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Word Count: 606

Pentu's Mark

Pentu watched dawn come to the new city being built to honor the one god, Aten. Pharaoh Akhenaten was pouring gold into the sand, some said, but they said it quietly and removed the image of Atum, the creator, from their homes. Pentu's father was a messenger for Akhenaten and Nefertiti, so he wore the disc of Aten proudly.

Pentu was in the palace garden to say goodbye to his father, for it might be months—even years—before Pentu saw him again.

A scribe set aside his wooden lap desk, then rose from the ground. As Pentu leaned closer to see the hieroglyphs on the scroll his father would carry, the scribe bristled. "This is not for your eyes!"

Pentu feigned disinterest as the scribe rolled the papyrus and placed it in a tube, but Pentu's mind ran over the symbols, wondering what they meant. His father took the tube with one hand, rested the other hand on his son's head, and then walked away.

In the predawn light, laborers pulled great stones lashed to skids to create the walls of the new city. Others floated

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stones from pyramids across the Nile to be reassembled into new tombs and cenotaphs.

Pentú ran to where artisans crouched before their stone tablets, stopping where he would be unobserved by another scribe, Meryre, who was making a funerary stone. Pentú tried to decode the marks that appeared as the man struck the copper chisel, gripped in his knotty fingers, with a wooden mallet. It was magic that lines chiseled into stone became words that told tales. Wistfully, Pentú remembered trying to carve marks on a discarded stone. He'd found that it was harder than it looked, and the stiffness in his fingers had lasted for days.

"You may come closer."

Pentú started at the scribe's voice, floundered to regain his balance, and stepped from the shadows.

"Meryre, I did not intend to spy."

"Of course you did."

"I find your work interesting."

"Few have the knowledge or patience, but perhaps you are one blessed by the gods."

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Pentu hesitated—was this a trick? Pharaoh Akhenaten worshipped only Aten, and Pentu's family would be disgraced if it were reported that Pentu worshipped the old gods.

"I must be blessed to live in the Pharaoh's palace." Pentu saw the quirk of Meryre's lips at Pentu's safe response; then the artisan's hands twisted, whereupon a feather icon appeared on the stone.

"That is another trait of a scribe—care with your words—for most words are as water flowing down the Nile."

"Your words will be read through eternity."

"If they are found and have not been destroyed as Akhenaten has destroyed the work of those before us." Meryre raised his chin to beckon Pentu closer.

Pentu looked at the Sun to check the time. He knew there would be trouble if Akhenaten's son Tutankhaten awoke and Pentu was not there to attend to his needs. Then Meryre touched a hieroglyph, luring Pentu forward until he was abreast of the scribe.

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“This is my name, and writing my name means that I will not disappear after I die. Still, I have no sons, so I am in need of an apprentice who loves words.”

Pentu's eyes widened, his mind swirling at this offer; then he ran toward the palace where Tutankhaten slept.

Pentu stopped just outside the palace, and in the sand he practiced the mark he had chosen as his name—the mark he would write in a hidden place. Dreamily, he imagined that one day someone would open the secret place, see the mark, and Pentu would live again.