

I was young, six or seven years old, playing in my family's farmhouse on the banks of the Nile. Nobody was home because it was spring, just after the wet season, and they were out tending to the new crops. Afternoon sunlight shone lazily through the windows, set low in the mud-brick walls, but I had already taken a nap. I was bored and left to my own devices; every mother's least favorite combination.

I wasn't completely alone. My grandmother, who was over at the neighbor's hut had said that Isis would watch over me while she was gone. Too young to know that she had been referring to the goddess, I decided to go searching for Isis in our house, in the hopes that she was playing a game of hide and seek. There were a lot of hiding places. I looked under the beds, in dark corners, under the stairs, and even in the oven, but I could not find where Isis had gone. The afternoon was wearing on and I was beginning to get bored. Maybe she had left without me noticing. It was then that I caught sight of a trapdoor in the earthen floor that had been exposed when I was sliding on the kitchen rug earlier. Then again maybe she hadn't.

I was disappointed at what I saw when I finally managed to pry open the door. No Isis. In fact, the space beneath the floor was only about as small as my child-size bed, although there was something in it. Whatever it was, it was wrapped in layers of coarse cloth and covered in the dust that had shaken loose from the floor above from many years of people walking over it. Pinching my nose with one hand, I extended the other to pull at the wrapping.

In a small explosion of dust and sand, the cloth pulled away and the object tumbled to the floor of its tomb. In the brightness of the sunlight reflecting off the dust, I could see that the strange thing was a sort of long curved stick with a bunch of old loose strings spanning the ends. Even though I was very little, I was smart enough to recognize its shape from the processions that I had seen in the city during the harvest festivals, it was a harp, the likeness of which I had seen many musicians cradling in their arms.

The gut strings of the instrument were only connected to one end, but otherwise undamaged. Taking the longest one between my fingers, I pulled it taut against one end of the harp as I plucked it:

*Ping.*

The note ascended in a weird-sounding slide as I pulled the string harder. Delighted, I tied the loose end to the other end of the harp, pulling it taut as I did so. I did this with a second string too.

*Pong.*

*Ping.*

*Ping.*

If I hadn't been paying so much attention to my newfound treasure, I might have heard the footsteps in the hallway signaling that my grandmother was back from her visit to the neighbors. If I had, I probably would have heard her stop dead in her tracks, listening to the *ping, ping*, of the harp. She must have sneaked to the open doorway then, and had stood there for awhile listening to me play, for I don't know how long. All I remember is that when I paused to re-tie a third string, I heard a distinct sob behind me and had turned to see my grandmother standing there half-in and half-out of the room, her face blotchy with tears. At the time, I didn't understand. I had rarely seen my grandmother cry and I was frightened that she was angry with me for finding the harp and trying to play it. Little did I know how wrong I was.

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“Tabia! Get in here at once, we have ten minutes until our performance and you *still* don't have any jewelry on!”

Zahra, our dancing girl was dragging me head over heels up a long flight of stairs back from the musician's quarters. Despite not being thrilled to see her, I was glad that she was there. The nobleman's palace had so many twisting hallways and empty rooms that I had gotten slightly lost, and was trying to find my way back to the rest of the troupe. We flew down another lavishly decorated hallway that must have been near the location of our party and swept into a room at the far end. As Zahra pulled me through the doorway, the edge of my harp scraped against the rough wall.

“Zahra, my harp!”

I fretfully examined the wooden resonator box, but nothing was broken, just a long thin scratch along the edge of the wooden frame.

“Well, then you should be more careful with it, and did I mention that getting your costume on in time would have prevented it?”

Smashing me down into a chair, she quickly draped an array of ceremonial necklaces over my head and arranged them artfully over my neck. Normally, Zahra was not like this, usually sweet and caring and graceful, except when it came to pre-performance nerves. Despite this, she looked beautiful tonight in her silky-white show dress and her costume makeup and jewelry. I had to quell a stab of jealousy. No matter how hard I tried, I would never be as beautiful as Zahra.

“She’s right, you know. You could have come straight back to get ready instead of going back to your quarters to practice our new song. Don’t worry, it’s not on the program tonight!”

Serq laughed good-naturedly. She was tuning her lute on a couch on the other side of the room, sitting carefully in her costume. She and Zahra and I made up most of our performing troupe that traveled through the cities of Lower Egypt, earning our living playing at parties, festivals and religious ceremonies. The youngest, I joined their ranks when I was only eleven, the local harp-prodigy of the farming village where I had grown up. Together, we were lucky to be one of the most prestigious groups of all-female entertainers in the entire kingdom.

Zahra jammed on the last of my bangles with a flourish.

“There, that should qualify you as presentable. Come on, we have only a few minutes!”

With a swish of her fancy dress, she was out of the room. Serq and I followed her, instruments in hand. In the large guest room of the palace, Amunet and Ode were waiting for us impatiently, their instruments twitching nervously in their fingers.

“Finally!” exclaimed Ode, her double reed pipes already halfway to her mouth, “Where were you?”

“It’s no matter,” said Zahra, as the rest of us settled down on the comfy silk cushions that had been provided for us, “because we’re here now, and it’s time to start!”

Assuming her usual position in front of us and off a little to one side, she froze, ready to begin.

With a radiant strum of Amunet’s lyre, we started to play a beautiful traditional love song as the guests began to enter the chamber and greet each other, taking notice of us. The music spiraled up to the top of the ceiling and as the song intensified, I closed my eyes. This was my life, sitting there in the company of those wonderful women, visiting strange, interesting new places, and playing my harp day after day after day.

*Ping, ping, dingggggg...ping, ping, tingggggg...*

*Pong, ding, pong, ding...pong, dingggggg...*

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I scrap rust from the old latch on the attic door. My fingers, wrinkled and swollen at the knuckles with arthritis, have a hard time doing it, but I manage in the end and the latch breaks free.

“Tabba, can I see?”

My oldest granddaughter pulls at the back of my skirt. Her huge dark eyes stare up at mine expectantly.

“Yes, come here darling.”

Even though she is still very young, and barely comes up to my shoulder, she is kind enough to help me through the little door. It hasn’t been used for many years. More than I can count. The attic space is dark and full of spiders’ webs and my granddaughter blinks as her eyes adjust to the dim light. There is only one object left in the room. Suspended from the ceiling is an old

harp, covered with the dust of the last ten or twenty years after my hands stopped being able to play it properly. Miraculously, the strings are still intact. I had disconnected them from one side of the harp when I had first hung it up here to prevent the fragile threads of gut from overstretching and breaking while the harp rested, just like my grandfather did before my all of those years ago before he died.

My granddaughter gazes at the instrument with an awestruck expression. I'm sure that she is remembering her mother's stories of being serenaded to bed every night by the beautiful notes of the harp. Together, we gently take it down. The bow-shaped body of the harp is in perfect shape except for a long thin scratch running down the side, barely visible. Carefully, taking her hands in mine, I teach my granddaughter how to re-attach the strings properly to their little pegs inside the resonating box. She doesn't say a word, just ties the ends off where I tell her too and buffs the frame with the corner of her dress. I know that she is trying her best to be respectful of me, just like her mother taught her, but I can see it in her eyes that she longs to try the harp.

We shut the door of the attic again and walk back down the stairs, morning sunlight filtering in from the high windows of the house. As we sit down on the foot of the stairs together she asks:

“Tabba, what does it sound like? Mother said that I was the most beautiful thing that she's ever heard!”

Looking into her eager, inquisitive face, I do what I must have been meaning to do all along. Carefully, as though giving her part of my soul, I place the old harp into her trembling hands.

“Why don't you tell me?”