

PROLOGUE

4,600 years before the Hyborian Age

THE MAN, OR sort-of-man, know as Graymoy the Sage, limped to the mouth of the cave and looked down the rocky side of the mountain. An icy wind whistled up the canyon to the south, past the ruins of a great marble temple, now crumbling bit by bit down the side of the cliff.

Dark clouds rolled rapidly across the sky in an unbroken stream, and flashes of lightning bubbled in their depths, filling the air with rumbles of thunder. It was a sky with no promise save misery. It was the end of an age.

Far below, he saw two men like himself climbing up the rocks.

To more modern eyes they would have looked bestial, apish. They were short, hairy, thick of limb and body, their faces wide and flat, dressed in animal furs and hides. To Graymoy they were distant brothers, with faces little different than his when seen reflected in still water.

Yet all of them were descended of people who had once been men, before the cataclysm brought down the world and doomed them to slide back, generation by generation, till they

were little more than beasts. They would slide further still before they could begin the long climb back to civilization.

Graymoy was a sage, as were the men climbing up the rocks, a last spark of knowledge and wisdom in an age of darkness. Graymoy was wise enough to know that the world had fallen before and that it would fall again. He was wise enough to know that even his spark would soon be extinguished, and their like might not come again for a hundred generations.

Someone tugged at the fur cuff of his sleeve. He looked down into the dark eyes of a small boy, dressed in rough furs, hunched at his feet.

“Grandfather,” said the boy, “is someone coming?”

He pointed to the back of the cave, past the fire and the many paintings of animals and men, to where a narrow passage led into blackness. “Go, Amet, and hide. Do not make a sound until they have gone.”

The boy reluctantly nodded and scampered across the chamber, vanishing into the narrow maw of darkness.

As he did, Graymoy heard a clattering of rocks outside, and the wide figure of a man, bundled in furs, appeared in the cave mouth. The man stepped inside, put down his shoulder bag, bow, and quiver, and hunched beside the fire without a word. He warmed his hands as the second man entered and repeated the process.

Graymoy joined them at the fire, squatting on a flat rock, putting him a head higher than the others. Both men were younger than Graymoy, not much older than his son would have been had he not been struck down three seasons earlier by one of the great cats that sometimes stalked the canyon rim.

One man, blue-eyed, and golden-haired, looked up at him. “Why have you summoned us, Graymoy? Our time of wisdom is ending. We are the last sages of our people. What purpose can such a meeting serve?”

The other, of dark hair and dusky skin, nodded. “I have no wish to be away from home. My son’s woman is large with child. I pray it will be a son this time.”

“It will be, Kaleth,” said Graymoy. “I have seen it in the

sacred flames. Each of you will have heirs, to carry your blood through the dark times to come. That is part of why I have summoned you. You know my only son was killed many years ago. There will be no heirs for me.”

The fair-haired one scowled. “What matter is it to you that we have heirs?” He snorted in contempt. “Do you intend to steal our sons?”

“In a manner of speaking, Reloth” His eyes narrowed. “I have found them, all that are left. Two of the three golden scales.”

Reloth’s eyes widened. “The golden scales? Where?”

“On a mountaintop, three days south of here, amid the bones of two great demons who appear to have battled over them to the death.”

Kaleth chuckled. “It is fitting justice. Death to all demons, gods, and creatures from beyond the veil, who have visited such ruin upon us.”

Graymoy frowned. “They could never have done it without the aid of men. Were it not for the worship and service of men, our lust for power, such creatures would have little interest in our sphere.”

Kaleth frowned, then nodded reluctantly. “It may be so, but they certainly warred over the three scales.”

“Only,” said Graymoy, “because the three scales gave them dominion over men. But now the necklace is broken, and I have learned that one of the scales is lost into the deep ocean, where no man can ever find it, and even gods will be humbled by the task. So until gods or demons return it to the world of man, only these remain—” He reached beneath his fur jacket and pulled out two leather cords. At the end of each, a shiny medallion of gold hung, each carved with a flaming sword and two inward-facing serpents. He held one out in each hand.

“I give these to you for safekeeping. In time, you must pass them to your heirs, and they to theirs, for the rest of time, or at least until the inevitable fallibility of men breaks the circle. Take them back to your native lands and let them be kept separate and lost to time.

Reloth held his over the fire, where the flicking flames reflected off its shining surface. "Why not just melt them down?"

"They were forged by powers beyond man. I don't think they can be destroyed, at least by such as us," answered Graymoy. "No hammer or axe or fire of man can harm them."

"Then," said Kaleth, "cast them into the sea as well, or into the sands of the desert, or into a mountain of fire."

"Such," said Graymoy, "would hide them from men, but not from supernatural beings, who would be drawn to retrieve them, no matter the cost. Just as someday the third scale may return, and must never be reunited with these two. Cast into the ocean, sooner or later they would be found and the war of gods would begin again. Only if they are always hidden by men may they remain safe from those who covet them. Perhaps not forever, for as we have seen, men are weak, but perhaps long enough that the wheel of time may make another turn." His eyes narrowed, and he studied the other's faces. "Do you see now?"

Reloth stood and nodded. "You speak wisely. I will take this back to my distant land, guard it closely, and charge its safety to my heirs when the time comes. Even if all we have learned is lost to history, perhaps they can still carry this burden through the long darkness ahead."

Kaleth stood, putting the leather cord over his head as he did. "Then I shall do so as well." He nodded to the other two men in turn. "We should make haste, for every moment these two remain together is a danger." He stood. "We will never meet again," he said. "Pray that the Scales never meet again as well." He turned and walked out of the cave.

Reloth reached out and clasped Graymoy's hand. "So it shall be. Perhaps I shall see you in the land beyond the veil." Then he turned and left also.

Graymoy crouched there by the fire, watching the empty entrance to the cave for a while, feeling a sense of great relief. They were wise men, these two, good men, but they were still just men. *Better they do not know. Better they never*

be tempted as I have been tempted, for on another day, in a moment of weakness, even I might have failed against it.

He heard a rustling noise behind him. He looked over his shoulder and saw the boy peering over the rocks. He signaled the boy over with his hand.

The boy trotted over and sat down in front of the fire, looking into the flames.

“It is just us now,” said Graymoy. “The two golden scales are gone.” He glanced over at the boy. “Now show me the third.”

The boy looked down, reached under his fur shirt, and pulled at a leather cord. He drew out the golden scale and looked at it in the firelight. He glanced up at his grandfather. “What is it for?”

“It is for you and your line to keep safe,” Graymoy said. “It is the most important thing you will ever have and the most important thing you will ever do. That is all you must know, and all you must pass to those that follow you. If I told you more, you would just forget, and if you remembered, it would still be lost in the river of time. Or worse, you would pass your knowledge along, someday to send men on dark quests to wrest the power of the gods. Nothing but doom and suffering could ever come from that. It is a thing, and you must hide and protect it. That is all.”

The boy hefted it in his hand.

“It is heavy,” he said.

Graymoy frowned. “In time,” he said, “it will become heavier still.”

1

"WELL," SAID ANOK Wati as he and his fellow acolyte, Dejal, marched up the marble steps to Great Temple of Set, "that was a poor excuse for a day, wandering the streets chanting praise to Set and frightening small children."

Dejal threw back the hood of his robe and glared at Anok, his eyes black as obsidian against his pallid skin. "Hush, brother, before one of the priests hears you! We serve Set in even our most humble tasks in his service."

You serve Set, Anok thought, not I. But he dared not even whisper his true feelings about Set or all his servants, for if it ever became known, he would be branded a heretic and killed by the slowest and most terrible means known to the High Priests of Set, and it was said that they could start killing a man on the night of one full moon and only end it on the next.

But heretic was what he was, a pretender in Set's temple, whose true intention was to bring down the snake-god, or at least to do him as much damage as possible before Set's followers could crush him.

As for Dejal, boyhood friend, and once comrade in battle,

there was a very personal score to be settled before Anok's final day came. *Dejal must pay for—*

He grimaced, and tried not to think about the beautiful Sheriti's murder. He pushed the rage he felt down into a deep recess of his heart, to fester with the almost infinite supply already waiting there. He had to maintain the pretense of friendship with Dejal, at least a little longer.

They passed the huge golden statue of a coiled serpent guarding the temple entrance, then through the doors to the ornate outer hall, with its gracefully tapered columns and wrought-iron chandeliers. They turned left and took a windowless corridor parallel to the main ceremonial chamber. Passing an archway watched over by four scarlet-sashed guardians of Set, they left the temple's public areas and descended a long staircase leading down into the catacombs beneath.

It was in this maze of ancient passages, many of which predated the construction of the temple itself, that the true secrets of the cult resided. The tunnels went on for leagues, extending far beyond the temple's foundations, and even beyond the plazas and gardens that surrounded it. In his time there, Anok had never come close to seeing their true extent. Some of the senior acolytes claimed they had no end, and others, that they led down to the flaming pits at the heart of the world.

Anok suspected these were mere tales concocted, like so much of the cult's doctrine, to create fear and confusion. On the other hand, he had seen terrors and wonders in these depths that prevented him from completely dismissing any claim, no matter how absurd it might seem, without firm evidence to the contrary.

He had seen forbidden caves filled with giant serpents, shrines to forgotten gods, pits filled with the bones of countless thousands, lakes of blood, glittering treasure troves, libraries full of ancient scrolls, and vaults brimming with artifacts both ancient and evil.

But these catacombs were at least one more thing. To the novice acolytes of Set, they were home. For it was in the cat-

acombs that they lived in their humble cells, studying Set's evil works and seeking power in his service.

Their path took them back, beneath the great altar, where countless innocents had been sacrificed to Set through the ages, to a quadrangle of corridors that surrounded the cells.

Or should have. They turned the familiar corner, only to find themselves at the end of a long and unfamiliar corridor. Anok stopped short, as did Dejal a few steps later. They both looked around in confusion.

"Spell of deception," said Anok. "We've been tricked!"

Dejal quickly reached beneath his robe and extracted the short staff he had of late been building as his focus of power. The staff was as thick as a man's wrist and the length of a man's arm. Dejal had carved ancient runes and mystic pictographs into the dark wood, and a fist-sized ball of crystal was held in the mouth of a metal serpent at the top.

He held the staff up in front of him and waved it back and forth. "Power of Set, protect me from my foes!"

Anok said nothing, produced no object of power. He merely raised his hands.

Suddenly, from the dimly seen end of the corridor, a ball of flame appeared, and with a roar began to rush toward them, like a charging bull.

"Flood of Flame!" shouted Dejal. "My ward won't defend against that!"

Anok planted his feet firmly on the dusty stone, held out his spread fingers, and shouted, "Deluge!"

From nowhere a wall of heavy rain appeared in front of him. The ball of flame struck the rain with a sizzle, and the combination instantly flashed into a thick, warm fog that flowed over them harmlessly.

"Clever, Anok Wati!" The deep voice seemed to boom from the air all around them. "Your elemental magic never fails to impress. Yet can it save you from a more subtle attack?"

Anok cried out in pain and grabbed his head. He felt as though a hand had reached inside the skull and was crushing his brain.

He struggled to resist, to summon some counterspell, but the maddening pain gave him no quarter. His power failed him.

He dropped to his knees, groaning in agony.

Dejal stepped in front of him, arm outstretched, staff parallel to the floor. "Ward of protection, to my ally as myself!"

The pressure instantly released, and Anok dropped to his hands and knees as though cut down from a hangman's noose.

"Quickly," shouted Dejal, "counterattack!" He waved the staff. "Peal of thunder!" With a mighty rumble, a visible blast of force shot down the corridor at their unseen enemy.

"Anok! Some help here!"

Anok struggled to stand, managing to get up on one knee and raise his hands. "Pestilence!" The air swirled, and a few cockroaches materialized on the corridor walls before the swirl faded out. Anok sagged, exhausted from the failed effort.

"Enough!" The voice boomed again, this time from behind them.

Dejal lowered his staff, and turned to face the footsteps approaching from behind.

Anok finally managed to stand. He saw three robed figures approaching them. The two on the outside wore dark, blood-colored robes similar to his own, though the yokes over their shoulders marked them as full acolytes and not just novices as Anok and Dejal were.

The man in the middle, taller than the others, wore the scarlet robes, trimmed with gold, of a priest of Set. As he approached them, he threw back his hood, revealing his pearly skin and white hair, identifying him as descended from one of the most ancient and revered of Stygian lines. Both Anok and Dejal knew him well. He was Ramsa Aál, the temple's Priest of Acolytes.

Ramsa Aál stopped and looked at Dejal. "Well done, acolyte. You've prepared your staff to store a useful assortment of spells and wards. However, as the Flood of Fire

spell proves, you need to be prepared for simple, physical attacks as well.”

Dejal bowed his head. “The staff of power is far from complete, Master. I’m preparing a jewel of reckoning to be mounted beneath the crystal. That should deal with such attacks.”

He turned his attention to Anok. “That was—disappointing, Anok Wati. You carry the sacred Mark of Set on your left wrist. It is mysterious to me that such vast power should fail you.”

“I’m sorry, master. As you know, I expended great energies when I went on my mission of vengeance. Perhaps my powers have yet to recover.” This was no lie. Believing his friend and lover Sheriti to have been murdered by the gang lord Wosret, leader of the White Scorpion gang, Anok had hunted down and killed them all, finally calling down lightning that blasted their stronghold into rubble.

Yet it was also a lie, for he suspected he had tapped only the smallest sample of the power he now possessed. The trouble was not in tapping the power, it was in keeping it in check once released. Only after killing Wosret had he learned that Dejal was Sheriti’s true murderer, and now his anger, and his power, had a new natural target. It took all his will to keep that power in check, to keep from vaporizing Dejal with but a thought, and to direct the power elsewhere.

It was that effort which had brought him to his knees, not the summoning of energy for a counterspell.

Ramsa Aál studied him. “Perhaps it is time for another test. There are many aspects to a sorcerer’s abilities—power, yes, but also skill, knowledge, and of course, will. Let us see if you still have the will to be an acolyte of Set.”

Ramsa Aál gestured for the two novices to follow him. The senior acolytes remained behind. Doubtless it had been they, not Ramsa Aál, who had performed the practice attacks and the spell of deception. A priest such as Ramsa Aál would never waste his great powers on such a trivial task.

They rounded a corner and instantly were back in their

familiar home, the corridor outside their cells. Anok glanced back and found only a solid corridor wall behind them.

Ramsa Aál led them past their individual cells to a common room often used by the novice acolytes for discussions or games of chance. He went to a locked cabinet in the corner and, extracting a brass key from under his robe, unlocked it.

He glanced back at them and pointed at the round, wooden table in the center of the room. "Sit," he said.

Anok and Dejal pulled up benches and sat across from each other at the table. Anok watched, curious, as Ramsa Aál extracted an unfamiliar metal object from the cabinet.

It was round, as wide as a man's body, shaped like two shallow bowls, or perhaps two shields, joined lip to lip. It was made of bronze, inlaid with polished copper, and intricately engraved with ancient hieroglyphs in concentric bands that circled its circumference. At the extreme bottom of the object was a small, bluntly pointed, projection.

Ramsa Aál put the object on the table between them, holding it balanced on the bottom point. "This," he said, "is a wheel of Aten. It is a simple device, powered by its own mystic energy. It responds not to power, but to will. I will spin it, thusly." He gave the disk a rapid spin, which caused it to balance, wobbling, on its point.

"Anok! Focus your will on continuing the wheel to your left!"

Anok stared at the spinning object, pictured its movements in his mind, then tried to imagine it spinning faster. To his amazement, the wheel responded, the hieroglyphs turning into a blur. The wobbling ceased, and the wheel spun smoothly in the center of the table.

"Now," continued Ramsa Aál, "Dejal. Focus your will on the wheel also, but I want you to focus your will to spinning it to your *right!*"

Dejal leaned forward, his dark eyes narrowing. His brow furrowed with concentration.

The wheel wobbled slightly, then lurched.

In an instant, it was spinning as rapidly as ever, but now to the right.

Ramsa Aál stood back and smiled. "This is a contest of wills. Let us see which of you will be the victor."

Anok lowered his head, felt the spinning wheel in his mind, and willed it to spin to the left.

Nothing happened.

Harder!

Anok smiled as the wheel reversed direction, spinning ever faster.

Dejal frowned, his lips pressed tightly together in concentration.

Suddenly the disk was spinning to the right.

Anok strained, again reversing the disk.

Then Dejal.

Then, with great effort, Anok.

Dejal leaned closer to the spinning disk, putting his palms flat on the table at his sides. He seemed to tap some deep reserve.

The disk reversed, spinning ever faster to the right. Dejal smiled, then laughed.

Anok struggled to reverse the disk, but without result.

Dejal laughed louder.

Anok looked into Dejal's face, ivory-pale like the priest's. The black eyes sparkled with malice. Again the laugh.

That laugh! Anok imagined that laugh as Dejal slit Sheriti's throat. That face, cruel and utterly lacking in kindness or mercy—

There was a snapping sound, and the disk again spun to the left, faster now.

Anok remembered seeing her body, the bruises on her alabaster skin, the blood caked on her wounds—

Something howled, a long, rising note. The disk spun faster, no more than a blur now.

Ramsa Aál's eyes widened with concern. "Anok!"

But Anok thought only of Sheriti. He now admitted to himself what he had never been able to when she was alive.

He loved her.

He had always loved her, since he first met her in the Great Marketplace as a child. Since he had saved her life and returned her to her mother, and they, in turn, had given him a place to live, and a new purpose.

The howl turned into a shriek, growing in volume. The wheel spun furiously, and wisps of smoke curled up from the wood under its supporting point.

Why had he never admitted it to himself? Why had he never told her? He had shared, in the end, his bed with her. Why had he never shared his heart?

The disk weaved from side to side, tracing curling lines of charred wood on the tabletop as it moved. The shrieking grew louder, becoming almost unbearable.

“Anok!” Ramsa Aál shouted.

What he could give, what he would pay, an eternity of torment, for but five minutes in her company, to show her his heart, to pledge to her his love!

But that would never happen.

Never.

Betrayer!

Defiler!

Murderer!

A deafening crack echoed through the room.

The disk shattered, fragments flashing through the air.

Wood splintered.

Pottery shattered.

Chips of stone flew through the air.

Anok blinked, stared at the empty table, with a startled Dejal cautiously peering over the edge.

Anok looked up at the priest, who in turn was calmly contemplating the long, jagged, shard of metal half-embedded into the stone wall next to his head.

The priest licked his lips. “Well,” he said, “that was unexpected. This isn’t usually such a hazardous exercise. Clearly, Anok Wati, you are not lacking in will.” He reached out and touched the metal with his finger, then looked back at Anok.

“In one week’s time, you will be promoted to full acolytes, and it will be time for you to take the next step in your studies. Especially for you, Anok Wati, I will have to consider how you may best restore your powers.”

The priest turned to leave. “I think, perhaps, a journey may be in order.”