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The Land of the Dead

By Vickie Chao

A long, long time ago, there was an Egyptian prince named Setna. He had a palace in the city of Thebes. One day, he and his son, Se-Osiris, stood in the window of their palace and watched two funerals passing by.



The first funeral must have been for a rich man. The family had the servants carrying the beautiful mummy case toward the Nile River. They loaded the case on a boat that would take the departed on his one last trip across the river. Since people at the time believed that the underworld for the dead was in the west, they always buried their loved ones on the western bank of the Nile. They also believed that every person had two spirits called the *ba* and the *ka*. The *ba* spirit was the person's personality. It looked like a bird with a human head. The *ka* spirit was the person's life force. It continued to live on after the person died. To be sustained, it required the same sort of necessities (such as food) the person had before he passed away.

Following the customs, the rich man's family prepared a lavish tomb for him on the western bank of the Nile. In it, there was everything he liked and used when he was still alive. The tomb was stuffed with food of every kind, expensive jewelry, fine linen clothes, furniture, and even board games! Priests were there to administer the ceremony. Professional mourners were also there to weep for him. All told, it was a grand funeral!

The second funeral was the exact opposite from the first one. It was for a poor man. His two sons carried the simple wooden case across the river. They buried it in a pit dug out in the desert. Other than the two sons, their wives, and the widow, nobody else was there to mourn for him.

Setna gave out a sigh. He said to his son, "Well, I hope that my fate will be that of the rich man and not of the poor fellow."

"On the contrary," replied Se-Osiris, "I pray that your fate will be that of the poor fellow and not of the rich man!"

Surprised and hurt, Setna exclaimed, "Son, how can you say that?"

"Come with me, and I will show you what I mean," said Se-Osiris. He took his father's hand and recited the words of power. Immediately, the *ba* spirits of Setna and Se-Osiris left their bodies and took the form of two birds. The pair spread their wings and flew west to the Duat. The Duat was where the Sun God, Ra, visited every night. It was also the land of the dead.

The *ba* spirits of Setna and Se-Osiris arrived just in time to see Ra pass through the gates of the Duat and enter the first division of the night. Ra was in a magnificent boat, called Mesektet. He was not alone, though. He was with many other gods and goddesses, as well as the *ka* spirits of all those who had died that day. The boat, towed by gods using golden ropes, moved along the ghostly River of Death very slowly. It sailed through the second division of the night but made a brief stop in the third division of the night. All the *ka* spirits got out and proceeded to the Judgment Hall of Osiris. After unloading, the boat continued on its way through the nine other divisions of the night.

The Judgment Hall of Osiris was a scary place. Its ceiling was made of fire. Its walls were made of living snakes. It was, indeed, as horrifying as it was described in the Book of the Dead. The Book of the Dead was like a guidebook of the Duat. It was a must-read for the living people. It told them what to expect in the underworld. It had a detailed map. And it contained magic spells for warding off evil.

Osiris, lord of the Duat, looked like a mummy as his body was wrapped in linen bandages. He sat on the throne in the Judgment Hall of Osiris. Behind him stood his wife, Isis, and her sister, Nephthys.

One *ka* spirit came forward. It belonged to the rich man whose funeral Setna and Se-Osiris had witnessed earlier. The rich man's *ka* spirit pleaded his case and said that he had never done anything improper. He claimed that he was a good man, always doing good deeds. After the declaration was over, Anubis, the jackal-headed God of Mummification, stepped forward and took the heart out of the rich man's *ka* spirit. He walked over to a large pair of scales. He placed the Feather of Truth in one pan and the heart in the other.

Name _____



Right away, the pan carrying the heart dragged down the scale. The rich man's *ka* spirit lied, for his sins outweighed the truth!

Upon seeing that, Ammut -- a god with a crocodile head, a lion body, and a hippo rump -- leapt from the floor and devoured the heart at a blink of eye! Thoth, the ibis-headed God of Wisdom and the rumored author of the Book of the Dead, recorded the final judgment. The verdict was cruel. The rich man's *ka* spirit would be cast into darkness to live with the monster Apophis in the pits of fire forever!

After the ordeal was over, the next *ka* spirit came forward. It belonged to the poor man whose funeral Setna and Se-Osiris had also witnessed earlier. Anubis placed the heart in the scale. Again, the balance tipped. But instead of going down, the pan carrying the heart rose higher and higher. The poor man's *ka* spirit did not lie, for he had committed no sin! Upon seeing that, the panel of forty-two judges cried out, "This man was as pure as he claimed. The eternal bread of Osiris shall be given to him!"

Horus, Osiris' son, led the poor man's *ka* spirit before Osiris. Osiris congratulated him and welcomed him to live in the paradise, Field of Reeds.

The *ba* spirit of Se-Osiris said, "Papa, now you know why I wished your fate to be that of the poor man and not of the rich man." The *ba* spirit of Setna nodded. He could not agree more!

After lingering for a while longer, the two *ba* spirits once again spread their wings and flew back. They re-entered their bodies just in time to greet the sunrise and welcome a new day dawning over Egypt.

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Questions

- _____ 1. According to this legend, who ruled the Duat?
 - A. Isis
 - B. Ra
 - C. Se-Osiris
 - D. Osiris

- _____ 2. Which of the following gods was NOT present in the Judgment Hall of Osiris?
 - A. Apophis
 - B. Anubis
 - C. Ammut
 - D. Thoth

- _____ 3. According to this legend, how many judges were there in the Judgment Hall of Osiris?
 - A. 58
 - B. 36
 - C. 24
 - D. 42

- _____ 4. The poor man was allowed to live in paradise because _____.
 - A. The Feather of Truth weighed more than his heart.
 - B. His heart weighed more than the Feather of Truth.

- _____ 5. Who in the Judgment Hall of Osiris recorded every *ka* spirit's judgment?
 - A. Anubis
 - B. Ammut
 - C. Thoth
 - D. Osiris

- _____ 6. Ammut had a lion head, a crocodile body, and a hippo rump.
 - A. False
 - B. True

