

DIVINE WISDOM

Deleted scenes from the egyptian book of the dead

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Ammit ordered a large beer for herself and a lotus water for her companion, Ma'at. Compared to the other goddesses at Hathor's esteemed gathering place, Ammit looked unapologetically scruffy. Her wild mane was a testament to an even wilder heart, and since most fashion didn't fit her peculiar body type, she didn't much care for it.

When their drinks arrived, Ammit flashed a wide crocodile grin at the young waiter, who scurried back, intimidated. She then turned to Ma'at, raising her cup to make a toast.

"Slay girl, you've really done it this time. The whole pantheon is abuzz over what you did last night!"

Ma'at, elegant as ever in her feathered headdress, leaned in and whispered: "Who, me? I don't know what you're talking about, Ammit."

"If I didn't know you any better, I'd almost believe you," Ammit laughed.

"You should," Ma'at said with an air of distinction. "Haven't you heard? I've been promoted to goddess of Truth."

Ammit slapped her broad thighs, laughing even louder now.

"Shh," Ma'at cautioned, glancing around. "Keep it down, will you? You never know who's listening in."

Ammit didn't like to be shushed, but Ma'at's sweet face made it hard to resist.

"Damn you," she said.

The atmosphere around them was indeed thick with the latest rumour. Last night, humans had been created out of sudden tears of joy, yet no deity had claimed this spontaneous act of creation. This was highly suspicious, especially since they were usually such a boastful lot! In addition to speculations about who was responsible and why they'd keep such a marvellous achievement a secret, most deities had started vying for the smallest acts of worship from these mortals. So, it's fair to say that the unexpected event had left the gods in a state of rivalry and intrigue.

And what to think about Ma'at and Ammit's meeting here? You'd be forgiven for assuming that their friendship was a case of opposites attracting. After all, Ammit's string of relationships with underworld gods were the stuff of legend, while Ma'at had been married for aeons to Thoth, who was dependable to a fault. Sure, Ammit was currently seeing Anubis, but her

tumultuous nights were a public secret and none of the gods believed that this time it would last. Yet, only a select few knew how often Ma'at had fled her boring household to attend Ammit's drunken parties. Her stable marriage kept Ma'at's escapades hidden behind a public image of flawless composure.

With the recent arrival of the human creatures, however, Ma'at felt her status slipping, because her meek husband didn't show any ambition for climbing this new social order.

"Did you hear about Osiris's sudden promotion?" Ma'at hissed. "Isis is simply glowing with pride."

Ammit, already on her second cup, chuckled. "Still green behind the ears, that one! I'm surprised he didn't trip on his own feet during the ceremony. So, which title did they give him?"

"Supreme god of the eternal Field of Reeds." Ma'at said. She pronounced his title like it was the name of a venereal disease. "You should've heard it when Isis told me: 'My Osiris is the *Supreme* god of the *eternal* Field of Reeds now.' Ugh!"

"Good thing you aren't the jealous type," Ammit smiled. "So, we hate Isis now?"

Ammit was always loyal in hating whomever had fallen out of favour with Ma'at, as long as she could keep up, that is. Just a day ago, Ma'at and Isis had been very close, but such matters tended to shift quickly with her friend.

Ma'at sighed reluctantly. "No, Isis has every right to boast, I suppose. I just wish Thoth would at least try to become the chief of... something! You know, these humans are so eager to please us, they'd let him be the god of *anything*."

"Well, you know what he's like," Ammit said.

"It's just... All the other gods are fighting for new positions, and where are our consorts? They went island hopping!" Ma'at said. She was fuming.

"Wouldn't it be funny if Toth became known as the god of Wisdom?" Ammit suggested.

Ma'at snorted, despite her anger.

To console her, Ammit said: "You're my wisest friend. I'm sure you'll think of something."

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Meanwhile, Anubis and Thoth had indeed retreated to the idyllic islands of the underworld. Anubis was lounging there in his full jackal form, languidly licking his front paws. You could be forgiven for thinking that he and Thoth were two peas in a pod, and there had been rumours about a secret romance between them, but other than a desire for some peace and quiet, they didn't have that much in common.

Anubis watched Thoth, in his familiar ibis shape, scratching curious pictograms in the sand.

“What shall we do with those human souls when they die?” Anubis asked.

“What do you mean?” Thoth said, looking up from his scribbles. “An eternity of reading awaits them here.”

“But surely we aren’t supposed to admit *all* of them into the afterlife, are we?” Anubis said.

“Why not? A stay on our islands of leisure is their due. Haven’t you seen their earthly toils? The failed harvests, the floods, the droughts?” Thoth asked.

Anubis didn’t seem aware of a single worry in the world. He howled: “Where’s the *fun* in that? Let’s organize a grand finale, a spectacular test to mark the occasion!”

“A test,” Thoth whispered, ensnared by this proposition. “Yes, but... but what if they fail? What fate awaits them then?”

“Then we feed them to my lovely girl Ammit,” Anubis said with palpable excitement. “She’s swift as a crocodile, ravenous as a lion, and strong as a hippo. And she’s been craving a decent meal for too long.”

Thoth, ever the bird of reason, replied: “Is it really necessary to subject the deceased to such a harsh judgement? Surely, we can find something else to still Ammit’s hunger. There are so many fruit trees on these isles that I have yet to invent a number large enough to count them.”

“And ducks!” said Anubis, just to tease his bird-friend.

But Thoth didn’t react. His mind was already spinning and Anubis knew it wouldn’t stop until it had found some intricate solution.

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That night, Ma’at noticed that Thoth was more preoccupied than usually. He told her about Anubis’s idea of a test with a horrid punishment, and his own ideas for a less cruel system.

“We could tally good deeds, but that wouldn’t be fair, now, would it?” he mused. “Long-lived souls have had more chances to do good, and one good deed might not balance out a really bad one.”

Ma’at was still annoyed with him, but she decided to be the higher deity and replied: “Wait a moment, I have just the thing for you.”

She disappeared into her archives and returned with a mechanical contraption in her arms and a giant feather between her fingers.

“It’s fluffy as a cloud,” Thoth said with admiration, and he knew a thing or two about feathers.

“Yes, that’s the feather of Truth,” Ma’at said. “It has a lustrous history that only a few of us goddesses truly understand.” She emphasized the *‘lust-’* as she said it, not that Toth would notice.

“And the other thing?” Thoth asked.

“That’s my set of balancing scales,” Ma’at said, placing it on the table in front of him. “You could put the feather on one scale and the heart of the deceased on the other. If the scales are balanced, the person passes. If not, Ammit can feast on them.”

Thoth bowed his ibis head. He felt tired of thinking and recognized the wisdom in his wife’s approach.

“You could let Anubis perform the weighing,” Ma’at suggested, mindful of her husband’s clumsiness, “so he will feel important, too, and you can record the result.”

“That sounds nice,” Thoth said.

“And ask Osiris to welcome the successful souls. Involving him as the mayor of the eternal Field of Reeds adds a touch of ceremony,” she added.

This should be enough to get my husband’s career back on track, she thought.

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Thus the ceremonial judgement was instituted. Thoth’s quill meticulously recorded the result of each weighing. After Osiris had welcomed the first group of good souls and was about to return home, Thoth conveyed Ma’at’s greetings to his wife, Isis.

Overhearing the mention of Ma’at and Isis, Ammit grinned. She remembered a particularly wild evening with those girls at Hathor’s house, the Lady of Drunkenness herself, where they had played Truth or Dare. Of course, Ammit never told the guys how Ma’at had procured that ostrich feather or to what purpose.

Ammit kept their secret for eternity, even though Ma’at herself had almost blown their cover that night, with her giggles and sudden tears of pleasure. But she had managed once more not to draw any attention, thanks to her uncanny ability to compose herself. Luckily, Ammit’s huge crocodile smile never raised any suspicion either. Anubis, Thoth, and Osiris simply read it as her anticipation of devouring another sinful soul as soon as the scales tipped in her favour.

Four deities officiated at the ceremony, but only one had sampled the juicy taste of sin. Only Ammit knew the true weight of that feather.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Sylvia Wenmackers is a professor in philosophy of science at KU Leuven, Belgium. Most of her research is related to the foundations of chance. Besides academic papers, she writes a monthly column for a popular science magazine. She has published two nonfiction trade books, and her speculative fiction has appeared in *Nature Futures* and *Danse Macabre*.