same songs that Bennu must have heard two thousand years ago. The Siwan Berber language, though peppered with Arabic words, had changed little over the centuries.

The Berbers use their own calendar—it runs 950 years ahead of the Gregorian one. The Amazigh people celebrate New Year on the 12th of January: Yennayer, meaning “first month” in Tamazight (yenn – first, yer – month). It’s thought to mark the beginning of the agricultural season, but in truth, it dates back to the coronation of an Amazigh leader as Pharaoh of Egypt.

That leader was Shoshenq (Sheshnaq), crowned in 950 BC, founding Egypt's 22nd Dynasty which ruled until 715 BC. The largest Amazigh tribe, the Meshwesh, were known as the finest warriors—tall, fearless, over two metres tall—they struck terror by name alone.

For centuries they clashed with Egyptian rulers, until the Pharaohs realised it was wiser to make them allies. The Berbers readily entered Egyptian service, receiving land and honours in return. Many rose to become viziers, generals and other high officials.

Among the Meshwesh, one family stood out—settled near Herakleopolis and descended from an Amazigh named Buyuwawa. This family had ties to the Egyptian royal line. Pharaoh Shoshenq I served as commander of the Egyptian army and vizier (chati) under the last king of the 21st Dynasty, Psusennes II. His father Nimlot was the Great Chief of Ma (Meshwesh) and brother to Pharaoh Osorkon the Elder.

Therefore, Osorkon the Elder was the son of Shoshenq the Elder, chief of the Libyan Ma tribe, uncle to Shoshenq I, and the first Amazigh to rule Egypt. He reigned for just six years—but for some reason, his rule is rarely mentioned. I wonder why?

Ever seen *The Scorpion King*? I think it's about Shoshenq.

In any case, Prince Shoshenq became Pharaoh and founded the 22nd Dynasty. But, as the film says, “peace cannot last forever.” Brothers began to fight over the throne, splitting Egypt into chiefdoms and weakening their power. Naturally, the fragmented Amazigh dynasty was overthrown by the Nubians. The last Amazighs took refuge in Siwa, the sacred oasis of Amun, blessed by the Phoenix-Bennu. But then something happened, and they scattered—vanished into the sands. Hemeidi said the oasis was abandoned for a time. I wonder why?

Hidden from the world by the Great Sand Sea, the Amazigh preserved their language, folklore, and traditions. It's fascinating how Islam wove itself into their culture. It was likely brought here by Muslim Amazighs from Algeria, Tunisia and Morocco, who stopped in Siwa on pilgrimage to Mecca. Some never left, seduced by the oasis and the beauty of its women.

And so, on my first evening in Siwa, I sat among the Amazigh people, surrounded by the sound of their voices. The jet-black sky above our heads, studded with stars the size of fists, pulsed with us in rhythm. I could've stayed until morning, soaking in the atmosphere—but we had plans. Reluctantly parting from the fire circle, we went home to sleep.

I opened all the windows and let the cool breeze in. The room smelled of dates and hay. Crystals of salt sparkled like stars on the ceiling—"to keep the djinn away," Hemeidi had said. The bed was so comfortable, I fell asleep instantly.

In the morning, rustling in the kitchen woke me. Sean. That meant it was nearly eight, and he was making coffee. I got up, washed my face, changed out of pyjamas and stepped into the lounge.

"Morning. Coffee?" Sean asked, handing me a mug of Nescafé with milk. We went out to the veranda.

It was incredible how quickly the morning chill was chased away by heat once the sun sprang up. I don't think I'll ever get used to how in Egypt the sun doesn't rise or set—it simply *jumps*.

Hemeidi arrived with breakfast bags: taameya, feta and tomatoes for salad, a jar of tahini for me to make the sauce, and a pile of fresh flatbread. We headed round the house to the outdoor kitchen.

While Hemeidi was slicing tomatoes with royal dignity and I was mixing tahini with water and lemon juice, questions about life in Siwa were pouring out of me. I learned that he was 34 years old, had four children who looked like Dutch kids — fair-haired and curly. His grandfather was an albino, and that gene had passed on to his two youngest children. His marriage had been arranged by his parents, and in Siwa, people usually know who they will marry since their cradle days. He got married first and only then grew to love his wife. Almost all men in Siwa have higher education — they graduate from Egyptian universities and often pursue academic degrees abroad.

"And what about women?"

"Why would they need to study?" Hemeidi smirked. "School is more than enough for them. Kitchen, kids and livestock — that's their lot."

When the table was set and everyone had gathered for breakfast, Mohamed appeared. Like the Cheshire Cat, his radiant white smile emerged from afar first, followed by him dancing into view.

"So, what's the plan for today?" our guide asked, beaming.

"Oh Lord, you tell us — you're the guide!" Sean laughed.

"We're going to the library!" Mohamed announced with great ceremony.

After breakfast and a small tea ceremony, we headed to Shali — the ancient capital of Siwa.

At the centre of the town stood a mountain, shaped like a giant termite mound. The whole mountain was covered in little clay dwellings. “Shali” in the Siwan language simply means “town”. It was built just like our lodge — from salt-saturated clay that, once dry, hardens almost like cement.

The Siwans had preserved this unique architectural style dating back to the 12th century CE — the 6th century of the Hijri calendar — and clearly continued to use it today, though it carried certain risks. Mohamed explained that these traditional structures were actually reinforced by light rain, which made the clay denser. But in heavy rain, the salt dissolved, and the walls would melt. So nowadays they build brick walls and coat them with clay. This preserves the original look and also provides excellent insulation.

In 1926, a three-day downpour struck Siwa, destroying the 13th-century fortress. The homes, originally four or five stories tall, began to melt and collapse. Back then, the fortress had housed hundreds of people. Now, only a labyrinth of flattened roofless buildings with melted clay walls remained.

Only a few of the structures within the fortress are still in use today, mainly as storage, workshops or cafés. There are two old mosques with minarets that look more like chimneys. The mosque on the northern edge of the city wall is considered the oldest clay-built mosque in all of Africa. There’s also a hotel at the base of the mountain — housed in a historic building that was successfully restored.

After the flood, the residents had to move down into the valley, where they built new, more comfortable homes. They brought in electricity and running water. As for the old city, it was partly restored — or rather, reinforced — and the fortress was opened to tourists.

At the base of the mountain was a small cluster of shops. No one grabbed us by the arms or shouted us into the stores. We turned right and entered a beautiful traditional Siwan building that housed the library. Next to it was a tiny museum. And that was my kingdom: embroidered talismans, mother-of-pearl amulets, traditional clothing and household items — everything called to me. I examined and photographed it all carefully.

The library was run by a couple — the wife was French, the husband Italian. Real-life Indiana Jones and his wife! They offered to show us a documentary about Siwa. That’s when I realised I had forgotten my glasses at the lodge. I went out to find Mohamed, who was chatting with friends outside the café.

“Mohamed, I need your help. I forgot my glasses,” I said.

“Very good. You wouldn’t have sat through that film anyway. You’re like a spindle,” he laughed. “Let’s go.”

Taking my hand, Mohamed said, “First we need transport. My tuk-tuk’s been taken by a friend.” And off we went to the square. He scanned the scene quickly and commanded, “Follow me.”

We walked over to a barber shop. “Saeed, you’ve just started that haircut. I’m taking your motorbike,” he said — not asking, just informing his friend. Then turning to me, he added, “The film’s two hours long — we’ll do my errands instead. You’re coming with me.”

We raced back to the lodge on the motorbike, quickly grabbed my glasses, and returned to town. Mohamed turned into a narrow street and, with a mysterious look on his face, asked, “Do you know where we’re going?”

“No idea,” I replied.

“To my house. You’ll meet my mother,” he said. That was unexpected.

Mohamed’s family is considered well-off — they own land, livestock, a shop, and he works in tourism. Plus, his mother runs her own catering business for weddings. But their lifestyle was very modest — I’d even say ascetic. The floor was made of packed earth covered in reed mats, the walls were plain white sand-lime brick, and the house doubled as a residence and a storage area. Inside was pure chaos — children of all ages running around and causing a racket.

“That’s my nephew. That’s the neighbour’s daughter. That’s my cousin...” Mohamed pointed out the kids one by one. “And that’s my dad’s son from his other wife. My father had two wives, but my mum sorted that out. Now she’s the only one. Strong woman.”

Mohamed’s mother really was a striking and powerful-looking woman. She seemed to be the central figure of the entire neighbourhood. She tried speaking to me in English, but once she realised I spoke Arabic, she was thrilled and began asking where I was from and how I had come to speak Arabic.

I told her I used to live in Egypt and that I loved the country and adored the language.

“Do you like Egyptian food?” she asked.

“Of course. Especially mahshi and taamiya.”

“You know what? My daughter Fatma is getting married next year. Come to the wedding! There will be so much food!”

“I’ll try. I even have a new wedding dress. I was supposed to get married in it — but it didn’t work out. What size is Fatma?”

“Fatma! Come here, quickly!” her mother called.

In ran the female version of Mohamed — an incredibly beautiful young woman, about twenty, with a figure slightly slimmer than mine.

“Perfect. The corset dress will fit you,” I said.

“Then it’s settled. You’ll come to the wedding!”

“God willing. I’d love to,” I replied, smiling.

Mohamed kept darting in and out of different doorways.

“Mum, where’s my camera?” came his voice. “Mum, where’s the camera battery?” he shouted again. “Mum, I told you not to touch my stuff!” This was followed by a rapid-fire exchange of sharp phrases in Tamazight.

“Alright, time to go,” Mohamed said, and I hugged and kissed his mother goodbye, promising to come back as soon as I could. He took my hand and pulled me through the garden, muttering, “Can you imagine?! Those kids broke my lens. Now I don’t have a camera.”

We jumped on the motorbike and arrived at the square just as the barber was finishing Saeed’s haircut.

“Saeed, your bike’s back. Thanks!” Mohamed called, taking my hand again with the same casual authority and dragging me off.

“We’re heading to the library?” I asked.

“Why?” Mohamed looked puzzled.

“That film has another hour and a half to go. Better to see how people really live. I told you, today’s about my business.”

The morning turned out to be quite the adventure. Mohamed darted around town using every kind of transport, never waiting more than a few minutes to catch a ride.

“Siwa is a small place,” he explained. “Everyone knows everyone and helps each other.”

In just an hour and a half, we rode in six or seven different vehicles. First, we stopped at the mechanics to drop off a part, then to the carpenters, then the market, a traditional pharmacy, and finally back to the mechanics again. The Siwans were incredibly kind and curious people. But only the men worked — the women stayed at home, went shopping, or visited friends, always wrapped from head to toe in black niqabs and embroidered blue cloaks.

We returned to Shali just as the film was ending, and our group reunited in full.

“Come on!” Mohamed tugged me by the hand again. “You’re not properly equipped.”

He led me into a shop where I bought my Siwan cloak.

“We need to choose a keffiyeh for you. A gift from me,” he said. As he and the shopkeeper wrapped various colours around my head, they finally settled on green.

“And now, the best part!” Mohamed announced with ceremony, gesturing toward a gleaming jeep from which Hemeidi emerged.

“Everyone here?” Hemeidi asked. “Hop in!”

We climbed into the jeep and drove out of Siwa into the desert. Once we reached soft sand dunes, Hemeidi stopped and let the air out of the tyres — to increase traction and stability. And then it began — something absolutely wild! We surged up sandy hills, seemingly vertical, and then plunged down the other side like drops off a cliff. It was breathtaking.

We rolled into a giant basin where the ground was covered in seashells. “What the—?” I couldn’t believe my eyes. “We’re nowhere near the sea!”

According to Google, the coast was 300 km away.

“This used to be the sea,” Hemeidi explained. “And this,” he opened his hand, “these are meteorites.”

I looked closer: mixed in with the shells were small melted stones.

“I want to give you something special,” Hemeidi said. He looked around and suddenly stared down, stunned, at a stone near my foot. He picked it up — quite large, flat and heavy, with a perfectly round hole through

the centre, as if it had been drilled. He handed it to me. I tapped it against my teeth — by the sound, it was metal!

And then it hit me — it was just like the stone Ankhsemut wore around her neck!

“Well then, now I have my own Benben stone! Thank you. But, Hemeidi, you’re a man of the desert, and I’m of the sea. I have nothing to give you.”

Hemeidi’s face stretched in surprise again. He bent down and picked up something by my other foot.

“You’re a real enchantress! You attract things. Stones with holes are rare here, and I didn’t even have to look — it was lying right in front of you! And look — right next to your other foot!”

Under his amazed gaze, between my big toe and second toe, lay a shark’s tooth.

“Do you realise how old this is? That’s a prehistoric shark tooth! I grew up here. I’m out here nearly every day. I’ve never found anything like this before. It’s your energy.”

We examined the tooth from all angles. I unclasped my necklace, the one with the African continent pendant.

“Let me see if I can thread your meteorite onto my Africa.” The stone slid on easily and settled next to the pendant.

“They look like they were made to be together. They belong to each other,” Hemeidi said.

A giant moon was already rising in the pale sky. He clasped the necklace back around my neck, took the stone between his fingers, looked at the moon, squinted and smiled — then let go. The stone slid down and chimed softly against the Africa, both pendants landing right over my heart.

“Don’t let anyone else touch it. Let it soak in your energy,” Hemeidi said, looking into my eyes with the same soul-piercing gaze from my dream.

That look filled me with peace. I had already felt comfortable in Siwa, but now... now I felt comfortable in the universe. I knew without a doubt — I was wearing a true Benben stone.

The ancient Egyptians believed that the phoenix lived on the Benben stone. When they looked up at the stars and saw meteors fall, they imagined the fiery bird Bennu gracing the land with its presence. At the sites where the celestial fire

had struck, they would find melted stones, which only deepened their belief. They built pyramids and obelisks, placing Benben-like stones at their peaks.

In the *Pyramid Texts*, it is written that the first mound to rise — the form taken by the creator god Atum — was in Heliopolis (called *Iunu* or *Annu* in Egyptian). And the Benben stone was the very first thing the sun ever touched. Of course, these are all legends and stories. Nothing scientific. But magic itself isn't scientific... is it?

So how do we explain dreams and visions? How do we explain miracles? They happen. You can throw people into psych wards or burn them at the stake, but that won't stop miracles from occurring.

And I've told you before — Bennu, the sacred bird, could reverse time and had power over it. Well, I have a strange trait — all watches stop on me. I mean it — I wear a wristwatch and its lifespan is, at most, a year. Then it just stops. Doesn't tick, doesn't respond. Can't be fixed.

Once, my dad brought me a Seiko titanium watch from Swiss duty-free. Titanium body, sapphire glass that can't be scratched, self-winding with movement, no back cover — solid casing.

He handed it to me and said proudly, "Daughter, look — I've given you eternity."

Yeah, eternity lasted me exactly eight months. I love watches, but I've lost count of how many Swatch and Seiko died on me. Even my dive computer burned out. So now I live without watches.

But back to the desert.

The safari ended with sandboarding down tall dunes and a tea ceremony by Hemeidi at sunset. A massive moon rose from one side of the desert while the sun slowly dipped behind the dunes on the other, hovered for a brief moment, then dropped behind the horizon. After sunset, it got cold quickly, but the sand still held the warmth of the sun, and walking on it barefoot felt divine.

The guys brought us to a desert camp. It looked like the one near the springs — tents, carpets, a central firepit, toilets and a little kiosk. The kiosk was a mix of bar and field kitchen. Behind it was a tandoor — a clay-lined pit dug into the ground. Grates of meat were placed in the coals, covered with a lid, and buried under sand. Tonight's menu included chicken and camel meat.

I hoped I'd never have to eat camel — the thought horrified me. I just can't eat intelligent animals. Sean, on the other hand, devoured it with delight.

As for me, there was no chicken left, and they brought me a giant camel steak instead. I had to make do with salad.

Mohamed's grin appeared out of the darkness. "How's everything?"

"Mohamed, where is my chicken?!" I cried.

"What chicken? I picked the juiciest pieces of camel just for you!" Mohamed looked genuinely puzzled — even slightly offended. "I'm serious. They ate all the chicken."

"You've got to be kidding me! I asked you!" I groaned. But honestly, after such an overwhelming day, I wasn't that hungry anyway. I wasn't planning on stuffing myself — a few spoonfuls of salad were more than enough.

"Shall we dance?" Mohamed's dazzling white smile lit up the darkness as the plates were being cleared.

Everyone was in a great mood. I turned on my speaker, and we started to dance. Arabic and European music echoed over the desert, and laughter filled the air. Soon, locals joined us, bringing drums and putting on a little show. The Berber dances were a lot like *dabke* — with squatting steps and sudden drops. Mohamed was bouncing a metre off the ground, then crashing down like a stone, knees tucked in, only to shoot back up again like a spring.

A massive full moon hovered above, lighting up the entire desert like a floodlight. We zipped ourselves into sleeping bags and got ready to sleep — though sleeping under a full moon is no easy task. It shines right into your face. Even under a tent, there's no escape.

We tossed and turned, but sleep didn't come.

Noticing I was still awake, Mohamed whispered, "Alex, you awake?"

"Mm-hmm," I murmured.

"Then tell me your story. Why did you choose Siwa? How did you even find me?"

So I began telling Mohamed about my dreams, my travels, and my visions. He kept interrupting me with little gasps of surprise — sitting up, lying down again, rolling around in his sleeping bag like a cocooned caterpillar. I couldn't help laughing, and he kept scolding me playfully: "Focus. And then?"

And suddenly, he sat up straight in his sleeping bag. "Wait! But you're here... So where's Mark?"

“If only I knew,” I said, exhausted. “I’ve crossed half of Egypt trying to solve that riddle. Honestly... I’ve spent my whole life trying to solve it.”

But I could feel it — I was getting closer. “And now I’m here, under the Siwan sky, lying in a sleeping bag, staring up at this ridiculously bright moon,” I said, finishing the tale.

We lay there for a while in silence, each lost in our own thoughts. Finally, Mohamed broke it.

“I wish I were Mark,” he said softly. “Just imagine... You travel the world for him. You’d do anything just to see him. I wish someone loved me like that.”

And then he began to sing a hauntingly beautiful song by legendary Egyptian singer Umm Kulthum — *Enta Omri* — a love that lasts a lifetime:

“Why didn’t I meet you, my love, earlier?

How many years have I loved you?

As long as we’ve been alive...

Oh my beloved, my idol,

What we missed is enough.

You are the one I longed for,

The love of my soul,

Everything I saw before I saw you...

Was just a wasted life.”

That song always hits me deep. My chest tightened, tears welled up. And somewhere between those aching notes and my own silent longing, I drifted into sleep.

I dreamed I was holding my Benben stone in my fist, thinking, “Alright — now I’ve got superpowers. I can see the future!”

Suddenly, Hemeidi appeared in front of me. “And why would you need to know the future?” he asked, his eyes piercing straight through me like a blade of light. “You’re already protected.”

His gaze was so intense, I jolted awake — breathless. It took me a while to fall back asleep.

SIWA, 2022

Day three of our journey through Siwa.

“Alex!” Mohamed beamed from his sleeping bag cocoon, his white teeth gleaming. “Sabah el eshta!” (“Creamy morning!” — it’s their version of “Good morning.”)

“Sabah el asal, we halwa, we baklawa!” (“A morning of honey, halva, and baklava!”) I answered in Arabic. He burst out laughing.

“You’re adorable! Marry me, stay here. You’d be happy in this place.”

“Oh, sure — until you bring three more wives into the house?” I laughed.

“Shame on you! You know our religion. The Prophet Mohamed, peace and blessings be upon him, said a man may marry four wives *only* if he can love each one equally. But the human heart can love only one. So don’t sin — marry once.”

To be honest, most people only remember the “four wives” part. Hardly anyone recalls the “marry only once” bit.

“What about Mark? I still need to find him,” I chuckled. This whole conversation amused me.

“Alright,” Mohamed said, thinking aloud. “Let’s say you do find your Mark, but in this lifetime, he turns out to be a total jerk. Then you come back to me, and we get married.”

“Perfect plan!” I laughed. “Now when’s breakfast?”

“All you care about is your stomach! What about poor Mohamed’s heart?” He rolled his eyes theatrically toward the sky, wearing an exaggeratedly romantic expression.

“Come on, a guy like you won’t stay single for long...”

“True. But Bennu — she’s one of a kind.” Suddenly, his face turned serious. “Jokes aside, let me make you a promise: go search for your Mark. I’ll be your loyal friend and help you in any way I can. But if one day you choose to be with me — I’ll always be ready to welcome you. No matter when you return to my life, I’ll be yours.”

“Why are you saying all this, Mohamed? Those are big words...”

“I mean it.”

That’s youthful idealism in full bloom. I just laughed and shook my head. This is what they call “*Try staying unmarried in Egypt.*” Girls, during your trip here, you’ll get more marriage proposals than you can count.

We returned to the lodge to shower and change. After our usual breakfast, we headed to the salt lakes — now *that* was a real adventure!

The water was so salty that you could just float on the surface like a cork. You could even roll around without sinking. And you could collect natural salt crystals there — huge ones, the size of your palm. (“From the jinn,” according to Hemeida’s version.)

So yeah — I was heading home with a solid kit: meteorites, sand from the Great Sand Sea, and chunks of magical salt...

Honestly, even if you go to Siwa just to soak in the various springs — it’s worth it. Salty, hot, fizzy... the sensations are incredible. You could try all three in a single day! Actually, make it four — the lodge pool has regular well water.

The salt lakes and quarries looked absolutely surreal — like massive white sugar bowls filled with aquamarine and sapphire water. The edges were sharp, and getting in or out was a little dangerous. Falling face-first? Not a great idea. One gulp of that water could be deadly due to the salt concentration. And God forbid it gets in your eyes. It stings like hell — trust me, I learned the hard way.

But floating in that water? Pure joy. Or more like reclining on a sofa, gently rocking side to side. It felt like sailing on waves — lying on your stomach while your feet bobbed behind you. And within minutes, your whole body would be coated in a sparkling crust of salt.

After those lakes, all our clothes and towels turned stiff — like they’d been starched. I was wearing a dress that froze into a bell shape. My skin sparkled like it was covered in frost, thanks to all the salt crystals.

All I could think was: I *need* a shower. Everything itched. When I looked in the mirror, I laughed — white salt traces on my face, my hair sticking out like a salty cactus.

Finally getting clean felt almost magical. Sometimes, the simplest things — like washing off — feel like the ultimate pleasure.

“How good it feels to be clean!” I said, drying my face with a towel.

Once we were all fresh and gathered in the gazebo, Mohamed made a grand announcement: “And now — the Temple of Amun!”

From afar, the Temple of Amun looked like Shali: melting walls, endless corridors, staircases, tiny rooms...

As I climbed the stone steps, I suddenly saw — centuries ago — how we carried Alexander’s tightly wrapped body into this very temple. A sarcophagus had been carved straight into the rock. I was singing prayers to Atum, Aton, Isis, and Osiris, asking Anubis to carry the great Pharaoh of Egypt on the Solar Barge to the lushest gardens of the underworld.

Mark’s brow was furrowed so deeply his eyebrows nearly touched. We placed the body in the hollow floor, then slowly lowered a large slab on ropes. It fit perfectly into the groove — hiding the tomb completely. The floor looked seamless.

Mark said, “Sleep well, my beloved brother. You were always my role model, my protector, my guide. I have fulfilled your will. Rest in peace.” And silence rang in our ears.

Now, here I am. Standing in the same chamber, on the very floor that hides the sarcophagus. Scientists have searched for years for something that can never be found.

I looked up — and there he was. Mark. His face twisted in rage. He drew his sword.

Someone was behind me. I didn’t have time to turn — a sack was thrown over my head.

Two strong arms grabbed me and dragged me backwards. No way to break free...

I *really* fell onto my back. It felt like I was plummeting into the ground, swallowed by darkness. When I opened my eyes, two worried faces were staring down at me — tourists from Alexandria.

“What happened? You just dropped to the ground and closed your eyes! Are you okay?”

“Must’ve been the heat. Probably dehydrated,” I smiled.
“Thanks. I’m fine, really.”

I stood up, brushed myself off, and looked around the chamber.

First of all, no oracle. Just an empty box. No stelae. No images of Amun left.

One by one, the rest of our group arrived, and Mohamed began his usual explanation: “See that little hole in the wall? That’s where the priests would speak in the voice of the oracle.”

But I knew better. That’s not how it worked. The answer came *through* the priest, who stood in front of the oracle. The oracle itself — either destroyed or, more likely — taken away...

SIVA, 2022

Day three of our journey through Siwa.

“Alex!” Mohamed beamed from the cocoon of his sleeping bag, flashing his pearly white teeth. “Sabah el ishta!” — which translates from Arabic as ‘*Creamy morning*’, their delightful version of ‘*Good morning*’.

“Sabah el asal, w halwa, w baklava!” I called back with a grin — ‘*A morning of honey, halva, and baklava!*’

He burst into laughter. “You’re a treasure! Marry me, stay here. You’d be so happy in Siwa.”

“Oh sure, until you bring in three more wives!” I teased.

“Shame on you!” he said, still laughing. “You know our religion. The Prophet Muhammad — peace and blessings be upon him — said a man may marry four wives *only if* he can love them all equally. But the human heart can truly love only one. So don’t sin — marry just once.”

That last part? Hardly anyone knows it. Everyone’s heard the ‘four wives’ bit. The ‘*marry only once*’ line — never gets mentioned.

“But what about Mark?” I chuckled, loving how absurd the whole exchange was. “I still have to find him.”

“Well, alright,” Mohamed proposed playfully, “how about this — you go find your Mark, but what if, in this life, he turns out to be a proper donkey? Then you come back, and we’ll get married.”

“Brilliant plan!” I laughed. “Now when’s breakfast?”

“You only think about your stomach! What about poor Mohamed’s heart?” He rolled his eyes skyward, putting on a face of mock sorrow and romance.

“Come on,” I smiled, “a handsome man like you won’t be alone for long...”

“Ah, but Bennu — she’s the one and only in this world.” And then, just like that, his tone shifted. He grew serious. “All jokes aside, I’ll make you a deal. Go find your Mark. I’ll be your loyal friend, help you with anything, always. But if you ever decide to choose me, I’ll be here. Any time you return to my life — I will be yours.”

“Why do you say things like that, Mohamed? They’re such big words...”

“I stand by them.”

That, right there, was youthful maximalism at its finest. I just laughed and shook my head. Honestly, *try staying unmarried in Egypt*. Girls, you’ll receive more marriage proposals during your trip than you could possibly count.

We headed back to the lodge for a shower and a change of clothes. After our traditional breakfast, we set off for the salt lakes — now *that* was a proper adventure! The water was so salty that you could lie right on the surface and float with ease, even roll over like a pancake. Plus, you could collect crystals of natural salt (according to Hemeida, obviously *gifted by the jinn*). Big ones — palm-sized.

By the end of the trip, I had quite the haul: meteor fragments, sand from the Great Sand Sea, chunks of salt...

Honestly, even just for the springs, Siwa is worth it. Saltwater springs, hot springs, fizzy carbonated ones — the sensations are unlike anything else. And you can try all three in one day! Actually, four — the lodge pool has regular well water.

The salt lakes and quarries look utterly surreal — like giant white sugar bowls filled with aquamarine and sapphire water. The edges are sharp and jagged, and getting in or out is an adventure in itself. Fall face-first into that water, and you’re in trouble. One sip could be fatal due to the salt concentration. And heaven help you if a drop gets into your eye — it stings like mad. Trust me, I’ve tested it for you.

But swimming in that water? Pure bliss. Or rather, *floating* — like lounging on a sofa, gently rocking side to side. It’s like being on a boat, riding the waves: lie on your stomach, and the stern lifts skyward. Your body is quickly coated in a glittering crust of salt.

After the lake, all our clothes and towels turned stiff as boards — it was hilarious. I wore a dress that froze into a perfect bell shape. My entire body shimmered in the sun, salt crystals sparkling like frost. My skin itched horribly — all I wanted was to wash it off. I glanced in the mirror and burst out laughing: white salt streaks covered my face, and my hair stood up like a wild salt bush.

When we finally reached the shower, it was almost a spiritual experience. Who knew something so simple could bring so much joy? Turns out, sometimes a good wash is pure ecstasy.

“How wonderful it is to be clean!” I said, drying my face with a towel, finally salt-free.

When we’d all scrubbed up and gathered under the pergola, Mohamed made a grand announcement: “Now — the Temple of Amun!”

From afar, the Temple of Amun reminded me of Shali: walls sagging like melted wax, endless corridors, staircases, and tiny chambers. I climbed the stairs, and suddenly — I saw it. Centuries ago, we had carried Alexander’s body into this very temple, wrapped tightly in linen, ready to be placed into a sarcophagus carved straight into the stone.

I was chanting prayers to Atum, Aton, Isis, and Osiris, asking Anubis to carry the great Pharaoh of Egypt on the solar barque to the most beautiful of the underworld’s gardens.

Mark’s brow was furrowed so deeply that his eyebrows nearly touched. We placed the body into a hollow in the floor and lowered a stone slab, suspended by ropes. When it slid into place, it left no trace — it simply looked like a smooth, seamless floor. Mark whispered: “Sleep, my beloved brother. You were always my guide, my protector, my teacher. I’ve fulfilled your will. Rest in peace.” Silence rang in my ears.

And now, here I stood in that same room, on that same floor — the hidden lid of a sarcophagus. Scholars have spent years searching for what cannot be found. I looked up — and there was Mark again, anger written across his face. He drew his sword. Someone was behind me — but before I could turn, a sack was thrown over my head. Two men grabbed me by the arms and dragged me backward. Strong hands — impossible to resist.

And yes, I actually fell onto my back. It felt like I was sinking into the earth, swallowed by the dark.

When I opened my eyes, two worried faces hovered above me — tourists from Alexandria. They were shaking me gently: “Are you okay? You just dropped backward and closed your eyes. What happened?”

“Probably heatstroke. Dehydration,” I smiled. “It’s alright. Thank you.”

I stood up, brushed myself off, and looked around the chamber. First of all — no oracle. Just a hollow shell. No stelae, no carvings of Amun anywhere. Our group slowly trickled in, and Mohamed began his explanation: “See that opening in the wall? That’s where the priests spoke on behalf of the oracle.”

But I knew that’s not how it worked. The answer came *through* the priest, who stood *before* the oracle — and the oracle itself, well, either it’s been destroyed... or more likely — taken away.

The brute who had dragged me out of the hold walked over and kicked me hard in the ribs as I lay on the deck. I gathered my strength — I don’t know where it came from — and struck him with my foot just above the heel. He crumpled instantly, falling to the ground in pain. The crowd of armed men howled.

With a single jump, I sprang to my feet, grabbed his sword, and took a defensive stance. My hair clung to my face, I was utterly exhausted, my whole body ached, but I was filled with resolve — I’d rather die than let myself be torn apart by these savages. I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. For a brief moment, the world stood still.

I opened my eyes and, drawing a circle in the air around my head with the sword, then one on the deck around my feet, I began to recite a prayer: “O Great Atum, creator of all that lives and does not live, your daughter calls upon you. Do not let disgrace fall upon me, shield me from harm, save your daughter from a sorrowful fate...”

Suddenly, a powerful wind surged, and a giant wave struck the side of the ship. The sky darkened rapidly with storm clouds. Sailors rushed across the deck, rolling up sails and sealing the hatches. Two of them grabbed me by the arms and shoved me back into the hold, slamming the hatch shut. The boat rocked so violently I hit my head on a ceiling beam.

SIWA. PRESENT DAY.

I opened my eyes and sat up sharply. The sun hadn’t yet risen, but the sky was already lit with the dim glow of dawn. I was on the ground. My head throbbed from the impact. Where am I? At the oracle?!!! I jumped to my feet, brushed myself off, and ran to the exit, scrambling out of the fort. Mohamed was asleep in the back of the tuk-tuk, curled up in his sleeping bag. I shook him awake, and he, rubbing his eyes, drove me back to the lodge.

“All questions later, please,” I said, and dashed off to catch a bit more sleep. After tossing and turning for about half an hour, I realized I wasn’t going to fall back asleep.

I got up, dressed warmly, and stepped outside. I put the kettle on for coffee and decided to watch the sunrise from the rooftop.

I heard Sean was awake too — he stepped out of his room. “What are you doing up so early?”

“Going to greet the sunrise. Want to join me?”

“Sure,” he agreed.

We brewed a mug of coffee each and climbed up to the roof. While we watched the sun rise swiftly over the horizon, I replayed everything I had seen in Siwa. It truly left a deep impression — it’s not the kind of place you want to leave. I felt completely at ease in the endless sand, surrounded by palm trees and that illusion of poverty.

At first glance, the people in Siwa seem to live on the edge of poverty — chipped walls, bare interiors, crumbling fences everywhere. But then you look at their cars, the amount of gold on their women and children, the food on their tables — and you realize these people simply don’t *need* much to be happy. Why would they want diamonds when the vast Milky Way stretches above them every single night?

I had learned a lot — about myself, about Bennu, about Mark. But the riddles didn’t get any fewer.

Mohamed appeared with bags in hand.

“Well? What are our plans for today?”

“Oh my God, Mohamed, why don’t *you* tell us already?” — Sean rolled his eyes, laughing.

“Alright then,” Mohamed grinned disarmingly. “Today — Cleopatra’s pool!”

We had passed it many times, even stopped at nearby cafes for juice, but hadn’t swum in it yet.

The huge pool bubbled like a glass of soda. Sean jumped in, and a cloud of white foam formed around him — it looked like milk from all the bubbles. He sat there, surrounded by the frothy mass, looked around in confusion and exclaimed: “I swear, that wasn’t me!”

Have you ever swum in soda water? It’s an amazing sensation. Your whole body gets covered in tiny bubbles, creating a micro-massage effect.

There were some green algae growing in the pool, like moss — they floated up in clumps and didn't look very appealing.

After swimming, we lounged on sunbeds and ordered guava juice. I closed my eyes. The sunlight filtered through the woven roof of the café, and little glimmers danced on my eyelids.

"Hey Alex, you asleep or what? I asked — maybe you'll stay with us a bit longer?" Mohamed asked.

"Sorry, Mohamed," I replied. "I drifted off in thought — took a quick trip a couple of millennia back."

"Did you see Mark at the oracle?" Mohamed flashed his signature pearly smile — in the shade, it looked especially striking.

"If only! Last night I saw a storm. Got knocked out pretty hard against the doorframe — woke up in Siwa," I said, laughing.

"It's a sign!" he jumped up. "You must stay!"

"And what would I do here exactly?" I asked, already knowing the answers: I'd have a cozy home, space to paint and write, and live in a place of immense power... It was very tempting.

"Let's go ask the oracle!" — the words escaped my mouth, and a chill ran down my spine.

"Again? Habibti!" Mohamed protested. "You saw yourself how ruined everything is. Aren't you tired of going there?"

I shrugged.

"Well... as you wish," Mohamed agreed.

We jumped into the tuk-tuk. Third trip to the oracle.

As we pulled up to the Temple of Amun, I said: "Wait for me here — and hold onto my talismans."

I removed my bracelets, pendants, earrings, rings, let my hair down, and took off my shoes. All I had left were linen trousers, a tank top, and around my neck — the meteorite from Hemeida.

I began climbing through the temple corridors. There — the place where we had laid Alexander's body. The oracle had been in that room. But now — nothing but rubble.

Or... not quite. I placed my palms again beneath the silhouette of the bull's head. One of the stones gave way, and a small recess opened in the wall.

Naturally, I reached in.

My hand pressed against something inside the recess. The back wall shifted with a slight push and gave way into some hidden space. I reached in up to my elbow, then my shoulder.

To be honest — it was scary. What if there was a cobra or scorpions, like in *Indiana Jones*? But of course, it was empty.

When I pulled my hand out, a small black smooth square stone fell from the recess. It was etched with symbols... The ankh, and two cobras. A royal sign.

I picked it up, wiped the dust off, and studied it. With my other hand, I grabbed the meteorite — and suddenly my vision began to shimmer.

I hovered about half a meter off the ground, stones in hand, and scenes from my life flashed before me like a film reel: my birth, then Asenath's birth, how my sister and I were taken to the palace, dressed up; our bull, the silk cushions in my chamber, my sword, Mark's eyes, the crocodile, my husband's embrace, the escape, Alexander's body, the ship, the storm, the shore... And everything that followed — all the way to my deathbed, surrounded by my children and grandchildren.

We're lying in each other's arms, saying goodbye to our loved ones, and Mark says to me: "Until we meet again, my love. I've always loved you, and I always will. Wherever you are, I'll find you. I swear it! We'll be together always — in this life, in the next, and the next after that, and in all that follow..." I close my eyes, wrapped in a feeling of absolute happiness.

Suddenly, I feel myself being pulled into a grey-brown vortex. I pressed my palms together, merging the two stones. A wild thunderclap flung me to the ground. I squeezed my eyes shut in fear, and when I opened them again, I saw only my meteorite in my hands.

Now I know everything. I witnessed the creation of the World. I understood that Egypt is the stronghold of monotheism, and all these gods are just personifications of natural forces. Everything around me became vivid and clear.

Now I remember my entire life — or more accurately, the entire life of Ankhsamut. Has my journey come to an end? Have I uncovered the mystery of dreams and found everything I longed to know?

So now what? I held the meteorite in my right hand and said: “Lord, thank you for showing me everything I dreamt of knowing. I believe in you and I trust you. I understand that you know what’s best for me. Thank you for it all. I’m ready, lead me forward.”

I stepped out of the temple, and Mohamed was waiting for me, sitting on the open trunk of the car. “Yani?” (Arabic: “So?”)

“Yani, my journey is over. I know everything I needed to know,” I replied. “I don’t have to rush anywhere anymore. I need rest.”

“So, that means you’ve got time to tell me everything that happened to Bennu after the storm?” Mohamed brightened.

We arrived at the hotel and sat in lotus pose around a low table covered with little dishes of scrambled eggs, cucumbers, tomatoes, ful and taameya, fried potatoes, and a stack of fresh flatbreads made from grey flour. In the salt shaker was a mix of salt and cumin. Back home, we have salt and pepper, but here the main spice is kammun — cumin, as we call it. By the way, Egyptians have a rather specific skin scent — very spicy. I suspect it’s from all the cumin.

After breakfast, we sprawled out on carpets with mint tea. It was so cold we had to wrap ourselves in camel wool blankets.

“Come on, yalla, tell me what happened next,” Mohamed urged. And I began my tale.

It was the year 321. January. A merchant ship got caught in a storm near Athens. Bennu was found by local villagers and brought to the city unconscious. They took her to a slave market and intended to sell her to a palace, but when she grabbed a sword and threw everyone to the corners, she was sold instead to merchants from Ephesus who were purchasing gladiators. And so Bennu ended up in Ephesus, becoming one of the most famous female gladiators of her time. Not even the fearsome Assyrian warriors could scare her. The magnificent Bennu became a star — undefeated and fearless.

She spent two years in captivity. Escape seemed impossible: she was guarded by soldiers and chained at night. But, realising the futility of running, Bennu ate well, trained hard, and took care of her appearance, biding her time — waiting for HER moment to break free.

That moment came when her husband arrived in Athens on a diplomatic visit. Bennu walked through the corridor to the arena clad in armour, a heavy sword in one hand, a shield in the other. The crowd roared, shouting her name. When she

stepped into the sunlight, its rays crashed down on her shoulders. On her face — a lioness mask.

In the royal box sat the seventeen-year-old ruler of Ephesus, Demetrius, and beside him was Mark — a messenger and envoy from Ptolemy of Egypt. Their host had arranged entertainment for the diplomatic mission. Mark saw the gladiator, and his heart clenched; in her confident movement, the way she lifted her chin and traced a circle through the air with her sword, there was something achingly familiar.

A huge lion was led into the arena, prodded with spears to provoke it into attacking Bennu. For the first time, she wasn't fighting a gladiator, but a beast. The lion roared, making the spectators tremble. But Bennu, who had served a bull her entire life, knew how to handle nearly any animal. Still, we remember her ordeal with the crocodile — of course, she was uneasy.

The lion spotted her and began slowly approaching. Bennu sheathed her sword, shield raised, and walked toward the lion with her right hand open and extended.

The lion shook its mane and kept growling. Bennu murmured, "Good lion. You're hurt, baby. Come to me." She gently pulled the spearhead from its paw, stroked the lion behind the ear, set down her shield, and began combing his mane with both hands. And the fearsome lion became a big cuddly cat in her hands.

The crowd screamed: "This isn't a fight! Kill them both!" And when the lion hugged her with its paw, she took off her helmet and kissed it on the nose.

Mark saw his wife's face and turned pale. "Ankhsamut!" She turned to the sound of his voice, and the lion stood protectively before the priestess, growling at the crowd.

"Stop the fight! Now!" shouted Mark.

Demetrius stared at him in confusion. "But she's our best gladiator. A shame we'll have to kill her. The crowd demands it."

"She is my wife! I demand you stop the fight!"

"What nonsense, General?" Demetrius extended his right arm, fist forward, thumb horizontal — then sharply turned it down. The signal to kill. But before the guards could move, Mark already had a sharp dagger pressed to the ruler's throat.

Everything froze. The air hung heavy with silence. Mark said loudly, "Bennu is my lawful wife. We were separated two years ago, but I never stopped searching

for her. I don't want trouble. Just give me my wife. For her, I won't hesitate to kill anyone. I don't want a life without her, and I'll fight to the last drop of blood if I must. But I believe we all understand — none of us wants that."

Then Demetrius flailed his arms at the guards: "Of course, General. Release Bennu!"

The guards backed away from the gate and bunched up on the stairways that lined the stands.

Mark let go of Demetrius and raced down the steps toward his wife. But Demetrius signaled an archer to finish the valiant warrior.

Just as Mark reached Bennu and drew her into his arms, she spotted the Bowman loosing an arrow. She spun her husband around, shielding his broad chest with her own small—seemingly fragile—back.

Mark had come to the spectacle as a guest and therefore wore neither armor nor weapons. He had only a dagger hidden in the shaft of his sandals—just in case. After all, he was in an enemy stronghold; at that time, every ruler was an enemy to the next, each plotting to topple the others. Thus Mark was utterly defenseless against the Ephesian arrows.

The arrow struck Bennu in the back, and she cried out, going limp in her husband's arms.

"No! No! Nooo! Ankhsumut!" Mark screamed, bending over his unconscious wife. In a single instant his entire world collapsed. Tears blurred his vision; for the first time in his life this mighty warrior wept.

Guards rushed at him, but he yanked a sword from one of them and began to cut down everyone around him. "I don't care how many of you there are—I'll kill you all!"

The crowd poured from the stands in panic; noise and chaos erupted. Some of the guards fled as well. Demetrius pulled up his hood, trying to melt into the mob, but the lion sprang on him, clamping its jaws around his throat and pinning him to the floor.

The clash in the amphitheater carried all the way to the harbor; Mark's troops grew alarmed and stormed in to rescue their general, swords flashing. Amid the turmoil Mark reached Demetrius. The lion obediently released the ruler's neck when Mark pressed a blade to it and shouted, "Everyone! Stop!" Everything froze.

Mark's eyes were still swimming with tears. "Because of you my wife is gone. That means you die too!" He was ready to slit Demetrius's throat when the latter cried, "General, wait! She's alive! I swear she's alive. Look!"

Mark looked down and saw Bennu sitting up, arms around the lion, which was licking her face. The broken shaft of an arrow protruded from her back.

"Arkesilai!" he shouted to his lieutenant, who was nearest. "Keep an eye on Demetrius!"

Arkesilai took the sword that menaced the ruler's throat while Mark rushed down.

The lion snarled at him, blocking his way, but Bennu smiled and murmured, "Shh, that's my husband. You can't eat him," stretching out a hand toward Mark. "My head is spinning—sorry, I can't stand."

Mark dropped to his knees beside her, cradling her as though she were the most precious treasure on earth. When his breathing steadied, he began to examine her wound. He tugged the arrow free; Bennu let out a soft gasp of pain. Her armor, it turned out, was made of palm-wood slats covered with copper plates and laced with leather. The arrow had buried itself in the copper, snagged in the palm fibers, leaving a nasty bleeding gash but not killing her.

Gently, the general lifted his wife in his arms as easily as if she were a kitten. The fearsome gladiatrix became a fragile girl, her arms looped around her husband's neck.

"Let's get out of here," Mark said. "Men—withdraw!" Taking Demetrius and a couple of his attendants as hostages, the general and his troops headed for the ship that had brought them.

They sailed to Rome, where they lived long and happily. Bennu's life had not always been easy: she had been separated from her beloved for several years. But in the end everything turned out magnificently; they led a life full of adventure and love. Bennu's sister—as I already wrote—had settled in Rome two years before Ankhsamut's arrival and lived in wealth and affection. The sisters were overjoyed to reunite.

And when the time came, both Bennu and Mark left this world surrounded by their large, loving family.

Sitting at the table, gulping down every word, Mohamed drained his tea and said, "You have to write a book. This is such a captivating story! Your visions and dreams—they're like a movie!"

“Yeah, all that’s left is to find a producer,” I replied with a smile. “Sadly, people have stopped believing in miracles. Who would want my book?”

“You don’t need them to believe,” he said. “It just has to be a good story. While you’re here, start writing—but first tell me every last detail!”

A week before... May 11, 2022.

These words echo like an unshakable truth: “Don’t be afraid. I’ll never leave you. Wherever you are, I will find you. I swear! We will be together—in this life, the next, and every one after...” And then that milky kiss...

This dream became my constant companion—haunting and mysterious—returning to me night after night. With every passing evening, it grew more vivid, more tangible. At first, I could barely make out the face of my warrior. But now, the tiniest details rise to the surface: every freckle, the honey-gold sparks in his eyes... I can physically feel his steel-hard muscles, smell the salt of his skin, hear the creak of leather armour. His voice keeps repeating: “In this life. And the next. And the next...”

How can a dream feel so real? I feel the breeze on my skin, the shifting warmth and chill of the air, the splash of water—it’s all so visceral. I’m there. And when I wake up, it takes time to remember—this world is the “real” one.

Am I losing my mind? I’ve seen movies where people battled full-on schizophrenia. One with Demi Moore, another with Brad Pitt... They had to choose which reality to accept. Am I supposed to do that too? If so, I’d rather stay there.

To melt with joy in his arms, only to wake up to a cold, empty bed—it’s unbearable.

Inspired, I picked up a pencil and a sheet of paper. I drew us together: my beloved already asleep, and me lying beside him, afraid to close my eyes in case I woke up in the world where he didn’t exist.

But he promised! *“In this life. And the next. And the next...”* And suddenly tears streamed down my face as I cried into the silence: “Wherever he is, bring him to me! Now! Enough! I can’t wait any longer!”

I fell asleep in tears...

THE BIG DAY.

This past week, I kept having strange dreams. I'd wander through endless blocks of high-rise buildings, always rushing somewhere, always late. Other nights, I'd just lie there, eyes shut, unable to fall asleep at all.

Same story tonight: barely four hours of rest and the weirdest dream ever. Would've been better not to sleep at all.

I craved a silly night with a friend—just to laugh and shake off the heaviness. But plans didn't go my way. My friend clearly wasn't up for hanging out.

"You look totally wiped, Alexa. You seriously need to get out, listen to some music," he said.

"Come on," I replied lazily. "Let's hit a café. You'll puff on your shisha, I'll sip a cocktail. We'll laugh over the dumbest things—like always."

"No, no," he cut me off. "You're going to that rock bar tonight. End of story. Who was it that wanted to hang out with you?"
"My friend. We said we *might* go... but I'm not even sure she really wants to."
"She does!" He practically dragged me to my room, made me change, and walked me all the way to her house. What choice did I have?

She and I headed to the bar and found a table right across from the stage. The band was warming up, and I turned around to look for the waiter... And that's when time stopped.

Him. My warrior. My beloved. The one I had searched for across continents and lifetimes. He stood at the far end of the bar, smiling at me.

My heart skipped a beat. Because one look can change everything. Our eyes met—and the world turned upside down.