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THE HOT WIND blasted sand against his face, and Anok pulled the cloth covering over his mouth and nose, squinting against the dust. His camel rocked gently under him as it made its surefooted way across the Stygian wilderness.

Then the wind passed. He wiped the sand from his dry, burning eyes, and gazed out past the other camels in the caravan, across the rolling red rock of the plain, at the distant mountains. His eyes felt like they were full of boulders, and they were long out of tears.

The Mark of Set tingled on his left wrist, and he was reminded of its healing powers. Until now, he had resisted using its power for anything other than matters of life and death, yet, now he had the Band of Neska to control its power.

What harm could it do?

He closed his eyes and concentrated. "Heal," he whispered.

There was an electric sensation that started with the mark, flowed up his arm, his neck, across his face, and into

his eyes. As the tingling faded, the relief was immediate and dramatic.

He opened his eyes, which troubled him no more. The sand was gone, and he saw the distant mountains with crystal, almost supernatural, clarity. Even more, he had the feeling that no matter how much the sand blew for the rest of the day, he would not have a vision problem again. It was as though his eyes were made of glass, their lids of rugged yet supple leather.

He smiled, until he remembered his friend Sabé, with whom he shared the curse of the Mark of Set. Sabé, who was known to all in Kheshatta as the “blind scholar,” was not blind at all.

Rather, in his youth, the magic of Set had so corrupted him that his eyes became like those of a snake, seeing the world only in shades of hate. Finally, to save his sanity, he had been forced to bind them shut and live out his life in darkness.

Yet Sabé had never had the advantage of the Band of Neska, which was now bound around the bones inside Anok’s right wrist, nor had he been warned of the terrible danger the Mark of Set represented.

It won’t happen to me. It can’t. I have other things to do.

One of the other camels in the caravan fell back beside him. The man riding it wore the scarlet robes and yoke of office of a priest of Set. And not just any priest, but a *Priest of Needs*, one of the most powerful in all the cult.

He was a tall man, thin but muscular, with pearl-white skin, white hair and dark eyes, which marked him as belonging to one of the oldest and most powerful of Stygian noble families. His name was Ramsa Aál. He was Anok’s sponsor in the cult, his trainer, his master.

He was also secretly Anok’s hated enemy, whom he would gladly kill with his own hands. By at least one account, Ramsa Aál had murdered Sheriti, Anok’s first love and oldest friend. Without doubt, he was complicit in her murder, and for that alone he would have to die.

But not today.

There were still many secrets to learn from Ramsa Aál, and as the priest rose in power he took Anok with him into the highest reaches of the Cult of Set. Anok knew well that the only sure way to kill a snake was to cut off its head.

Ramsa looked at him with a familiar grin. "The Tomb of the Lost King is just over the next hill." He pointed to a rise, where a caravan from the west, loaded with white-robed travelers, wound its way along the crest of a hill. "Pilgrims from Khemi, wealthy elders and patrons of the cult come bearing tributes of gold for the shrine."

His grin turned into a wide smile as he gazed off at the travelers. "It amuses us to let them think that the Lost King was a chosen of Set, taken up to join him in his Realm Eternal beyond the stars."

Anok raised an eyebrow. "The stories are not true?"

Ramsa Aál laughed. "The temple is empty, and always has been. It is so pristine and undisturbed by vandals or tomb robbers precisely because it was never used."

They topped the rise and looked down into a small valley occupied by a complex of ancient but beautiful stone buildings, the most splendid and ornate being the tomb itself.

"Within those splendid walls, there is no golden sarcophagus, no treasures for the afterlife, save those brought as offerings by pilgrims, which are quickly taken to our troves in Khemi or Luxur." He laughed again. "These fools will never know that within the burial chamber are only unfinished walls of unadorned stone."

Though he suspected that Ramsa Aál only laughed at the foolishness of Set's followers, he decided to see if that was all. "I don't see the joke, master."

Ramsa Aál glanced at him, eyebrow raised quizzically. They'd engaged in much verbal jousting since the priest had first arrived in Kheshatta, and it ran both ways. "The idiocy of these fools trying to buy their way to eternal life is obvious, but the richest jest is far less apparent. The nameless king who built this tomb was murdered by his own brother, his heirs slaughtered in their beds, his riches divided among his scheming relatives, his body burned, his

ashes scattered. If there is indeed a Realm Eternal, he shall never go there.”

“You don’t believe in eternal life, master? The Scrolls of Set . . .”

“There are scrolls and there are scrolls, acolyte. Much of what you read in your early training is but the pabulum we give to the sheep you see here.” He cocked his head strangely. “And the path to eternal life lies not in the bribing of fickle gods, but in the attainment of earthly power!” He chuckled, and looked back at the pilgrims. “If you learn nothing else, learn that lesson well.”

Anok had other questions about their mysterious mission to this seemingly pointless shrine, but he kept silent for now. The more questions he asked, the more questions Ramsa Aál asked in return. There were few questions that Anok wished to answer right now. Especially about what had happened at the tomb of the lost Atlantean sorcerer, Neska, weeks before, and the death of Anok’s turncoat friend and fellow acolyte, Dejal.

On returning to Kheshatta, Anok had provided Ramsa Aál and Kaman Awi, the High Priest of the Kheshatta temple of Set, with a version of those events that stayed as close to truth as possible without giving away Anok’s secrets.

Anok reasoned that it might be easier to keep a lie straight when it contained large stretches of truth.

This had proven to be a wise decision, as Ramsa Aál seemed to want to hear the story again and again, each time pressing for some new detail, challenging each small inconsistency. In this altered version of events, they had gone to the tomb seeking not the magic-controlling band of Neska, but objects of magical power. As in reality, he told of how Dejal found the Rings of Neska, turned on his companions, and nearly killed them. He had also told them how he’d been able to defeat Dejal by attacking and destroying the rings rather than Dejal personally, and that Dejal had been buried when the tomb collapsed.

What Anok had neglected to mention was that the Band of Neska was now sealed within his right wrist, and that it

gave him the ability to wield great magic while resisting its corrupting and maddening influence. With it, Anok had restored his fragile sanity, and now felt equipped to continue his infiltration of the cult, hoping to destroy it from within.

But he also found himself wondering, what was the Cult of Set? He had expected a tightly knit army of evil, united under, and controlled by, one supernatural god. What he found was a loose group of men drawn together by their lust for wealth and power, each with his own agenda, each building his own power base, each seeking some advantage over the others.

The Temple of Set at Khemi was as different as could be from the temple in Kheshatta. The former was a grand center of power, wealth, and intrigue, wrapped in the great trappings of Set. The latter was a more modest structure, devoted to Kaman Awi's study of sorcery and "natural law." His lust for knowledge was as total, and just as corrupting, as the more common lusts for power or wealth. It was knowledge that he truly worshiped, not Set.

Even the cult's high priest, Thoth-Amon, secretly conspired against his own god. What little loyalty existed within the cult could turn into treachery in a moment, and every priest knew it.

Anok suspected Ramsa Aál was well aware that Anok intended to betray him when the opportunity arose. But in that, Anok was no different than any other acolyte within the temple.

He had joined the cult expecting to be a lone heretic, but it seemed he had joined a cult of heretics, bowing to their snake god even as they plotted to use and steal his power. Was he that different than the others?

Yes, I am.

He still had his family secrets. He still had the rage over the cult's role in the killing of two of the most important people in his life: his father, and Sheriti, his oldest friend and first lover. He still had the Mark of Set on his left wrist, a brand of frightful mystical power that he had only barely

learned to tap, and one of the mysterious Scales of Set, a mystic artifact much desired by Ramsa Aál.

He had many reasons to hate Ramsa Aál and the cult, and he had resources with which he might yet do them great harm.

As he looked toward the sun, low in the horizon, he caught a glimpse of a large camel silhouetted against the horizon, a camel with two familiar riders. He saw them only a moment before they passed behind a hill, out of sight, and was careful not to draw attention to them. Still, he smiled a secret smile at the sight.

I have one other thing as well. I have friends!

TEFERI SAT BACKWARD in the white camel's oversized saddle, his long, dark legs contrasting with the pale hair on the big animal's flank. He toyed idly with his bow, pulling back the string, sighting on imaginary targets in the landscape that slid away into the distance behind them, and the occasional lizard scurrying between hiding places.

He could feel the naked skin of the woman's muscular back pressed against his, but he found the sensation more annoying than erotic. He tried to catch some whiff of her scent, but the camel's stench overpowered everything else. He squirmed, trying to put a little distance between them.

Fallon brushed back her long, black hair and glanced back over her shoulder. "You have something to say, Teferi?"

He considered a dozen alternatives, abandoning each in the name of diplomacy. "I was just looking for a more comfortable position. I do not like riding on the back of this camel like a child."

"White camels are large, Teferi, born to carry heavy loads. Fenola does not mind."

"I mind. We should have hired a second camel."

"Why waste silver when the camel I already own will suffice?"

He grunted.

“You don’t care for me, Teferi?”

“You are adequate company.”

She smirked at him. “Flattery! Do all men from the plains of Kush have this gift?”

Her remark made him twitch, and he almost didn’t reply at all. “I was born in a city. I remember the plains of my ancestral land only in my dreams.”

She was quiet for a moment, and he felt her shift nervously. When she did speak, her voice was apologetic. “I meant no offense, Teferi. It’s been a long ride, and you’ve hardly spoken. If you do not care for me, I would like to know why.”

He chuckled incredulously. “You’ve made it clear you don’t care for me as a man.” The words sounded surprisingly bitter, even to his own ears. “Why do you care at all? I am entrusted with my friend’s, my *brother’s*, safety as a matter of honor. It’s but a job to you. Can you not do it in silence?”

“Anok doesn’t pay me enough for silence, Teferi, and he pays you as well as a matter of his own honor, though I know you would be here anyway. But perhaps you don’t understand me nearly as well as you think.”

“Are you saying you would still be here if there were not silver to be made?”

“I’m a Cimmerian, Teferi. We live as Crom made us to live: to struggle, to fight, to club life over the head, throw it to the ground, and steal its purse. But a purseful of silver is worth nothing. A purse *emptied* well is another matter, and a purse *filled* well is better yet. In these past weeks I have battled ancient monsters, survived supernatural evil, and untold treachery. I have seen things to make hard men tremble, and have tales to tell my grandchildren, if by some accident I should live long enough to have any.” She looked off at the horizon and nodded, seemingly more to herself than to him. “That is better than silver.”

He sighed. “For silver or glory, there’s little difference.”

“You think so poorly of me? Anok is your friend, but he has been more to me than that.”

Teferi laughed. "You shared his bed! And how much does that mean to you?"

"You think that because I'm a forward woman I lie with a man the way a dog scratches an itch? It's a man's way to think with his loins, and I'll wager you've let yours think for you more than once."

Teferi winced at the truth of it, but said nothing.

"For what it matters, Teferi, you are a fine figure of a man, and were that my only concern, I would happily test your skill in the darkness. But I am not the woman you think I am, and my heart and mind are much confused these days."

He licked his dry lips. "Then perhaps if you did not add to that confusion with wine—"

She spun her head around and glared at him, those dark Cimmerian eyes filled with blood and fire. "Is that what this is about?"

"When Anok needed you, when he faced the devil Thoth-Amon alone, you were holed up in a bar."

"And you were holed up in a library with Sabé! Neither of us was there for him, Teferi. We must both live with our failure. Yet much as we might try, we can't always protect Anok from the danger of the path he has chosen for himself. He has put himself against the Cult of Set itself."

He sighed. "Then why are you here shadowing Anok? Why even bother to answer his summons?"

She was silent for a time. "There was no summons. I overheard Anok talk of this journey and thought of following him myself. Then I lied to you about his instructions. I did not want to hire another camel because Anok did not give me the silver to hire one with."

Teferi blinked in surprise. Then he laughed. "You tricked me, woman! I have wronged you greatly, doubting your goodwill and courage. I humble myself before you."

She grinned. "I won't forget it."

"A fine figure of a man?"

Her smile vanished. She pushed his head down and quietly ordered the big camel to kush. It dropped quickly to its knees, then belly down in the dirt.

Following Fallon's lead, Teferi rolled off the camel and crawled along the ground to peer over the top of a reddish-orange boulder. They watched a pair of lightly armored soldiers on horseback ride along a path below. Teferi instantly recognized the scarlet sash and the scarlet ruffles on the reins.

He slid down, his back against the rock, and listened as the hoofbeats faded into the distance. Then he glanced over at Fallon. "Guardians of Set. Are we close to this shrine you told me about?"

"Without doubt. From what I learned on the streets back in Kheshatta, the cult keeps an entire garrison of troops here to guard the shrine and its treasures."

"You could have warned me."

"I did not know there would be patrols. I thought they would stay close to the treasure."

Teferi peered over the rock again. Off to the west, he could see a caravan of pilgrims cresting a ridge. The riders were richly dressed, and there were many pack camels, all heavily burdened with *something*.

He slid back behind the rock. "Perhaps," he said, "the treasure is not where we think it is."