No Certain Victory, Part 1: Fajr Chapters 1-12

by Khamira

Summary

When Germany sends troops to invade Egypt, the Medjai find themselves with a new enemy, and a few surprising allies in the battle.

Notes

This was written quite a bit ago, but I am just posting it here, in preparation for the sequel. The original note went something like this: First off, this is dedicated to Koyote, Richel and Kristin without whom it would have never ever gotten written. Second, I know I've made some concession in the mythology, after all you can't go by the real Egyptian myths when the films don't but I've tried to stay faithful to the spirit of them at any rate. Third, all the Arabic and Egyptian is to the best of my knowledge correct. But while my Arabic is reasonably fluent my Egyptian is not, so I had to make do with translations and the help of a few friends. My apologies for any errors. Last but not least, I hope it's enjoyable. If it isn't, tell me that too please. Marrie27 who wrote a good portion of this with me, passed away and I have been hard pressed to finish the sequel without her. However, in her memory I have persevered. I hope both the original and the sequel find the audience she intended.
"There is no honor in certain victory, not for gods, men, or monsters."
Egyptian, New Kingdom, author unknown., translation attributed to TE Lawrence.

No Certain Victory: Prologue

When the tanks of the Reich came into Egypt, they came for more than the canal. They came for more than gold. They came for the ancient power and secrets buried in her sands. They came for the Fuhrer and his greed for the occult and his mad obsession with the holy land. But they found as conquerors had for ages before, that the secrets of Egypt were not easy to take and the might and defenders of the old gods were not quite as asleep or dead as they might have thought.

In the darkness of his long eternal night, Imhotep, once high priest of AmmunRa at Thebes, heard the stirring of the sand around him, and as the curse he had endured for millennia pulled at him again, he heard the call of his god. And once again he opened long dead eyes. But this time beheld the face of AmmunRa, He who is Lord of all Egypt. And Imhotep listened to the words of his god and obeyed. The troops of the Reich never knew what enveloped them in the desert.

The Medjai were not as unaware, nor as ignorant.

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Ardeth pulled his tired horse to a stop finally, and slid thankfully to the ground. One of the younger Medjai took the horse's reins with a smile and led it away. He gave his tribesman an exhausted smile in return and made his way over to the fire. "Selim, Arebe, Gamal, Abdul, how are your tribes?" He sat down with the other Medjai leaders.

"Well. And no more stirrings of He who shall not be named that we can find." Selim answered. As the eldest there he usually fell into the role of spokesmen for them all. Ardeth nodded.

"And none here either. We have scouts at Hamanaptra and at the remains of Ahm Shere and yet even our people in Cairo have heard nothing since that last division disappeared out near the Wadi Assaid." He took the glass of karkaday Gamal's second wife handed him with a nod of thanks and reached for the platter of bread and tahini, only then realizing his own hunger. "I do not trust the quiet."

Arebe laughed with his usual warmth. "I knew you would think that. So I asked Emil to send word to Mohammed at the British Museum."

"Mohammed? Why?" He finished the sweet hibiscus tea with a frown.

Arebe smiled again and Selim chuckled. "Because, if He who shall not be named, is moving about. We thought it prudent to know where your friends were."

He smiled a little himself, a bit melancholy at how long it had been since he had seen the O'Connells. Their son must be more than ten years old now. "And are they well?"

"Yes. They do not seem to be aware of the stirrings here. Mohammed said he would send them a message if you wish."
He nodded a little absently, and then took the paper and ink that Selim handed him. It was a simple enough note.

O'Connell,
The sands stir without wind, and swallow armies whole.
But we have no signs of He whom I shall not name. Take care all the same, and watch your own back as you guard your family, my friend.
Ardeth Bay

He handed the paper to Arebe and then rose to his feet. "I must leave before morning. I am riding out to Ahm Shere. Forgive my rudeness, my friends, but I must sleep."

"Take care of yourself, Ardeth. We shall need your strength more than I would like to think in the days to come, I fear." Selim replied quietly.

"In'sh'Allah." He replied with a shrug. But he prayed silently to God all the same, that it would not be his will at all.

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"He said what?!" Evie O'Connell asked sharply.

Rick just shrugged and smiled at his wife. "Just that. Watch our backs."

"Wonderful." She rolled her eyes. "Delightful. And just what are we to be watching our backs for this time? Crazed curators perhaps? Half-scorpion men? Or just your run of the mill gravity-defying mummies and reincarnated Egyptian princesses."

"Don't toss stones, love." He smiled a bit more. Evie flushed a bit but smiled back.

"Just another day in our lives, then?" She tossed the long dark hair she'd been brushing over her shoulder. "Nice of him to think of us at least."

"Yeah, he's probably wondering what cursed thing we unearthed and started deciphering or ransacking this time, more likely." Rick checked the bedroom door lock once more just to be safe and then smiled at his wife. "We haven't, have we?"

"Ransacked or deciphered any cursed thing? Not recently certainly. Well, there was that ostracon Dr. Emerson sent, but that wasn't cursed."

"Of course it wasn't." He headed toward the bed Evie was sitting on with a grin.

"Well, if you believe the press, every artifact ever excavated in Egypt is cursed." She began running the brush through her hair again. "So, when are we going to Egypt?"

That changed his plans for exactly what he was going to do with his wife when he reached the bed and he sat beside her with a sigh. "When are we going? Are we even going to consider not going?"

She smiled, that wonderful mischievous smile he loved. "The man who helped us rescue our son from Imhotep and his crazed followers sends us a two-line note from half way around the world warning us that something might be wrong while he's out there in the middle of it." She shook her head with a sigh. "Rick."

He smiled back. "Are we packed?"
She laughed, throwing her arms around his neck and kissing him firmly. "Of course we are."

"Just checking." He took the brush out of her hand, set it on the bedside table and turned out the light with long practice. "I'll see about booking tickets for the first steamship to Alexandria tomorrow."

"Good."

And that was about all they needed to say.

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Imhotep lowered his arms as the sand finished swirling about the last of the invading soldiers and their machines. Set would be eating well this night. He looked up at the bright Egyptian sun and then bowed.

"Great Ammun Ra, You who are Lord of all Egypt, who hears all prayers, I have done as you commanded. The pale followers of madness are dead. Egypt is safe."

The god of gods of ancient Egypt looked down upon this last priest of his former glory and smiled. "You have done as I have asked. Cursed was your name for generations Imhotep, but no longer by us. Rest now, sleep the dreams of the faithful, and walk once more in the Egypt that was."

And Imhotep closed his eyes and for the first time in thousands of years he slept at peace. If AmmunRa in his great sweep across the sky noticed the tears that wet the sand beneath his last priest's head he made no mention. And Mut drew the cloak of night over the sands of Egypt and the shelter of the earth back over the sleeping man.

When Imhotep opened his eyes he was uncertain for a long moment where he was. The bed under him was soft and smelled of cedar. The air was cool, rustling the linen as the wind moved about the room. He sat up slowly, not at all certain he wanted to interrupt whatever odd dream this might be. He glanced down finally at his hands, blinking in surprise at finding them whole. A sad smile turned his lips for a moment and then he got out of the soft bed and walked across the polished stone floor to the small table against the wall. A bronze mirror lay on one edge, a jar of water and a bowl sat in the center and a chest on the other end. He poured water into the bowl, dipping both hands into it with a pure sigh of pleasure. Then raised them to pour the water over his head and face sluicing it down over his chest and arms. Gods be praised but such a simple joy felt wonderful. He picked up the mirror at last and gazed into it. And blinked, and looked again. He was whole and human and utterly himself. He blinked again but the image did not change. A dream them surely.

He set the mirror aside and walked out through the curtained doorway to the balcony he knew would be there. And there in all its glory was the great temple of Ammun Ra.

"Rest now." Said the voice of his god in his memory. "And dream the dreams of the faithful, and walk once more in the Egypt that was."

He looked over the temple below, recalling how it had looked when he and Anck-su-naumun had walked its shattered halls. He closed his eyes at that. Whether it was her courage or her love for him that had failed him at the last he was not certain. But either one it burnt him still. He turned his back on the temple outside and went in search of the baths. If his god wanted a priest to this temple of times past, he would do his best to oblige.

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"You need to sleep, Ardeth." Selim said firmly, taking his young leaders arm and guiding him over to a tent.
"I know, Selim. I know." He nodded, obviously past weariness and into exhaustion now. "You will wake me at dawn?"

"Would I let you sleep through prayers, Ardeth?" Selim smiled as he asked the question.

"Hmm, goodnight then."

"Ma Salaama, Ardeth. Sabah el Kaheer."

"Sleep well yourself, Selim." He was asleep almost the instant he laid down.

Selim smiled at the other Medjai as he walked back to the fire. "I think Allah in his wisdom is merciful enough to forgive our young leader if he sleeps through morning prayers, do you not, Pasha?"

The other Medjai nodded. "I think we could let him sleep all day."

And with that decided they began to plan out the next day.

Ardeth blinked, trying to recall when he had woken. Then again he was not certain he had fallen asleep. He reached uncertainly for his sword and found it beside him on the bed. He sat up, and then unsheathed the weapon quickly. The room around him was filled with bright sunlight, which only highlighted its unfamiliarity. The low bed he was sitting on was covered in linen sheets of dark blue. And drapes of white hung from the carved posts. Cheetah heads stared out from each post, rings in their mouths holding the fabric. He got to his feet carefully. There was a low table against one wall, a stool in front of it and a chest not far from that. Two more chairs and a carved table with a bronze top sat near the curtained doorway to somewhere and another smaller door on the opposite wall led somewhere else. Not a thing in the room was familiar. He swallowed the sudden rush of panic and headed past the curtains. The balcony overlooked a temple he did not recognize. But it was somewhere in Egypt, he was certain. The Nile rippled in the distance as it always did. He narrowed his eyes against the bright midday sun and frowned. Selim had promised to wake him for morning prayers had he not? And they had been camped not far from the Wadi Natrum that night, no where near a city or... He looked again at the temple stretched out before him and swallowed. He knew every temple in Egypt, every lost city and ruin and modern sprawl built on the remains of old. And this was not one of them. The columned roof looked to be as large as Karnak's hyper-style hall and yet... He looked again, seeing men in clothing he had only seen on temple carvings walking among the pillars. And knew where he was. Thebes, but not his city of Luxor now, Thebes of Egypt, of Pharaohs, of...

"Greetings, Medjai. I was wondering if you were ever going to sleep." Said a voice from behind him. "You will understand, I trust, why I did not knock?"

He turned slowly from the rail, sword still in his right hand little too no good though it might be. Allah, he prayed silently, have mercy on my soul.

The creature smiled, looking not the least concerned. "You would be better served to direct that to a god that might hear you here."

He blinked, and then took a deep breath. "There is no God but Allah."

A chuckle. "As I expected you to say. Come, it is foolish to stand under the midday sun when there is shade to be had just inside. We have much to discuss you and I, Medjai."
"We have nothing to discuss." He replied coldly. Only your death or mine. He added silently.

"It is too hot to fight as well. And the leap from the balcony would only grant you a painful death before you woke once more right here as you are now. Come inside warrior. If you have more sense than a crazed dog." The damned thing turned its back to Ardeth as if he and the sword he held were no threat at all. And indeed, if the creature was already whole and with all his power then what had it to fear from one warrior armed with only his faith and a sword?

Horus, god of Vengeance, carry my prayer to my brothers, so that they may know of the danger we face.

"Now that just might get you a response." The creature's voice carried from inside. "Are you coming?"

He swallowed once and then walked back into the room he had woken in.

"Welcome, leader of the Medjai to the great temple of Ammun Ra, He who is lord of all Egypt." The creature sat in one of the chairs by the small table. "Or at least to this wondrous reflection of what once was the glory of both kingdoms. You have a million questions racing for answers and too much pride to ask a one. Sit. If I wanted you dead, Medjai you would be. I have questions of my own. Sit. The wine is cool." He poured himself a goblet from a stirrup jar Ardeth had not seen before.

"Wine is forbidden." He answered calmly.

A smirk that was almost a smile. "Your god is not a very happy one is he? Water then? Hibiscus?"

He clenched his jaw and said nothing.

The creature laughed again, the sound oddly warm and even seeming genuine. "Ah Medjai, we have a long wait until the others arrive. It is still early even there. You were quick to sleep."

"Others?" He had to ask.

"Of course. You do not think I planned the whole banquet for only you do you? Honored though I am at your presence surely."

He clenched his jaw tight again, only keeping the angry reply in by a bit.

Another smile and the creature sipped at the wine it had poured.

"Creature am I? I prefer my name, or even my title if you can not do me that courtesy."

"I will do you none. And I will see you back in your grave if it kills me." He promised, pleased at the cold certainty in his own voice.

The creature smiled again. "Where do you think I am Medjai? Where do you think I am?"

Allah have mercy, he thought again, suddenly chilled. Then where am I?

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"When will we get to Alexandria dad, mom?" Alex asked as they finished dinner in the liner's main dinning room.

"Tomorrow about noon, Alex." His mother smiled. "Why don't we head back to our rooms and pack just to save time in the morning?" Evelyn had learned the hard way that getting her son to keep his things in order was a never-ending battle.
Okay mom, it'll be great to see uncle Ardeth again. Maybe I can learn that trick with the sword this time."

Evelyn sighed. "Maybe. Coming Rick?"

"Hmm?" Her husband looked up and then blinked. "Sure." He shook his head a little and then shivered.

"Rick?"

"Somebody walked over my grave I think." He shrugged.

Evie restrained the urge to knock on wood. "I'll be happier when we see Ardeth. And when we know exactly what we're facing."

"You and me both, Evie. You and me both." Rick agreed. He glanced once toward the bow of the ship as they walked along the deck before heading down the stairs to their rooms. "We should have flown."

"It's dangerous enough to take a ship, Rick. What with the blockade and the U-boats and all we're lucky you could arrange it with the American embassy. I'm afraid even father's old friends couldn't have gotten us here as British citizens."

He smiled a little. "Nice to be the wife of a yank for once, huh?"

She smiled back. "It's always nice to be your wife, Rick. It's just a change to be glad you're American."

"Geesh . . . " Alex muttered under his breath. At eleven he was a little better at dealing with the obvious affection between his parents than he had been, but it wasn't a vast improvement. "When did Uncle Jonathan say he'd get here?"

"A week from yesterday. He had a bit easier time being in Morocco but the overland route isn't easy even nowadays." Evie replied.

"Great!" Alex grinned.

"I certainly hope so. Are you all right, Rick?"

"Yeah, fine, just thinking. I do that occasionally you know."

"Occasionally." Evie returned with a smile. "Do you need help packing, Alex?"

"No, mum." He rolled his eyes. "I'm not a little kid anymore."

"Of course not." She replied with a smile, but refrained from ruffling his hair at the last minute. "Good night then, luv."

"Good night, tiger." Rick smiled.

"Night dad, night mum."

"Sleep well." Evie added as their son disappeared into his own room.

"You too." He called back.
"God willing." Rick whispered under his breath, at least that's what she thought she heard. And for some reason she shivered herself and thought the same thing.

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"Eventually your legs will go numb and you will have to sit or fall." Imhotep smiled at the young Medjai who had been standing there silently for hours. Imhotep had read two papyruses and studied his young guest for some time and the man still insisted on standing. It was as amusing as it was annoying. He smiled a bit more. "And if your legs are numb you will be in even less shape to fight should you need to. Sit, Medjai." He tried again.

Silence.

"If I had wanted to bore myself with this sort of company, Medjai, I could have talked to one of the statues. Sit. Or I can summon one of your fellow Medjai leaders in your place and see if they will be of any better company."

He waited to see if that threat did any good. Not surprisingly the young man reached over for the chair after a long moment and pulled it over to where he was standing before sitting. "There, you have managed it and you still have your head and soul. Where are your manners, Medjai? Am I so poor a host?"

"You are a demon from hell, monster. And no host to me."

He chuckled. "I am a priest of Ammun Ra, He who is lord of all Egypt. I was cursed for millennia to be certain. But I am not a demon of your god's hell or any other, Medjai. I will not even claim to be an afreet or a Djinn. I am only what I am." He poured himself another glass of wine. "What will you drink?"

A cold smile. "A toast to your death?"

He smiled back, amused by the young man's devotion. "I am honored to have my continued existence be the center of your world Medjai."

Surprise at that and he could all but see the young man bite back another sharp reply.

"Here then. A toast to my death." He handed the Medjai a goblet of fresh karkaday.

Disbelief and a firm conviction of treachery filled the young man's thoughts.

"Medjai, Medjai, if I wished you dead you would be dead. If I wished you my prisoner instead of my guest, you would have woken in chains and not in bed. If I wished you harm your fellow guests would arrive to find you covered in your own blood. You are here because I wish it, and by my leave. What need have I of poison or trickery? A toast to my death, you said? Let us toast then. I am rather fond of my death myself." He raised his own goblet.

Growing confusion filled the young Medjai's thoughts but finally he sighed and raised his own glass and the paused. A small smile flashed across the bearded face as he swallowed. "Shall I pray for as much acceptance of my own?"

He smiled back. "When the time comes, perhaps. But I hope it will be a long way off. I am enjoying the entertainment too much to let it end."

"I am no man's entertainment, creature, least of all yours."
He sighed. "Medjai you would try the patience of the gods. And you are more entertainment than you know." He leaned back and studied the young man again. He could have used a bath perhaps, and it was still odd to see so many dark curls sweeping the young man's shoulders and know they were his own. He tried to picture the Medjai in the dress and wigs of his own time and then chuckled at the thought.

Confusion and distrust in those expressive dark eyes.

"A moment's amusement Medjai nothing more. Our next guest is about to arrive. Shall I bring him here or let him wait for the others do you think?"

"Leave whoever else you would torment alone, creature." The Medjai hissed and very suddenly he was next to Imhotep, the long sharp sword he had held across his lap held to Imhotep's throat instead. He smiled just a little and met the young man's eyes. "No." And with that he called on the little power he had here yet and sent the Medjai slamming into the far wall.

"Uncle Ardeth!" Alex O'Connell's voice came from the balcony followed a moment later by the child himself as he ran to the Medjai's side.

And at some other time the despair that crashed over the young man at that moment might have made Imhotep smile. As it was he simply set his goblet of wine aside with a sigh. "I trust I did you no injury, Medjai?"

The man did not answer but he whispered something to the boy beside him in a language Imhotep did not know. He was certain it was the same one he had heard them all speak before. English he recalled it being named but he did not know it.

"Greetings again, young Alex." The odd name sounded even odder amidst the ancient greeting. "Welcome to the Temple of Ammun Ra, He who is lord of all Egypt. We are waiting dinner on the rest of your family of course but they should arrive shortly."

Alex, to give the child credit, tried to be brave, but the fear that gripped him for a long moment was obvious. Then he cocked his head to one side, blond waves falling into his eyes. "Aren't you dead?"

Imhotep laughed. "Quite. It is a rather common state of my existence however, so I have no concern with it. We were just discussing your banquet." He smiled a bit more. "Please, sit." He righted the chair the Medjai had been sitting in with a thought and pulled it back over by the table.

Alex glanced up at the man beside him and then nodded. "Thanks kindly." He followed the Medjai's lead and walked over to sit. "I'm really not hungry, though."

"A surmountable problem, I think." He smiled again, noticing the Medjai's growing confusion. And he locked eyes with the dark-eyed warrior teasingly. "We can enjoy the entertainment before the meal then."

Those dark eyes flashed but the main concern in his thoughts was for the child beside him. And that was all the control Imhotep needed.

"Have you ever seen a man fight a lion before?" He asked calmly. The child's eyes widened.

"Like Daniel you mean?" He asked. "For real?"

"I do not know that name." He shook his head. But he could read the Medjai's concern and fear easily enough, as well as the certainty that he would be the one fighting the lion. Imhotep smiled
again and sipped his wine. "Of course we could have it be a crocodile instead if that is more entertaining, or perhaps a fight between warriors? For the fate of the princess?" He looked at the warrior with a smirk. "Preferences, Medai?"

The warrior swallowed once and then nodded. "Crocodile."

He smiled back.

"Really, Uncle Ardeth? They're nasty quick, and mean too." Alex put in.

"He seems certain enough." Imhotep smiled. "Uncle is it?"

No warmth to those brown eyes. "We are brothers, his father and I."

"Ah." He nodded once and then glanced at the doorway. "Speaking of the other guests. Open the door Denmut." He called to the priest outside. "Do come in Princess, O'Connell we are waiting on you."

A flash of hope and joy from Alex. And a more subdued hope from the Medai but more concern as well.

O'Connell growled out something in English his voice harsh. But it was easy enough to tell the concern and fear he had for his son.

"Be civil." He returned with a sincere smile. "Nefertiri, as always your beauty if that of Isis herself. Welcome Princess to the temple of Ammun Ra, he who is lord of all Egypt."

"May he curse your name for all the days murderer." She returned in the old tongue.

He smiled sadly. "A foolish moment of panic and despair that I think I have paid enough of a price for. We are all fools for love are we not Princess?" He looked pointedly at the man beside her and asked in honest curiosity. "Would you not risk the Hom-Dai yourself for the man you love?"

Confusion and fear in her beautiful eyes.

"Leave her be, demon." The Medjai growled in the same language they had been speaking.

"It was a simple enough question. Come now, Princess, Medjai, O'Connell, Alex. We have a full night ahead." He looked at the Medjai leader and spoke softly in the language of his tribe. "You will tell O'Connell to be civil and behave, and you will do the same. Or I will serve you both the heads of those you love for dinner. Do you understand me, Medjai?"

Hatred and fear in those expressive eyes now but then he clenched his jaw and nodded once.

"Good." He smiled. Sometimes the old threats were the best. He watched the Medjai escort Alex over to his parents and whisper into his brother's ear as he clasped his shoulder and Nefertiri hugged her son tightly. O'Connell's eyes closed and the same hatred and fear went through his mind as well but he nodded. Imhotep smiled at him as he opened in his eyes. "Dinner and the evening's entertainment await us honored guests."

"For now." Nefertiri agreed. "Good to see you, Ardeth."

"And you Evelyn. Would that Allah had granted us a better cause."

O'Connell said something else and then rolled his eyes. "Can we try something I know?" He asked in the language of the followers of Allah.
The Medjai looked over at him, a silent question.

"I would prefer to speak a civilized tongue but for the sake of my guests I can make do with that of heathens."

The warrior smiled coldly. "Your hospitality is endless."

He laughed. "Perhaps. Perhaps." He walked past and purposefully brushed against the young man. "Do not try me, Ardeth. You are a poor guest yourself." He teased in the Medjai's own tongue and then headed down the hall. "Do come Princess, everyone will be pleased to see you."

A sudden shyness to the young woman. "You surely don't expect me to-- dress for dinner do you?"

He laughed and then teased her husband a bit. "It would certainly improve my dinner, but perhaps we had best not distract your bodyguard with such a now uncommon show of beauty."

"Bodyguard?" O'Connell asked sharply.

"As you have always been, have you not Medjai, guards to Pharaoh and his wives and children?"

There was a moment of silence and then a chuckle. "Hardly a task we have been called to perform for over a millennia."

"Ah." He acknowledged the point.

"I would be honored of course, Evelyn."

"Why thank you, Ardeth."

"Bully!" Alex put in, in what had to be English again.

He walked into the room where the banquet table stood already filled with all the delicacies he could recall. He took his seat on the raised dias, just to the right of the main seat. "Princess?" He indicated the seat beside him trusting the others to figure out the remaining chairs. He was only mildly surprised and more than a little amused when she took her seat and Ardeth and her husband stood behind the chair instead. Alex sat next to her. "Medjai, Medjai it is a joy to know that some things in this world do not change. Your son has told me he is not hungry yet and as I am certain you dined together perhaps we should eat after the entertainment?"

She smiled at him coldly, more of the honest hatred of Nefertiri in her eyes now and not Evelyn O'Connell's dislike. "What sort of entertainment did you have planned, Priest? I'm short on fencing partners."

He caught his breath at that and then returned the hit coldly. "I asked your son earlier if he had ever seen a man fight a lion or a crocodile. I took the answer to be no. We can remedy that of course. Crocodile was it, Medjai?" He knew full well it had been.

"As you know." Ardeth replied just as coldly.

"Fine. Be sporting to the beast, Medjai. Leave your brother your sword."

Evelyn gasped suddenly and Alex muttered something in English. O'Connell simply gripped Ardeth's shoulder and shook his head asking something else.

"It is done, Rick. Stay by your wife, yes?" Ardeth passed his blade to the other man with a simple formality. "May I keep my daggers creature, or must I do this with my bear hands?"
"That would not be much sport either, would it? Keep your dagger of course." He smiled again. "But only one."

"Ardeth, you can't." Nefertiri whispered, so much concern and fear in her eyes. He could almost feel pity for her. Then he recalled all too clearly her condemning him to the curse he had borne for so long and the horrible pain it had brought him. Let her worry for her friend. She was fortunate he did not feed her son to the beast in front of her.

"Have a little faith in your guard, Princess." The Medjai smiled. And the warmth and odd humor changed his whole face into something much more arresting than Imhotep had noticed before.

"Either of your guard will do of course, Princess." He offered with a smirk. Knowing as she and Ardeth and her husband all knew that she couldn't bring herself to risk him either.

"I chose the challenge. I will fight it." Ardeth said firmly.

"As you wish, Ardeth." He teased, noticing the Medjai's discomfort at the use of his name. "As you wish." He turned to the acolyte beside the dais. "Bring in one of Sobek's children Shusha."

The youth hurried away and a moment later one of the large handlers appeared with a very angry, muzzled crocodile in tow. He could hear the young Medjai's unvoiced prayer, approving more than a little at the choice of Sekhmet for strength. It was telling of course that he prayed to Allah first. But old habits were hard to break. He chuckled. The young were so foolish.

"If this harms him, priest, I will find a way to curse you all over again." Nefertiri promised in a growl.

"I would not even think to doubt that you would try, Princess. Do keep your feet up young Alex, to be safe of course." He smiled at the woman beside him, not at all surprised when Rick O'Connell moved forward between his wife and son, sword held at the ready in his hand. "Warriors." He rolled his eyes and turned back to the floor.

The handler had removed the back strap of the crocodile's muzzle and then at his nod moved to the front of the beast and taking the end of the leash firmly in his hands pulled it free. The crocodile snapped its jaws appropriately and hissed.

He drew his weakened powers to him and directed them at the crocodile. Entertainment was on his agenda, pain this side of the dreaming fierce enough to wake even the exhausted Medjai leader on the other was not. So best to keep him whole. Besides, he thought to himself, the man was intriguing if nothing else. The large lizard swung its head around and then its tail, almost catching the Medjai's feet. Alex caught his breath in another gasp but Nefertiri and her husband were silent.

Ardeth had his dagger in his right hand. His left held away from his body making him appear even larger to the crocodile as the loose black robes he wore billowed out. And the crocodile was none too certain of its attack. He leaned back in his seat with studied indifference. Interesting fight at least.

The lizard snapped its jaws again and then lunged forward, surprising almost everyone with its speed. But the Medjai seemed prepared for the lunge and moved sideways, and then ducked low, leaping over the surprised crocodile and slashing out, a glancing blow only across the beast's back but a blow none the less. Imhotep smiled.

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The crocodile screamed in anger the odd hissing screech echoing off the chamber walls and lunged around again, jaws snapping shut and this time there was a tater of black and silver in its jaws. Ardeth swung away again, making it turn in another circle, its legs not quite as quick in that move as straight forward. Another leap that took him up over the crocodile and to the far side of the dais the
crocodile lunged again and he leaped, turning somehow head over heels the blade slicing out again and this time scoring a long gash along the creatures back. But it snapped its head back and lashed out its tail and the Medjai stumbled just a bit as he found his feet, whirling in barely enough time to avoid another lunge. Another swipe of the blade as the jaws snapped shut and another slash of red along its snout this time. Enraged it raced forward and in another of those leaps that seemed to almost float he landed on the dias again, only this time right beside young Alex O’Connell. And he grinned, saying something in English and picked the boy up, leapt another time before Imhotep realized he was moving and tossed the startled child right through the image of Mut on the temple wall. Right through the goddess of dreams and into the waking world. And the knife sailed through the air and caught the crocodile solidly between the eyes.

And on a steam liner out in the Mediterranean Alex woke with a scream that roused his parents in the cabin next door.

Ardeth smiled. "Be well." He raised his hand in salute as Evelyn and O’Connell vanished, both of them half-way to his side.

Imhotep leaned back against his chair, considered many responses and then laughed. "Well played, Medjai. Oh, well played."

The Medjai said nothing only picked up his sword from the floor when it had fallen when O’Connell vanished and looked at him in that same silence.

"Ardeth, Medjai, that was truly impressive." He chuckled again. "Ultimately futile of course as they will fall asleep eventually but impressive none the less. And forewarned is indeed forearmed. Oh, well played." He rose to his feet and walked over to the dead crocodile and pulled the knife free. And it was boast enough that he could not help himself. "Yours?" He handed the blade hilt first to the Medjai, the point aimed with calm certainty at his own heart. Ardeth reached out and took the blade, flicking the blood off of it in a quick move and then sheathing it at his belt. "I should of course have you punished for ruining my feast." He smiled as he walked over to the table. "Aknutsun remove the poor child of Sobek will you and see it properly mummified and honored?"

Aknutsun gathered the dead crocodile into his huge arms and walked away.

Imhotep poured himself a mug of beer and turned back to his remaining guest. He shook his head a little at the Medjai's thoughts; relief at his friend's safety, gladness at thwarting Imhotep in anything, a bit of pride at his defeat of the crocodile and in carrying out his friend's rescue, and a sad certainty that his own death was approaching quickly and would be unpleasant at best.

He smiled, sipping the beer slowly and thought as he walked back to his earlier seat. "I seem to be short on guests, Medjai."

"Are you going to insist on the pretense that I am your guest, monster?" Ardeth asked coldly. He chuckled. "You are, Ardeth." He rolled the name with a smile watching the Medjai tense again. "If you were not, I would have you stripped, hung from those pillars and lashed until you screamed for ruining my banquet. And that, Medjai, would be only the beginning." He leaned forward, and put all his long horrible death into his voice. "Do you know what the Hom-Dai involves, Ardeth?"
The young man swallowed hard and the thoughts that came to his mind indicated he knew a great deal.

"There are a few more agonies and degradations than you know of course, but that is accurate enough." He smiled again, and got to his feet, walking over to the young man and then meeting those brown eyes. "I lived it, Medjai. Do you doubt that I could preform it in turn?"

Horror and fear and despair that he could feel washed through the young man like the inundation of the Nile. Then finally softly, "My soul belongs only to Allah, monster. I will not fear your curse."

He chuckled. "You do. Though your bravery stands you in good stead, have no doubt. It is a truly horrible way to die, Ardeth. And death is only the beginning."

"My soul belongs only to Allah." He repeated in that same soft voice. "I will not fear your curse."

"And when I have cut all those pieces from you that I will take, and bound you pleading in linen and placed you in the coffin that will hold you prisoner for eternity and I pour jar after jar of scarabs upon you before I seal you away, do you think, for a moment that will mater?"

Silence, but the young man closed his eyes and drew himself in deeper. Faith and strength and courage that Imhotep could almost touch. "I will not fear your curse." He repeated once more in Arabic again. "My soul belongs only to Allah."

He shook his head and then placed his palm in the center of the Medjai's chest just over his heart. "Do you wish to die?"

A deep breath, hands clenching at his sides but he made no move. "No sane man wishes to die."

"Hmm, you will you know. You will beg this god of yours to end it. For anything to take the pain away as you are eaten bit by bit." He sighed. "Is it worth it to have them free for a few hours?"

"It is worth any cost I must pay, to see you locked back in your grave, monster."

He gave the young man a slight smile. "Shall I lock us in together, then?"

A shudder.

"No?" He drew his hand away slowly. "I thought her love worth even that, Medjai. I hope your ideal of honor is worth as much to you."

A long silence. "If they are free, it is worth it."

He smiled again. "Good." He headed back to the table. "Come enjoy your last meal then, Medjai."

The young man took a deep breath. And then with a resigned sigh he opened his eyes and looked over. "Do you truly think I can eat?"

"Hmm, not a good idea perhaps. You'll vomit it all back up when I cut out your tongue no doubt. I certainly did." He poured himself a bit more beer. "Perhaps you should ask your god's forgiveness and get drunk first."

"Perhaps I should."

He smiled and indicated the table. "Beer or wine, Medjai?"

"Wine." The young man replied, a little more strength to his voice.
"Wine it is." He poured a goblet and handed it to Ardeth. "To-- things worth dying for." He raised his own glass.

"To things worth dying for." He raised his glass of wine in turn and then drank it down.

Imhotep smiled a bit more at his guest's uncertainty at the taste. "Shusha, bring the wine." He walked back over to the dias. "Come join me, Ardeth. If you will not eat we can at least enjoy the rest of the entertainment."

A weary sigh. "What shall I fight next, then?"

He chuckled. "Nothing so bloody this time, warrior. We are enjoying your feast now. In your honor, if not for the reason I originally planned. Sit." He indicated the chair Neferititi had recently claimed. Silence for a moment and then the young man moved to sit beside him. Shusha refilled the Medjai's cup and backed away. Imhotep smiled and clapped his hands filling the room with musicians and dancers and laughter. His young guest did not relax at all in the beginning but after an hour or more and three goblets of wine the tension was less. More than a few of the dancers focused their attention on his guest, and he could see both the Medjai's discomfort and half-uncertain enjoyment of the flattery. He chuckled, and took the wine from Shusha to refill the young Medjai's cup. "They are good, are they not?"

"Very, even if it is unseemly."

"Their lack of clothing you mean?" He teased with a smile. "Hardly unseemly for them. It is what is worn, here, now. Our gods are not as unhappy as yours, Ardeth."

A sigh and then a small smile. "There is no God but Allah."

He chuckled. "As you say, Medjai, as you say." He called out a few acrobats and sword dancers to the mix, creating on a smaller scale a royal festival fit for Pharaoh. His guest seemed content for the moment to watch the show and drink the wine. And wonder in the back of his mind when it would end and the horror Imhotep had promised him would begin. He smiled to himself. For now, let him wonder.

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"Rick, if we have the captain blow up the boiler we won't reach Alexandria at all." Evie said firmly.

He turned to look at her and then stopped, seeing the same worried concern in her own eyes that he knew was in his. "I know. I know. I'm sorry."

"We'll get to Alexandria, then we can find a plane to take us to Cairo, and you can get Izzy to take us to Hamanaptra."

"Why there?" He asked.

She smiled coldly. "Because that's where Anck-su-naumun left the book of AmmunRa."

He smiled back. "Good. Wonder if we can find another spear of Osiris, just to be on the safe side."

"We can try." She looked back over the rail. "I wish I knew where he was."

"You and me both, Evie. You and me both. Luxor you think?"

She shrugged. "Three thousand or more years ago certainly, but right now? What was that? Where
"were we?"

"I'm pretty sure we were right here sound asleep." He shook his head.

"And Ardeth threw Alex through the image of Mut, back into the real world." She shook her head. "I'm too tired to think, and we daren't go back to sleep."

"I hope he got out too." Rick said finally, wrapping his arms around her from behind.

She nodded and said a silent prayer for their friend both to God and to the ancient deities of Egypt that ruled wherever it was Imhotep had conjured them.

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Selim looked in on his young leader, not surprised to see that Ardeth had barely moved in the hours since he had fallen into sleep. He debated with himself, but decided the sleep would do him better than dinner.

"He will kill himself before he is my age." Pasha shook his head. "Much less yours, Selim."

Smiling at his friend and fellow Medjai, Selim let the tent flap fall and walked with him back over to the fire where Gamal and others were gathered.

"How is Ardeth?" Arebe asked.

"Sleeping soundly. I think Allah will understand if we let him sleep through tonight and even through morning prayers."

Arebe shook his head. "Allah grant that we do not need him before then."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed. "Any signs?"

"Of He, Who Shall Not Be Named? No. But Elim sends word from Mohamad that the O'Connells will arrive in Alexandria tomorrow."

"God have mercy. If that does not mean that the creature has returned I do not know what does." Pasha glanced heavenward.

Arebe chuckled. "I do not doubt that Ardeth will think the same thing. When he wakes tomorrow we shall tell him he could be in Cairo to meet them. Sallah will meet their boat and see that they make it that far."

"Good. Then we will let him rest, because Allah alone knows when he will get another chance. We shall wake him for the noon meal, even Ardeth is not dedicated enough to go riding out in the heat of the day so we can insure he eats as well."

Arebe chuckled. "You would think he was one of your daughters the way you worry so."

Selim smiled back. "Were he my son I could not be prouder. But I worry not only for his sake but for all our sakes. We need him."

"There is truth in that." Pasha agreed. "So he can leave towards sundown tomorrow and be in Cairo by morning to meet the O'Connell's train."

"Do you think he will mind that we planned this all?" Gamal asked, sipping the strong mint tea his wife poured.
"Perhaps, but by then it will be done. It is as it has always been, easier to apologize than to get permission." Arebe laughed.

"It is." Selim agreed.

Ardeth watched the dancers with the flaming torches weave in and out of patterns of flame, keeping track of the swirling sticks and arms and legs was a complicated exercise and one he felt oddly apart from. He had felt oddly apart from most of the unreal evening for the last few hours as the entertainment had continued. But his...host seemed in no hurry to end it. And if he was being honest with himself he was in no hurry either. He shivered a bit; trying once more to push the thoughts the creature's words had brought up deep down in the back of his mind. He had, he supposed, come to terms with the concerns he had had for his soul. He would trust in Allah that he would awake in paradise. But he doubted very much he could face the manner of his upcoming death so calmly. It was, as the creature himself had said, a truly horrible way to die. Allah, he prayed silently, have mercy on me. Let me wake. Then with a sigh he glanced up at the ceiling. AmmunRa, you who was god of Egypt for so many years before the Prophet, peace be upon him, came to this land, hear once more the prayers of the silent. Let me go.

"You truly should eat, Ardeth." His host's voice was full of an odd humor. "How much wine have you had now, hmm?"

He glanced at the goblet in his hand, once again noting the beauty of it, the set of the lapis lazuli along the carved alabaster edge. "One is as great a transgression for Allah to forgive as ten, so I have not counted." He shrugged.

A chuckle and those strong fingers took the goblet from his hand. "Medjai, Medjai, you are drunk."

He blinked at that. Having never been drunk he was not certain if this was what it should feel like or not. He frowned a bit. Wine was an indulgence Allah would forgive him for partaking of, even Mohamed, peace be upon him, had drunk wine. But to be drunk was a greater sin. Then again, Allah was most merciful, and would undoubtedly understand that Ardeth was ignorant of such things and simply wished to face his death bravely. "Better than facing this sober I would think." He nodded in agreement, only then recalling that he had promised himself he was going to stop agreeing with the damned thing.

The thing shook its head with a smile. "Ardeth, Ardeth, I have a name you know. You are such a poor guest, it is a wonder I do not just toss you off the balcony. Did you enjoy the performances?"

He blinked, only then realizing that the music had stopped and the dancers who had been swirling about the room were departing. One of the women who had come closest to him and all but laid across his lap earlier smiled at him again over her shoulder, long black braids falling to the waistband of her short skirt in back and sliding across her uncovered breasts in front. He blinked and then shook his head to clear it.

His host laughed again, an oddly warm sound to his ears. And then a hand under his chin made him look at the man beside him. "Did you enjoy the performance?" He repeated the earlier question in Arabic this time.

Ardeth swallowed. "I did." It had been unique and unreal and oddly beautiful.

"Good." A smile and then a shake of its head. "Will you eat?"
"I thought you did not want me to be sick when you cut out my tongue?" He shrugged a bit.

The creature laughed. "Whether or not you are sick when it happens, Ardeth, will be the last thought to enter your mind. Trust me on this, Medjai."

He assumed the creature was in a position to know so he did not argue.

"Oh, you are so going to hate the morning my young warrior."

He wondered if that's what they were waiting for then. Morning. How long away could it be now? A couple of hours at best? Would Selim go to wake him for morning prayers and find his body dead? Would he seem unconscious there for the time it took him to die here and his soul was freed for Paradise? He was not certain himself on that one.

His host laughed again. "It is indeed well toward morning here, Medjai, but it is barely toward the mid of night were your body sleeps. We are in the time of dreams here, Ardeth it flows differently."

The creature had developed an odd delight in rolling his name as if it was of the old tongue. He was certain that it was only done to annoy him but he had found he rather liked the sound after all. Another chuckle. "Come now, Medjai, you have a hard day to face tomorrow without any more help from me. Drink this and then sleep. We will talk after my god has risen for the day and feasted."

He wondered absently if in this place of all places that was not true and drank the contents of the goblet the priest handed him without care. What was in it that would be worse than what was to come?

"Nothing, but some herbs and water to make you less unwell come morning. Come now." Strong hands helped him to his feet. He knew he should argue, struggle even but it seemed so foolish. "You have nothing to fear from me this night at least, Ardeth. It would be hardly sporting or even entertaining right now. We can commence the battle again tomorrow."

He followed his host as the creature led him down a hall back to the room he had first woken in, in this strange world of dreams.

"Rest now, Ardeth. Tahiri will see that you are comfortable. I will see you when you wake."

He tried to focus his eyes on the man as he spoke. "I may sleep until morning, then?"

"Indeed. Or longer if you wish. I have all the time in the worlds after all, Ardeth."

"Then I will do. I am in no hurry to die."

"As you should not be. Good night, Medjai."

He smiled a little. "Ma Salaama."

The creature chuckled. "And your god's peace to you as well, Medjai." And with that it turned and walked back out of the room.

Ardeth did not even feel like arguing with the young woman who took his robes, only keeping his sword and knives, pants and boots. She did not seem to think well of him sleeping in his boots but he was determined.

Sleep came with a soft step and stole away this odd dream and dropped him into nothingness.
Imhotep sipped the strong coffee the servants had made for his young guest and smiled a bit knowing the Medjai would need it when he woke. "You may wish I had killed you quickly, Ardeth." He looked over at the warrior still asleep in the now sun covered bed. He was lying on his stomach at the moment, one arm under his head the other hand resting lightly on the hilt of the sword beside him, long dark curls spread out across his neck and half covering his face. He looked younger asleep, with none of the defiance or anger or fear of the night before. Imhotep chuckled to himself, even in the shape the young Medjai was going to be in when he woke he did not doubt that all of that defiance and anger would be back. He could admire such devotion to his cause annoying though it was. The Medjai stirred a bit, hand tightening on his sword hilt and then groaned and started to sit up. Pain and confusion and fear and then memory and despair raced through his thoughts before he could come to grips with any of it. Then the pain won out and he laid back down on the bed with a groan.

"You do not drink often do you, Ardeth?" He kept his tone soft, speaking the language of the Medjai with ease.

"Most merciful Allah, please, have pity on your child." He recited the ritual prayer in the Arabic it had originated in. "Let me wake."

"You are, after a fashion of course. Here." He walked over and handed his guest a cup of the strong coffee. It was some indication of how bad the Medjai must have felt that he only raised himself to one elbow and glared at Imhotep through a tangle of those black curls. He could not help but smile. "Drink this, I will have the healers make you another drought later, then you should soak and drink as much water as your stomach can hold." He held out the coffee again. "Ardeth, if I wanted you dead or worse you would not be waking in bed at almost midday. Drink."

Confusion and distrust in the pain filled dark eyes but finally he sat up a bit more, palling more that a little at the move and took the mug hissing at the heat. But he sipped the bitter drink slowly.

"Good. Denmut, go see if Metheret has the potions I requested done and bring them here. Better still, have them brought to the baths. Can you stand yet, Ardeth?" He chuckled at the dark look the Medjai gave him.

"What does it matter?"

"Well I thought I would leave you a bit of your pride but I can have a few of the other priests carry you." He let his gaze wander over the young man with a smile. "Or I could I suppose."

Ardeth growled a curse and tossed the coffee at him before he had really thought about it. Imhotep caught the hot liquid in mid flight and held it there before taking the cup from the startled Medjai and gathering it out of the air with a grin. It strained his powers to their limit with the control it took but he did not doubt it was all the reminder of what he had once been capable of that the young Medjai would need. Then he backed away and let Ardeth roll to the side of the bed and find his feet shakily. "I suppose I should not let you carry the pot in that temper, should I?" He teased drinking the rest of the coffee in a few swallows and taking the pot from the brazier himself. "Come now, Medjai you want to meet your death and your god in the best shape you can do you not?"

A soft sigh that might have been the name of his god and then he drew himself together as much as he could despite the pain from the hangover Imhotep could feel where he stood. "It is always best, to face death on your feet when you can."
"I think it is best to face death sound asleep myself." He returned. "It is a horrible thing to be awake for."

A bitter smile. "May I go back to sleep, then?"

He chuckled, not missing the wince the sound brought to his guest's face. "After your bath perhaps." He teased. "Can you walk?"

"I will crawl if I must." Ardeth replied with a cold certainty that he found just as amusing as his stubbornness.

"It is good that some things even to your day do not change, Medjai. Come then." And he led his unwilling guest to the baths. He was almost as surprised as he was amused that the man managed to walk on his own, and that he did it without being ill. Smiling at his own odd enjoyment of the Medjai's company even in his present state he sent the acolytes that clustered at the baths away with a quick command. "Relax, Ardeth, soak, I will leave you the coffee. Tahiri will bring you water and clean clothes and Denmut should have Metheret's potions for you soon. It will do you well to drink it all if you can. Then when your stomach calms we can see about some food."

A shaky sigh as the young man sat down. Then he raised his head to stare at Imhotep with unconcealed confusion. "Why do you do this now? When you have told me I am to die soon. What does it matter?"

He smiled just a little. "Ah Medjai, you may not consider yourself entertainment but I find your company an enjoyable change if an annoying one at times. So, for now, you are my guest again, Ardeth. No executions for today, hmm? You are in enough discomfort on your own I think without us adding to it. We shall see about death tomorrow." He smiled at the confusion that changed to something like disbelief and then resignation that filled the young man's thoughts and eyes.

"You are mad."

"Millennia of cursed eternity will do that to you, Medjai." He smiled. "Rest now, warrior. We will talk later. I must see to my god."

Strong fingers reached out and caught his wrist. "I am not a pet, monster. Not yours, not anyone's."

He smiled again. "I have plenty of pets, Medjai. But you are currently my only guest. That might change of course, when your friends go back to sleep. But for now, consider yourself delightfully unique. And simply rest until you feel less unwell. I would like you to eat something at these dinners I keep putting together for you." "Do not presume to do that again, Ardeth. Or you will be lacking the hand that tries."

Undisguised anger and contempt in those expressive eyes and then a nod. "As you say. Are you going to see to your god now, creature or must I wait for my bath a while longer?"

He smirked and then did not even try to stop the smile that he felt building. "What makes you think I do not want to stay and watch, Ardeth?" He let his gaze wander over the young man beside him.

Disbelief then disgust and maybe horror and then a firm grip on the anger that followed and a tension that had to make his already sore head worse. "Go to hell."

He chuckled. "I think not. You are fun tease, Medjai you are definitely that." He smiled. "Rest, bathe, your-- honor is safe enough today, Medjai never fear." He chuckled again. "Rest well."
There was no reply but more of that studied silence. He laughed again and left his quest to himself.

Ardeth lowered his head to his hands as the creature finally left the room. It was all he could do for the moment to sit there and not be ill. And the thought of trying to be sick when he knew he had nothing in his stomach was too much to contemplate. He was not certain his head could stand it. After a long few minutes of simply breathing in the steam filled air he felt better enough to raise his head from his hands. Allah, he prayed once more, let me wake.

Whatever power kept him in this place, it seemed listened to neither his prayer or his God. He shivered at that.

Soft footsteps behind him and he whirled, blade in hand, not even thinking about it.

A surprised cry and a young woman he did not know dropped the jug and basket she was carrying into a tumble. He lowered the knife with a sigh. "My apologies."

She looked at him and then smiled a little and gathered up the things she had dropped. "It is I who was foolish. Never approach a Medjai quietly." She shook her head. "You do not look well, Medjai."

"I do not feel well." He admitted.

"The High Priest of AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, has told us that you are his guest and that we are to be as courteous to you as we are to him. I have brought you cool water to drink, and as close to the clothes I took from you last night as I could find. If you will give me what you are wearing I will have them washed as well."

He blinked again and looked closer at her. "Do I know you?"

She giggled at that. "You were very-- tired when you went to sleep last night, Medjai I do not doubt you have forgotten me. You would not let me take your footwear."

"Ah, forgive me then. I am called Ardeth."

"I am called Tahiri, Medjai." She smiled again. "May I take them now?"

He chuckled, not certain his head liked the feel of that and then pulled off his boots. She laid the clothing she had brought out on the carved bench. Towels or cloths of some sort were laid out beside them. And then she poured a goblet of water and turned back to him. He took it with as courteous smile as he could manage.

"Bathe." She directed with another smile. "Soak. I will find you something to wash your hair with. How do you stand it so long and unbraided in the heat?"

He shrugged. "Practice. Thank you."

She giggled again. "It is my pleasure, Medjai." She headed back into the shadows and he took the opportunity to slip out of his pants and leave them with his boots. His knives and sword he kept in easy reach as he sank thankfully into the hot water. Nib, god of the Nile be thanked for the luxury he directed the thought with a smile. The Nile of all the old gods was the only one he knew most Egyptians still said a prayer to now and again.

The young woman returned, making far more noise this time if still not much and set a bowl beside him on the edge of the tub. "There. I can wash it for you if you like?" She smiled again.
He had no idea how he kept from flushing. "No, thank you."

A sigh but a nod. "Drink." She indicated the goblet. He finished it and then took it from her after she refilled it. "Do you wish me to stay?"

"No. Of course not. I will be fine." This time he was sure he flushed.

She giggled and then got up, leaning over the tub and not in any way trying to conceal what little the very thin sheath of linen she was wearing covered. "As you wish, Medjai." And she headed back into the darkness.

Allah, he thought to himself. Does no one here care in the least for modesty? And that thought brought to mind the dancers last night and he decided that no obviously they did not. What was it the creature had said it was how they had dressed here, then...That brought to mind the way the damned thing had looked at him as he left and Ardeth did his best not to shudder at that. If the creature knew it bothered him it was only likely to get him more trouble than less. He leaned his head back against the edge of the tub and tried not to think. Despair was his enemy now as surely as the creature that called itself his host. And he was so very tired of it already. He closed his eyes, simply letting the torch light play along his closed lids and cleared his mind as best he could considering how much his head hurt. How did the English and the Americans do this so often? No wonder it was forbidden to be drunk. It made you foolish and it made you sick afterward. Odd that when he thought about it a sin that carried its own retribution. He smiled. Allah was merciful but not always forgiving. He drank the water the girl had poured him and then refilled the goblet from the jug she had left.

More unquiet footsteps roused him from the almost meditative state he had managed. He opened his eyes and set the goblet down but did not quite reach for his knife.

"Have you fallen asleep, Medjai?" The young woman asked softly.

"No." He answered as calmly as he could.

"Good. Metheret made this potion for you. You are supposed to drink it." She handed him the goblet.

"Thank you." He did not understand the creature at all. Why take the time to let him heal from his own stupidity when as he recalled it the point of the wine was so he would not be sober for his death. No executions today it had said. What did that mean? Should he expect it tomorrow then? What time was it at the Wadi Natrum, how long until Selim woke him? Could the creature risk that? Letting him wake and escape whatever torture he had planned.

He recalled the rest of the boast however. I have all the time in the worlds after all. And if that was true, then did his death have to come now? He was only human after all and eventually he would fall back to sleep. And what would he find when he did? Another banquet, another day as a guest of the High Priest of AmmunRa, or chains and worse? He shook his head. The creature was mad and he could no more follow its thinking than he could catch the wind. For now, he would heal and do his best to face whatever came with courage. He drank the bitter mixture the young woman had given him and then leaned his head back against the tub and closed his eyes.

It was later or it was not he had lost the track of time somehow when there came a stirring of the wind through the baths. And he knew with certainty that he was no longer alone. "Did you see your god?"

A oddly warm chuckle. "I did. Ammun's blessing to you this fine day, Medjai; are you feeling better?"
He sat up a bit in the still warm water and poured himself another goblet full of water. "Yes." He answered truthfully. He drank that down glad to find that his stomach did not even complain. He gathered the soap from the bowl the girl had left and lathered it through his hair and over himself quickly before using what was left in the jug to pour over his head and rinse it away.

"Good. Good. Then you can join me for the midday meal."

"No, thank you." He kept his mind carefully blank and reached for one of the drying cloths as he stood up.

Silence and then to his surprise another laugh. "You are undoubtedly the most annoying and engrossing guest I have had in this or any other life, Medjai." The creature walked over and then smiled at him and picked up one of the pieces of clothing the girl had left. "Perhaps I should leave you as you are."

He met the monster's eyes with a small nod. "I rather expected you might."

Something that might have been surprise and then another laugh. "Well played, Ardeth. Well played. Dress yourself, Medjai or I will never get the servants to do anything but ogle." He shrugged. "Not that one could blame them of course." He held out the robe he had picked up. Ardeth took it as calmly as he could and slipped it on, pleased to find it was not much different that his own if of lighter fabric and a dark brown not black. There were soft pants of pleats and pleats of linen and sandals in place of his boots but it all fit well enough. He wrapped the sash about him and slid his knives and sword into place.

Imhotep stood leaning against the wall and then smiled. "You might just do yet, Medjai. Come, lunch is waiting."

"And if I do not?"

Another chuckle. "Hm, I could drop you in the middle of the desert and let you starve I suppose. No that is a bit much for rudeness alone. I could have a few dozen of the other priests drag you to the hall and tie you to a chair, but that seems foolish and the have done nothing to warrant the beating you would give them before they overwhelmed you with sheer numbers." He smiled. "Perhaps, I should have you tied to your bed and let the serving girls take turns feeding you, hmm? They would certainly enjoy it and it might teach you some humility."

He found his courage and stepped over. "I would have thought you would threaten to do it yourself."

The creature smiled a bit more. "Tempting, but you would probably be a poor guest and bite me. You are not so likely to bite the girls, I do not think."

He smiled himself and then without letting himself think about it he slid the blade out of his belt and straight up to where the heart should have been.

Utter surprise in those eyes, but the blade stopped none the less just before it would have cut. And no matter how hard he pushed against that invisible force the blade would go no further. The creature smiled, leaning back against the wall and watching him for a long moment in what seemed to be amusement. "You are a poor guest Ardeth. Does this god of yours not expect manners?"

He sighed. "He expects me to keep you dead."

"Well then, your duty is done. Why then not relax and enjoy the day? Are you going to put the blade away or am I going to have to worry you will hurt yourself with it?"
He pulled his hand back and it moved easily enough in that direction so he sheathed the blade back at his waist.

"Very good. Now are you coming to lunch or not? I would hear more about this very unhappy god of yours." The creature moved past him and toward the hall.

Oh Allah, what shall I do now? Divine inspiration seemed as lacking as a way into the waking world so he took one last deep breath and went to explain the word of the Prophet as best he could to a creature already damned.

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Imhotep shook his head and pulled out another papyrus to lay on the table. "Why in the worlds would one want to follow such rules, Ardeth? What is the joy?" He indicated the text he had just unrolled. "AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, guarantees us peace after work, food after labor, bright sun and cool nights. Why would anyone give this up to follow your Prophet? Have men become fools?"

His young guest sighed and then glanced up at the ceiling as if seeking answers there. "I am no Prophet. I am not even a mulahin well versed in answering the questions of those seeking faith. I am only a warrior."

He smiled. "Here." He handed his guest another goblet of karkaday and then rose. "Come, I will do better than try to explain why I do not see the appeal of your god, I will show you." He picked up his own goblet. "Come now, Medjai. Perhaps it will help at least one of us understand."

So much confusion and distrust and yet honest curiosity in his guests’ thoughts. He hid another smile. You are more like your ancestors than you know, Medjai, always seeking answers. He headed out to the balcony not truly surprised when his guest followed after a bit. "What do you see, Medjai?" He gestured out at the temple below, at the fields beyond, and the Nile in the distance.

"Thebes." The young man answered after a moment. "A memory of what was."

He shook his head. "I see eternity." He disagreed. "I see the men and women of generations living the life of the faithful. I see the blessings of the gods on this wondrous land of ours. The Nile gives us life, Medjai, with the flood that makes this gift of green lush life amongst the red chaos of the dunes. AmmunRa traces the path in the sky each day and from his light all things grow. There is food to eat, animals to tend and catch, drowsy afternoons to spend in the shade or in the cool water. There is joy and love and laughter and song. Do you not understand, Ardeth? This is paradise. This is what the gods promised us after death. What the way of Osiris guarantees us all. We wanted no heaven that will save us from the life we know. Only the chance to live it forever whole and well. That is our reward, Ardeth."

Silence from his young guest and then finally a sigh. "It is beautiful. But it is not Paradise, nor real. It is gone to dust."

He sighed himself. "Has it? Truly?" He looked out again at the temple and smiled, shaking his head a bit at his young guest’s odd notions of things when it was so obvious to him that there was ample evidence otherwise. "So long as the faithful walk the halls of the Tuat, Medjai it will never be gone. Welcome to paradise, Ardeth."

"I would rather wake in time for morning prayers all the same."

He shook his head but then chuckled. "As you say. Not doubt your god should be well pleased with
such devotion. However, you have slept well past them already this day in the Egypt that is, so we will hope your god can be forgiving if he is not very fun." He walked back into the cool stone room.

"I will wake eventually will I not?" The panic that ran through the Medjai’s thoughts was obvious even though he gave no sign of it outwardly.

"I am certain you will. You were very tired when you finally fell into sleep, Ardeth. No doubt your fellow Medjai are letting you rest. So I have your company for a while yet." He headed out the door. "Let us go see if the boats are in shall we? There is a cool breeze off the west bank today."

More confusion and disbelief but his young guest followed him none the less. "We are going to the river?"

"We are. I thought to give you a tour of paradise, Ardeth. Do not disappoint me now, Medjai." He chuckled. "Do you like to fish?"

Utter disbelief and then something that might have been amusement before he forced it down. "Not really."

"No? Hunt? We could take a boat and go hunting for ducks and ibis for dinner."

"My skill with a bow could use some work." Ardeth agreed.

He chuckled. "As could mine, no doubt. However, you may not shoot me in the back when I am busy with the hunt, Medjai or I will dunk you in the water."

A chuckle that surprised Ardeth as much as it did him. "I do not understand you, creature."

"Well then we have something in common after all, Medjai. I do not understand you either. Let us find some bows and arrows so that we may see if we are men enough to catch our own meal."

"Most merciful Allah, have pity on your child." Ardeth whispered to himself in Arabic.

"AmmunRa, who hears the prayers of even those of the silent, grant me wisdom." He returned in the old tongue.

Silence and then amusement, but the young man did not chuckle again. "As you say."

He took the loose robe and headdress one of his attendants held out to him as he walked past the door and out to the courtyard. "Did you know Medjai, that it is only a select few who are honored enough to walk the great hall of the temple of AmmunRa." He headed to his right and out amongst the forest of columns. Ardeth was silent for a long moment as they walked between the pillars. "But no doubt your standing in the Egypt that is allows you such prestige here in the Tuat even if you were not my guest."

"It is...wondrous." Ardeth said finally, softly, but his thoughts were filled with something more like awe as they walked through the temple.

"Pharaoh upon Pharaoh has built here. There, see that column? It traces the victory of Tutmoses against the Kushites. And there, that one was carved by the masons of Akhatammun." He gestured at the one to his left. "That was dedicated by Tetshiri in honor of her son's victory and return to Egypt." He paused as the young man walked over to another one.

"I have-- seen what remain of course. I never knew they were all painted so."
"Always." he smiled a bit. "Come, let us see the courtyard, hmm? Have you seen the great obelisks that spear the sky with all their gold and bronze?"

"There is barely stone left, as you know."

"Your world is a dreary place, Medjai." He shook his head and then headed back down the columned walk. The guards at the door saluted and pushed open the huge cedar panels so they could reemerge into the sun. The courtyard was filled with the men and women who lived and worked in the temple. One of the children chasing a cat almost ran into him and he smiled, handing him back to its mother as she ran up nearly falling over herself in apology.

"We shall let him train with the priests of Bastet when he grows some perhaps if he is so fond of cats." He waved aside the apology.

Her eyes were wide but she smiled back shyly and then bowed and turned back to the others. He gestured a few to their feet, feeling the Medjai's confusion grow even more as they passed amongst the palms. "The obelisks of Hatchepsut." He pointed them out on either side of the courtyard. "Some days they reflect the rays of Ammun so brightly they can be seen at the funeral temples across the river." He looked back at his guest and smiled. "Overwhelming at first, is it not? It is the wonder of our world, Medjai. Come, the boats are in I am certain." He led his silent guest out past the great temple gates and along the long ramp of ram-headed sphinxes that guarded the way to and from the temple. "Thebes." He announced with a wave of his hand.

Ardeth walked up to stand beside him on the main rise of the ramp before it sloped down to the Nile. More silence and then quietly. "City of the gods."

"As it was, as it shall always be." He agreed. "Let us go and see what wonders today's boats have brought us. Perhaps we shall have new entertainment for tonight's feast."

"I am not fighting a lion." The Medjai said firmly.

He laughed. "Even if I leave you your sword this time?"

"No."

"Your fight with the crocodile certainly impressed Nefshen. I thought she was going to dance on your lap if you let her."

Embarrassment and then amusement and a resigned acceptance of the unreality of the day not unlike the way the wine had made him the night before. "She was pretty."

"She is indeed." He agreed. "If you defeat the lion you will very likely find her in your bed."

More embarrassment then a fleeting thought of that being the preferable option all things considered and more disbelief. "No lions."

He smiled, almost adding something teasing about understanding very well Nefshen wanting to be in the Medjai's bed. His guest was handsome and intriguing if damned annoying, although in some odd way that very annoyance was part of what intrigued him so. "No lions, Ardeth." He could not keep himself from rolling the young man's name. It got him another amused sigh so he smiled. "Have you another name you would prefer I call you, Medjai?"

Surprise and then a shrug. "I have only the one."

"I do not suppose I could convince you to call me something less rude could I?"
Silence for a moment. "He who shall not be named will get long to say after a while."

He laughed. "It would indeed." He looked over at his guest with a smile. "Is my name forbidden or some such?"

"It has been for generations."

"Really? How odd. Struck from the records to prevent anyone remembering it I could understand. That would have been an obvious part of the curse, but if everyone knows of it so they know not to say it, then I am as remembered as anyone so that undoes the purpose. I told you I did not understand you, Medjai."

"Nor I you." Ardeth returned.

"We shall have to debate that one later I think." He decided and then smiled. "The gods have given us a fine day, Atnutamun!" He called out to the chief steward of the piers.

"Great are all the days the gods grant us, Imhotep. Blessed be the High Priest of AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt." The other man returned and bowed his head a bit.

"Indeed they are. I am having another feast tonight, Atnutamun, so find me something enjoyable."

"As always." The man looked curiously at Ardeth. "Greetings on this fine day, Medjai."

"And to you." Ardeth replied in the same ancient language his accent just a bit off.

"What brings the High Priest of AmmunRa and the Medjai to me on this day?" The large man looked from one to another, concern and confusion in his eyes.

"I need a small boat. My-- guest and I are going to go see if we can find a duck or two." He shrugged.

"Ah, good. I thought perhaps Pharaoh was coming to visit. Great is the glory of Pharaoh Imhotep, but his boat is too big for my dock."

He laughed and clasped the man's shoulder in sympathy. "We shall have you a larger dock built then, Atnutamun."

"Truly?" He led them over to a group of young men who were coiling ropes up for the boat beside them. "Senmut will take you hunting, Imhotep. He is a good captain, and he knows the marshes well."

"Good." Imhotep agreed. "Are there bows on board?"

"Always." The young captain answered bowing low. "My ship is honored by your presence High Priest of AmmunRa."

"It will be honored perhaps if we manage to catch anything." He returned, gesturing the young man to rise. "Are you ready to try, Ardeth?"

The young man nodded with that same odd resignation to the unreality of the day. "It will be good to try."

He let the young man proceed him onto the boat and then caught his gaze. "No arrows in my back, Medjai." He switched to the language of the follows of Allah.
"Would it do me any good?"

"It will get you dunked." He reminded him with a smile. "And you have already bathed today."

A sigh. "As you say. I will aim no arrows at your back."

"Good, it is tiresome." He paused. "No arrows at my back? Does that mean I should concern myself with you aiming instead at my head or my front?"

"What is life without chance?" Ardeth returned with a smile.

He turned to look at his guest, trying to hide a smile and look disapproving. He doubted he was successful however because Ardeth looked almost as amused as he felt. "Just remember then that I gave you fair warning of the consequences when I throw you in the river." He paused again. "Can you swim?"

A smile. "No."

He chuckled. "Then I shall have to be careful with your dunking. That would be two feasts in your honor you have not eaten. The cooks will think you are slighting them."

"Shall I take the fact that you are feeding me tonight as indication that I am not likely to die soon after?" He took one of the bows and fitted an arrow into the string, sighting down the shaft at the reeds beside the boat.

Imhotep picked up one himself. "You may if it will let you enjoy dinner." He gave an answer that was not one, then at the wave of distrust and flash of despair he smiled. "And you may if it does not let you enjoy dinner. You are my guest, Ardeth for this day, for the night to follow. We will as I said earlier, worry about death tomorrow."

"Then let us see if we can catch something for the cooks to prepare." Ardeth scanned the rushes as the boat slid through them and then loosed the arrow he had ready, startling a small flock of ducks, but not hitting a target. Imhotep let lose his own and missed the ones in flight as well. Ardeth looked at him in surprise.

"Why are you so surprised, Ardeth? If I cheat and simply slam then all to the deck of the boat it is not much sport." He replied to the unvoiced question. "Do not expect me to do all the work, Medjai."

Another silent prayer to his god for understanding was Ardeth's only reply but he pulled the arrow line back in and checked the fletching before setting it to dry and notching another one. Imhotep followed suit. His skill with the bow was not as good as he would have liked, but apparently his young guest had grown accustomed to more modern weapons because his was not either. Finally, at last, they came upon another flock and he gave thanks to Ammun as he finally caught one of the ibis full through the breast and pulled the bird to the deck. It took only a slight twist of power to snap the foul's neck and he smiled at his guest. "Dinner?"

"Perhaps." Ardeth agreed. "But it is only one."

"Better than I see you catching, Medjai." He had to tease.

"It would be rude to upstage my host would it not?"

He chuckled. "Now you are worried about being a good guest? I should have taken you duck hunting yesterday."
"Yesterday you terrified my friends, had me fight a crocodile to the death, threatened to have me whipped at best and tortured and cursed for eternity at worst. You expected manners?"

He could not help but laugh. "I did not actually cause you any harm thought did I?" He asked finally.

"No, although a good host would have not let me drink so much."

"I am your host, Medjai not your keeper. I thought you said you were not a pet after all."

Ardeth sighed. "So I did. Should I be thankful I am alive and well, then?"

"Is it not something to be thankful for?" He returned with a small smile. "Things could always be so much worse."

"As you say. Thanks be to God then that I am alive and well. But I would be infinitely thankful if I could wake up as well."

He chuckled. "Catch yourself some dinner instead."

"And slight your cooks by not eating whatever extravagant meal they are preparing as we speak?"

He set another arrow into place on his bowstring. "Then we shall have a worked hard enough to have an appetite worthy of it." He decided and watched the reeds as they went by. One disturbed Hippopotamus snapped its huge jaws in annoyance at their boat and sank back beneath the water.

"I do have one question." Ardeth aimed his bow at the rushes just ahead.

"And what might that be?"

"Can you swim?"

It should have been a warning, but he was intent on watching the reeds and then the man beside him barreled into him and they both crashed over the railing and into the water. He growled out the Medjai's name as he surfaced, kicking free of the half-grip the young man had him in with a snarl. Panic gripped the young man's thoughts, then fear and then courage and the strong hands gripped his throat.

"Enough." He growled again, loosening the fingers and slamming the young man back into the water with a thought.

Ardeth choked, flailing at the water with a strangled cry of his own and Imhotep recalled that the fool could not swim. He drew his meager powers to him and using all the strength he could muster with them tossed both Ardeth and himself back onto the startled Senmut's boat. "You are the most annoying bastard of jackals, Medjai." He stalked over to the young man sitting on the deck. "Drowning is not a pleasant death either you know."

"When...you...consider...my choices...It did not...seem that bad at all." Ardeth coughed out the reply.

He shook his head. "Take us home, Senmut, My guest's sense of humor will be the death of someone yet."

"As you say, High Priest of AmmunRa. Are you well?"

"Wet." He shrugged. "I can swim." He smiled and crouched down in front of his erstwhile guest. "You will need more new clothes."
Confusion and distrust but then a sigh. "As you say."

"You are the most damnable guest, Medjai. Are you well?"

"Does it matter?"

"Foolish child." He smiled again just because it seemed to confuse the Medjai even more and patted him on the head. "You might do well to find yourself a keeper after all." And he took the cloth one of Senmut's sailors brought to him and moved to the prow of the small boat to dry off. When he finished he tossed the cloth to Ardeth. "Your weapons at least would benefit."

The young man got to his feet with a sigh and Imhotep had to chuckle just a little at the bedraggled look the Medjai gave him. Then he smiled a bit more as the sun caught the now almost transparent linen that clung to his guest. It was worth the dunking just to watch the play of wet fabric and muscles. He made no attempt to disguise his gaze enjoying his young guest's sudden flush as it registered just what prompted Imhotep's smile.

"Allah will get tired of your whining Medjai. I am only admiring what he has gifted you with after all." He teased. "You have no one to blame for the state of your clothing but yourself."

"Go to hell." Ardeth muttered, moving to sit at the boat's rail and dry off his daggers and sword.

"No thank you. I am enjoying paradise far to much at the moment." He returned. "You may relax, Ardeth, truly. I have given you my hospitality for the day and the night to follow. Even this will not make me revoke it. It—surprisingly enough has gifted me with something to enjoy." He shook his head and then went over to the captain of the small boat and left his guest be. The Medjai did as he suggested drying his weapons and then placing the back at his waist. As if they would aid him any. It was easy enough to realize his guest truly expected to be killed, had indeed expected it as a result of his foolishness, and was both relieved and completely confused by Imhotep's lack of retribution. You are far more entertainment than you think, Medjai. He smiled to himself, more than a little amused at the man's discomfort at being so unhidden from his gaze. It was obvious the game of regard was annoying his guest quite a bit and he was enjoying have the leader of the Medjai so very discomforted by something so simple.

You do not know what to make of my hospitality do you, Medjai? Am I sincere or only toying with you as a cat might with a mouse? You are so very certain of your impending doom that you are almost tempted to see if taking one of those daggers of yours and slitting your own throat will free you from Thebes. Ah, but then you would be damned and I would still be free. Truly, Ardeth Bey, you are as stubborn as your tribes have ever been.

He chuckled and walked back to his guest as Senmut docked the small boat. "Are you coming, Medjai?"

"Would you leave me here if I said no?" Ardeth returned with what almost passed for calmness.

He only smiled. "No."

"Then why ask?"

"To see if I needed to drag you behind me like the spoiled child you are behaving like or not. Gods, but the young O'Connell brat was almost this annoying and he, at least, was useful. You did not even catch us anything to eat."

Ardeth did not respond to that and they walked back to the temple in silence.
"We shall see if Tahiri has your clothes cleaned and dried yet so you will at least have something decent to wear to dinner." He suggested with a smile, just to tease the young man some more.

Ardeth took a deep breath, considering and rejecting several responses that would only add to their animosity and then spoke. "As you say." He offered finally, carefully giving neither support or argument.

Imhotep chuckled. "Ardeth, you can not run me through; you have tried. I have already told you that I am not going to go to hell no matter how often you invite me and, yes, I certainly would not mind if you wore exactly what you have on-- wet or otherwise. However, it is a feast in your honor, Medjai. Try to seem appreciative. I am certain the cooks have worked very hard on the meal."

"I am not hungry."

"Swallowing half the Nile might take away anyone's apetite; you will feel differently when you smell dinner, certainly. You have eaten little since you arrival." He shrugged, but did not give the young man and excuse not to come to diner.

"Forgive me if I do not have your calmness toward my impending death, creature. It is a new way of living for me."

"So I imagine. I will send Tahiri with something for you to change into." He smiled a bit and opened the door to the room Ardeth had come to accept as his in Thebes. "I will come collect you for dinner in an hour or so." And he met his guest's eyes without much humor, wanting to be certain he understood it was not open to question. "Do not disappoint me, Ardeth or I will tie you to that bed and have the girls feed you the meal and we can have the entertainment here. Not that watching that alone would not entertain me." He added just to tease and when Ardeth could not think of a response only left and closed the door behind him.

Imhotep was pleased to find that his young guest had indeed dressed for dinner. Tahiri had found him another set of robes and pants, this one in a dark blue with braided ocher and burgundy trim. He was reasonably certain it belonged to one of the Medjai's ancestors who no doubt stood with Pharaoh at this moment. "Kind of you to be ready."

"I was not given much alternative." Ardeth pointed out calmly.

"True. Dinner is ready and I am certain Nefshen is looking forward to dancing for you again." He gestured the young man out into the hall.

"There are worse entertainments." The Medjai returned.

"Oh there are indeed." They reached the banquet hall just as the guards pulled open the carved cedar doors and the musicians began. Imhotep smiled to himself. He had not been High Priest for years without learning a great deal of staging and timing. "Enjoy your feast, Medjai. The cooks have outdone themselves."

Silence and then a resigned sigh. "As you say."

He walked over the table and poured himself a glass of wine. "Karkaday instead, Medjai?" He raised his glass in question.

"Tea if you have it." The young man returned with a small smile.
"Indeed?" He caught one of the acolytes gaze and sent the youth off in search of his guest's drink. Ardeth stopped at the end of the table and looked over the great amount of food laid out. "Anything in particular that is missing of course simply let us know. I am afraid you will have to explain the rules of your god about what is edible and not to me a few more times." He picked up one of the alabaster plates, inlaid with onyx and gold and handed it to this quest. "Take what you will and join me." He did not make it a question; only took the plate Shusha had already ready for him and went to sit on the dias and wait on his guest. It was not a long wait. Ardeth took the chair beside him with a sigh and then placed his plate on the small table beside it. The dancing had only started when the young man glanced behind him with something like confusion. "Ardeth?"

"Is it not late for the children to be playing?"

"Children?" He looked behind him as well toward the curtained balcony not hearing anything that indicated children playing. Then he smiled, oddly sad the visit was at an end. "How is it you say it, Ma Salaama, Medjai?"

"What?" The man turned back to him and then vanished as the children he had heard playing in the waking world finally drew him from his sleep.

"You never did eat." Imhotep sighed to himself. "I can wait, Medjai. I can wait." He had learned the patience of the sands themselves when there was no other choice.

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"Thanks be to God." Ardeth repeated for the fifth time since he had woken. He was rather certain he had frightened Gamal's young daughters with the hug he had given them both for waking him with their laughter. "Selim!"

"I was just coming to wake you, Ardeth." Arebe said walking over.

He was not really thinking but he picked his friend up and slammed him against the trunk of the nearest palm. "Why in the name of Allah did you not wake me for morning prayers?"

Arebe blinked, startled and then swallowed and pushed his way out of Ardeth's grip. "You were exhausted. Allah alone knows when you will rest again. And you have a long ride ahead of you tonight. Selim thought it best." His friend added as an afterthought. "He can explain it to you." A small smile. "Allah is merciful Ardeth. He will forgive you missing prayer for once."

"Arebe, if you had any idea of how much I wish it were so simple. Where is Selim? I need to speak to him."

"We were going to have lunch."

He realized then how hungry he was. "I never did get to eat." He smiled just a bit, not certain of the humor.

"What? You were too tired to eat last night, Ardeth."

"So I was." He agreed. "Come. Let us find the others." He walked over to the fire where the other Medjai were gathered. "Selim, Gamal, Pasha, I have unhappy news."

They glanced at each other. "We have news as well. Sit, eat, you will need your strength." Selim handed him a plate.

He blinked a little startled at the sudden flash of memory or dream and sat down heavily. "Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." He whispered to himself.
"What is it that makes you ask most merciful Allah for his blessing, Ardeth?" Selim asked worriedly.

"Dreams-- and portents of worse. When do the O'Connell's arrive then?"

They looked at each other again and Pasha coughed once. "Did you dream of them?"

He found a smile with little humor. "Of many things. Let me start at the beginning and you can all tell me whether or not I am mad." And he began with that.

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"O'Connell Effendi, Sitt O'Connell!" The man's voice boomed out across the dock. "Friends of my friends, welcome to Egypt." He hurried over and took several of the bags from Rick's startled hands. "Imshee!" He hissed at the children and others who crowded about asking for work or baksheesh or candy. The scattered into the crowd like dust motes. "Come, please, we must get to the train."

"I'm not going anywhere with you. I don't know who the hell you are." Rick growled finally.

"A thousand pardons O'Connell Effendi I am Sallah, assistant curator of the museum of antiquities of Alexandria, most humble servant of Allah." He met Rick's eyes suddenly and all traces of the fool vanished. "We are all warriors of god are we not, O'Connell?"

He found a smile. "Any friend of Ardeth's."

An answering grin. "As you say. We could all do with worse friends than Ardeth Bay. Come, Sitt O'Connell; Alex is it? It is too hot here and you do not look like you had a pleasant trip."

"I'm going to fall down asleep." Alex announced. "Can't we rest, dad?"

"Not yet, Alex. Coffee Sallah, lots of it and as strong as it can be."

Sallah blinked in surprise but nodded, snagged one of the many gunwaris about and barked an order. The man vanished into the crowd but by the time they got their luggage on a car there was cups of coffee for them all.

O'Connell put one arm around his wife as she slipped into the seat beside him. Alex was next to her drinking the bitter coffee with a grimace. "How long is it to Cairo, Sallah?"

"Three hours, In'sh'allah." He answered, heading toward the train station. "It is more likely to be four."

"I don't think even this coffee will work that long, Rick. We've been up for over a full day with what an hour of sleep. If you call that sleep." Evie sighed.

"I know. Just hold on now. Sallah, listen to me. Dammit, this is important."

"So is arriving at the train in one piece." He replied swerving about an old woman and her water buffalo.

"Please." The man sounded too tired to even argue.

"I am listening, O'Connell." Something was happening and Allah help him once again he was in the middle of it.

"If we doze off. Wake us in an hour. One hour, understand? Not any more. No matter what."
"Why? You are clearly..."

A hard hand gripped his shoulder. "One hour!"

His wife's hand took its place. "Please, Sallah, our souls are in your hands."

He did not doubt the odd certainty of her voice.

"One hour only," he agreed. "Come, now we will get on the train. Then you will tell me why you can not sleep."

Evelyn O'Connell glanced at her husband and then sighed, her son's hand clutched in hers. "Imhotep."

It was, Allah have mercy, the answer he had both expected and dreaded. "Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim."

"If were really lucky." Rick O'Connell replied. "Come on., let's get started for Cairo."

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Imhotep smiled as the child excused himself for the tenth time as he tried to work his way through the dancers and up to the dias. "Hello Alex, welcome back to Thebes."

"Looks like I just left. Except there isn't the crocodile of course, or Uncle Ardeth. Is he okay?"

"Your uncle or the crocodile?" He returned with a smile. "Have faith in his skill young Alex. He won."

"Well that's good." He glanced around. "Where is he, then?"

"We are waiting on your parents once again, I am afraid." He did not answer the boy's question. Let his parents wonder. "Are you hungry?"

"Yes thank you. Breakfast was hours ago and I didn't have lunch. I'd've fallen asleep in my soup and I haven't done that since I was a kid."

"I see." He smiled again. "Well there is certainly plenty to be had." He escorted his newest guest over the banquet and offered him a plate with a smile.

"Wow!" The child looked a bit uncertain of some of the choices but helped himself to many more.

"Would you care for a drink? Water? Karkaday? Wine? Tea?" He smiled to himself at the last. The cook who had brought the tea for Ardeth earlier had been more than slightly unhappy with finding him gone.

"Mum and dad don't let me have wine." The boy replied with a roll of his eyes. "So I guess karkaday would be good."

"Fine." He poured a goblet and followed the young man back to the dias. "You may sit in your mother's chair until she arrives, if you wish." He indicated the one beside his.

"That would be rude, wouldn't it?" The child asked and moved over to the one to the far side of it.

He raised one eyebrow but then had another added to the right of that one. "You were hungry." He observed as the boy began eating.
"Mum and Dad can take forever to get anywhere. It's best not to wait dinner on them." Alex explained.

"I see." He smiled a bit more. "Well for once it seems they are on time." He held up a hand and the dancers moved to the sides of the room. There was a blast from the trumpet one of the guards at the door held and the carved wooden panels were pulled open again.

Evelyn O'Connell and her husband stood in the doorway for a moment and then she nodded to the guard beside her and walked forwards. "Imhotep."

"Nefertiri." He smiled back. "O'Connell. Come join us, your son and I were enjoying dinner."

"Hi mum. Hi dad."

"Are you alright, tiger?" O'Connell asked in Arabic.

"Fine dad. It's good food."

"Really?" He looked at Imhotep with barely concealed hatred. "I see we're dinner guests again."

"Indeed. Help yourselves, certainly. Your son tells me you have not had lunch." He smiled and indicated the banquet table.

Servants approached them both with plates obviously uncertain how to treat the oddly dressed Princess or her guard. "Drinks? You do not follow Allah do you? There is wine, beer, water of course, karkaday or tea?"

They glanced at each other and then with far more hesitation than Alex had shown found something on the table to eat and a goblet of karkaday each. He waited until they were both seated, amused when after another exchanged look it was O'Connell who was sitting next to him and Evelyn had the far seat. He could admire the tactic of keeping the boy between them and O'Connell's courage at taking the closest seat. He could have always stood beside his wife again.

"You look quite exhausted, O'Connell. Odd as that sounds considering you are already asleep."

A shrug. "Long trip."

He chuckled. "So I imagine. I did not care at all for crossing the Mediterranean myself." He let Shusha refill his goblet. "I am certain the cooks shall be glad you will have a chance to eat this time."

"Can't say I'm sorry we missed it last time." The man returned with a cold smile. "Better floorshow this time though."

He chuckled at that. "Do you wish to try your skill and luck? We have no shortage of crocodiles."

"Nah." Another shrug that did a good job of covering the momentary panic. The man had courage and bravery both. Whatever else he thought of Nefertiri, she had well chosen guards.

"I can not say I blame you. And you, Alex?" He asked, simply to see their reactions.

The boy choked on the sip of karkaday he had just taken and Evelyn reached over to tap him on the back. O'Connell's eyes went to a cold blue. "Go to hell."

"What is this fondness all of you have for hell?" He shook his head. "Ardeth said the same thing to me often enough."

"Imagine that." O'Connell's voice was calm enough, but it was so easy to read the concern in his
thoughts for his friend.

"That and prayers to his god of course. Allah does not seem to listen to his followers much, does he?" He sipped the wine with a smile. Sometimes the best lies were in how you told the truth.

"I wouldn't be the one to ask. Why don't you ask, Ardeth?"

He chuckled. "That would be-- problematic, at the moment. He is-- how shall we say it, not available to answer right now."

"Why not?" Cold hatred with not even an attempt to control it.

He glanced at the boy beside his father and then leaned over and whispered into O'Connell's ear. "I took out his tongue of course."

Silence but the anger and despair that washed through the young American was gratifying in a way. So the man was as concerned for Ardeth's as his actions had let Imhotep to believe. It was always good to know what leverage one had in case he should have to use it.

"I'll see you dead again for that." O'Connell promised softly.

"As you say." He smiled again.

"Rick?" Evelyn O'Connell's voice was only slightly uncertain. Her thoughts far more frightened but she kept the fear under a firm hand. He sipped his wine again, watching the look that passed between them.

"Where is he, priest?" Nefertiri asked after a long moment her voice cool and the ancient Egyptian flawless.

He smiled. "And spoil dinner with the unpleasant details? Really princess, there are children present."

"Is something wrong, mum? Dad?" Alex glanced between them. "I mean besides the obvious of course."

Imhotep chuckled again wondering what his parents response would be.

"Nothing that we can't fix." His father replied.

"Where is Uncle Ardeth?" Alex asked him, in Egyptian, and the boy's honest worry and fear were obvious despite his attempt to be brave.

"Unable to join us I am afraid." He offered in honest reply. "You should take a lesson from your parents' misfortunes, Alex. Be very certain of what you are invoking before you speak." He smiled at Evelyn. "Tell me, Princess, do you still have the Book of the Dead?"

"Why? Do you need it?" She replied with one arched eyebrow.

"Me? Hardly." He gave a passing thought to that and Anck-su-namun but then shook his head. "But, with all this concern for your missing guard, I thought it might be helpful." He sat back and took another drink of his wine.

Silence as they each came to their own conclusion about that.

"Where is he, bastard?" O'Connell growled out after a moment, the anger almost masking the sadness. Alex blinked against his own tears and even Nefertiri's eyes were bright and full of loss.
He shrugged and then asked O'Connell the same question he'd asked Ardeth the night before. "Do you know, O'Connell, what the Hom-Dai involves?"

O'Connell closed his eyes and Evelyn prayed silently to both the god of the Christians and then to Osiris and Anubis.

"Shall we see if you can summon him yet?" He asked the princess with a smile that he knew held no warmth. "He might not have finished dying of course. But it is worth a try I suppose."

"You son of a bitch."

He gripped O'Connell's throat in one hand using more power than brute strength. "You are overstepping my hospitality, O'Connell, and unlike my previous guest I do not find it as amusing. He knew the price he would pay for ruining my banquet and keeping you safe. I made certain of it. So unless you want to join him you will sit down and mind your manners. Do you understand?"

O'Connell gripped his wrist in both hands and he let the man go with a smile. "Do you understand?"

He repeated.

"Yes."

"Good. You are almost as-- entertaining as your brother. He certainly did not care for the idea either." He chuckled. "I do hope that unhappy god of his is as forgiving as Ardeth thought he would be about the wine. It is certainly not the sort of thing one wants to face sober if you can avoid it."

Alex asked his mother a soft question in English the only part of which Imhotep could grasp was the curse he had suffered.

Nefertiri closed her eyes and then just took her son's hands in hers. "It's a-- type of punishment that they used in ancient Egypt, Alex."

"Oh." More sadness now, and another soft few words in that damnable English that he could not follow. He felt a brief moment of sympathy for the boy. Who truly had no fault in this except to be the son of two people Imhotep truly loathed.

"Now you have gone and ruined the banquet." Imhotep sighed. "How are even the most accomplished dancers supposed to entertain us with this much despair? Hmm?" He shook his head again. "And I doubt you will eat anything else either. My cooks are going to wonder why they bother. Come then, Princess, I will show you to your rooms." He got to his feet and offered the very surprised Nefertiri his hand.

"Like hell." O'Connell stepped between him and his wife. "Keep your hands off my wife."

He rolled his eyes and then chuckled. "Asking manners of Medjai seems to be as futile as wishing for rain in the desert. What is a host to do with you? Very well, O'Connell, you may bring your family this way then."

Silence and then a mutter in English he took to be a curse.

Almost as entertaining as teasing your brother, warrior. Almost as entertaining. He thought to himself. They were almost to their room when O'Connell stopped suddenly. He turned, more than expecting some sort of attack but the man only blinked in surprise and then vanished followed a moment later by his wife. Alex looked at where his parents had been and then waved and vanished as well.

"I have the worst mannered guests." Imhotep smiled to himself and then laughed.
"God," Rick muttered to himself shaking his head again. "Thanks Sallah."

"It is little enough to have done, O'Connell. So, does He who shall not be named still haunt your dreams?"

"That's one way of putting it. Makes a great boogeyman."

"He didn't really kill uncle Ardeth did he dad?" Alex asked suddenly as he shook off his mother's hands.

Sallah looked at them all in shock at that. "Allah forbid."

"We can hope." Rick returned. "I don't know, sport. I don't know. I'd like to think not. I mean it's only a dream right? So even if-- it happened, then, it wouldn't be real, right?" He looked at Evie hoping somehow that she had more answers than he did.

"I don't know, Rick. I've never even heard of a rumor of a myth that explains this whole mess."

He sighed. "Damn."

"Did the creature tell you that Ardeth Bay was dead?" Sallah asked harshly.

"He asked dad about some type of ancient Egyptian punishment, right mom? What's it mean really I mean? Hum-Dahi?"

Sallah paled and then began to mutter curses and prayers in Arabic.

"That's bad, right?" Alex asked.

"Yes, luv, that's bad." Evelyn O'Connell hugged her son. "But like your father said, I'm not really certain it's possible. One, I don't know that it would...um...translate into the waking world here. And I don't know that the creature has the-- right to invoke it even if it does. It is a curse after all."

"Hell, Evie, even it is just a way to kill someone it's hellish." Rick muttered.

"I know. I know." She hugged Alex again and Rick didn't think about it before he moved over and hugged them both. "Now what?"

"Can you get us some more coffee, Sallah? And how do we send word to ask the others about Ardeth anyway?"

"I have sent word that we will be arriving in Cairo in..." he opened his pocket watch. "Two hours or so now. Then we can send word with those who meet us at the station. I am uncertain as to where Ardeth would be right now. He was at Ahm Shere when Selim asked me to meet your boat."

He could feel Evie shiver under his arm.

"Great. Okay. Will you have us a car in Cairo? I want to get to the airfield as soon as possible."

"Airfield?" Sallah asked.

"First we're going to Hamanaptura." Rick said coldly. "Evie needs to get a book and I need a
weapon if I can find it. Then were going back to Ahm Shere."

"Allah have mercy, O'Connell. You could not find two more accursed spots in all of Egypt. And all the Medjai have been watching for signs of the creature at either place and we have seen nothing."

"Then we'll dig him up and send him straight back to hell all over again." Rick promised. He rubbed absently at the tattoo on his wrist and closed his eyes. I promise you that, buddy. God I'm sorry, Ardeth.

Sallah sighed but then nodded once finally. "In'sh'allah."

"If He isn't willing to help, I'll do it alone." Rick growled. "Coffee Sallah?"

"Yes, of course." The man left with a sad sigh.

"Maybe he's not really dead?" Alex asked after a moment.

"Maybe not luv," Evie answered, but she didn't sound hopeful. Rick didn't feel very hopeful about it himself.

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Izzy wasn't happy with going to Hamanaptura, and he was even more unhappy with the idea of going back to Ahm Shere but Rick was in even less of a mood to be polite than he'd been the last time he'd hired his friend's services. And it wasn't like the money was a problem.

Izzy had done well for himself with the share of the wealth he'd managed to finally weasel out of Jonathan. The plane was relatively new and well maintained. It didn't take long for them to get it fueled and be in the air. Alex was beginning to doze off again and Evie was working intently on translating something she wanted to have ready at Hamanaptura, just in case. Rick looked over at Sallah and then gestured the other man over. "Alex is about to nod off. I'm going to try and join him just to be safe. One hour, Sallah."

"As you say, O'Connell. Allah grant you a peaceful dream this time."

"I can always hope, right?" He got up and then went over to hug his wife. "I don't think Alex is going to be able to stay awake, sweetheart. Can you manage if I doze off with him for just a bit? Sallah will wake us."

"Of course. I could too."

"No. We need that." he indicated her translation "And I'm not going to be any help with it. I'll try to keep Alex out of trouble you find us a way to kill it okay?"

She smiled tiredly. "Okay." And then she kissed him. "I love you."

"I love you too, Evie." He kissed her back, pulling her close for a long moment.

"Oh please," Alex muttered. "I gotta stay awake for this?"

Rick chuckled and released his wife. "Come on tiger, let's catch another nap and see if we can manage to avoid the boogeyman this time, huh?"

"'Kay." Alex didn't object to Rick sitting down and hugging him close. He leaned down and whispered into his son's hair.
"If we do see the bastard you just run like hell okay?"

"Okay dad." Alex agreed with a smile. "What are you going to do?"

"Run like hell the other way?" He tousled his son's hair. "Sleep tiger."

"'Kay. I won't tell mom you keep saying all those words we’re not supposed to either."

Rick smiled, because Alex was right his vocabulary always got worse when he was exhausted. “Thanks sport.” And it was so damned easy to fall asleep.

For a moment he'd thought he'd woken up but the room he was in was definitely not Izzy's airplane. It was a dark hallway only somewhat reminiscent of the bright sunlit ones he'd seen in Thebes. Then again it was dark now the high slitted window openings revealing only stars. He looked around for Alex, but at the moment there was no sign of his son. He took a torch out of one of the wall scones he passed and pulled his pistol with the other. It might not do him any good against Imhotep, but it might help against some of the guards he'd seen. Then again, they might not be any more human than the dead priest. He wasn't certain how that sort of thing worked here. He walked along the hall for a bit, finally coming to a set of steps cut into one wall that led down. Even less certain, he followed them. They reminded him more of some of the rock cut tomb steps he'd seen than anything else. Now there's a pleasant thought. Just keep it up, Rick, and you'll be jumping at shadows. Then again, the shadows here just might jump back.

The stairs ended in another smaller hall that was even less well lit, without the star-filled windows. Two torches burned at either side of the end of the stairs and two more burned at the end of the hallway and another door. He walked over it and then not having a better idea pushed it open as quietly as he could. To his surprise it swung inward easily enough. What, I don't have to have the magic key? He smiled and remembered that he did. He'd pocketed both magic keys when they’d left Cairo just in case he needed either of them in Hamanaptura. Evie'd need one at least for the book of Ammun Ra. He took a deep breath and pushed down the pain that came with the thought that even if he'd been tempted to use the Book of the Dead as Alex and Jonathan had done for Evie, they didn't have that one either. Then again, if they had to go dig the creature up at Ahm Shere, maybe they could find the book too. Around here one never knew.

The room he found himself in was pitch black at first, and it smelled awful. He stepped forward, carefully, not sure what to make of the odd sounds he couldn't identify. The torch light played about the room and he realized, suddenly, he'd seen something like it before at Hamanaptura. The fancy name Evie had given it escaped him but he could recall Jonathan translation easily enough. 'Mummies, my good son, It's where they made the mummies.'

That made a certain amount of sense, he thought. This is supposed to be the great temple, right? He edged deeper into the room lighting a brazier he found finally with the torch.

Well, it certainly wasn't as nice as the rest of Thebes. Stone tables and odd half inclined slabs with straps and things. He touched one uncertainly finding the leather damp with what was probably blood.

He searched the room again only then seeing the far doorway. Swallowing hard, he headed through it. What you think it's going to be like Dracula or something, Rick? Gotta go back and sleep in the coffin? Sheesh, get your horror stories right, O'Connell. The black humor helped a little. But then there it was just like he'd expected it, a huge black sarcophagus. He edged forward again. Then he backed away a step realizing that the sounds he still couldn't identify were coming from in front of him...right in front of him...
"Oh God. Oh God. Oh..." He blinked at the sudden tears and jammed his torch into the ground. "Damn it...okay. Okay, I can do this. I can at least do this. I'm so sorry..." He put his gun away and got out the key he needed, not really surprised that it fit the lock. He turned it, then stepped back just a bit. If he got himself covered in the damned things, he wasn't going to be able to do this last favor for his best friend. He drew his gun again and then turned the key that last bit. The lid opened just a crack and the sounds got worse. Trying hard not to be sick, he kicked the lid aside a bit more, raised the pistol in his hand and didn't even let himself look. He only aimed at where the head would be just inside the coffin and...

"O'Connell!" The voice called out sharply and strong hands gripped his shoulders shaking him once. He blinked, trying to keep his grip on his gun and then realized he was back on the plane. Awake. And Sallah was standing over him shaking him.

"Damn it Just one more second you son of a bitch...oh God..."

"Rick?" Evie's voice was worried now. "Are you okay?"

"No..." He swallowed hard and pulled away from Sallah's hands. "You okay Alex?"

"Yeah. I didn't even dream I don't think. Were you back in Thebes dad? Are you okay?"

"Im fine. I don't know. Maybe.." He shuddered.

"We are landing." Sallah answered. "Come now, Alex, let us go see if Izzy will let us help, hmm?"

"Yeah, yeah, leave them alone to talk. I know the drill." Alex got up. "You sure you're okay, dad?"

"Yeah Alex." He found a smile and nodded at Sallah in thanks. The two headed into the cockpit. Evie sat down beside him and took his hands. He just wrapped his arms around her and held on for a moment.

"Were you in Thebes?" She asked finally.

"I guess so..." He swallowed.

"Was Imhotep there?"

"No." He shook his head. "Then again, I wasn't looking for him exactly."

She'd never failed to amaze him with her intelligence. "Did you find him?"

He closed his eyes. "No." He lied softly. Maybe he had, maybe he hadn't. The dream didn't seem to have the same feel as the other so maybe it had just been a nightmare. He'd pray so, or that just maybe he'd managed that shot after all.

"Rick."

"I was looking but Sallah woke me up too soon." It was the truth after all. "And I'm not even sure I was wherever it is that place is. Maybe I was only wishing."

"Okay." She didn't argue but he didn't think she believed him either. He laid his head against the soft black curls under his chin and didn't bother worrying about the fact that they weren't really strapped in for landing. He took a deep breath, catching the remnants of the rosemary shampoo she used and the perfume she'd put on that morning. It helped clear the last memory of that horrible stench from his mind. It didn't do a blasted bit of good for the sounds though. He closed his eyes and hugged her
tighter for a moment, wondering if he couldn't just doze back off for that one more second he needed...

The plane bounced once as it contacted the hard packed sand. With a sigh he got up and they followed Izzy and Sallah out into the sand. "Hamanaptura." Evie said softly. "City of the Dead."

"God, I hate this place." He whispered to himself. "Let's unload the gear and get digging."

"I will go gather the others, O'Connell. They can help." Sallah said and started toward the eastern dunes.

"Fine." He didn't really care at this moment and shouldered his pack with a sigh. "Are we going to need to refuel in Aswan Izzy or can she get us all the way from here to Ahm Shere and back?"

"No such luck, Rick. We're going to need gas."

"Okay." He agreed. "Then you get on the radio and make the arrangements. Alex stay with him."

"But dad."

He turned to look at his son ready to argue the old fight all over again but something must have been in his eyes that he didn't want to be there because Alex only sighed.

"Okay, dad, be carefully okay? You too, mom?"

"We will be." She agreed with a smile and then took his hand and they walked together back through the ruins.

It was even harder going this time. The creature's first death had brought down much of what had remained of the city to begin with and Anck-su-naumun's excavations hadn't helped much. But Evie seemed pretty certain of where she wanted to dig so they went to it with shovels and picks. Some of the things his wife knew he had found he didn't even question any more.

They stopped after a bit and Evie sat down to look at the map she'd drawn again. Rick leaned against his shovel handle and wiped the sweat out of his eyes. He hated this place.

"Have you not learned by now what a truly bad idea this is?" The voice asked from behind him just as a strong hand clamped down on his shoulder.

He whirled, bringing the shovel up and stopping just short of smacking his friend with it.

"Welcome back to Egypt my friends." Ardeth smiled a bit. "I was worried."

He didn't even think he just dropped the shovel and hugged his friend hard. It must have shocked Ardeth as much as it did him because he simply stood there for a long enough moment for Rick to let go and then grip the front of his robes in both hands and shake the man as hard as he could. "What the hell did you think you were doing?!"

"Ardeth!" Evie exclaimed in what sounded like about the same amount of joy and confusion and annoyance he was feeling himself. She wormed between them, costing him his grip on Ardeth's robes and then startled the man even more by throwing her arms around him and leaning up on tiptoe to kiss him on his cheek.

"Evelyn, please, that is not proper. Rick-- you are not helping...what? Are you both well? There is much to discuss and you...What?" He asked again, setting Evie down gently. "Will one of you say
"Uncle Ardeth!" Alex hollered before Rick could put any words together and then leapt up into his uncle's arms with a laugh. "Oh you're here. I knew it was a lie. Mum and Dad they didn't know any better but I knew he couldn't have killed you...I just knew it!"

"Could not have...ah...Now I begin to see." Ardeth squeezed Alex quickly and then set him down as well. "Is that what brought this great amazement and joy at my arrival then?"

"You should have seen it, Uncle Ardeth. There we all were, right back where you had fought the crocodile and there were all these people dancing and stuff and all this food. And then Im..."

"For all our sakes, Alex, do not invoke him here!" Ardeth hissed.

"Right, I forgot. Then the bad guy said something really awful to dad when he asked where you were. Which no one will explain to me. What's it mean anyway, HemDahi? It sounds nasty and all but...anyway so there we were and I really thought dad was just going to like take his head off for real and...what?"

Ardeth smiled and then just hugged his nephew again. "Your concern and relief are appreciated my friends. Come, let us get out of the sun for a bit."

"He-- didn't really do that did he, Ardeth?" Evie asked finally. Rick hadn't been able to get the question out.

"No, thanks be to God. I-- have an odd story to tell. No doubt, we all do. Come, we will leave this place of curses for now and see what can be done."

"We came for the book of Ammun." Rick put in finally. "Thought it might do some good."

"It might indeed. Are you certain it is here?"

"About ten feet down." Evie indicated the hole they'd started. "She threw it back in after they dug him up."

"Well then, we will get a few more people to dig and find it. You both look ready to fall. No offence my friends. Come."

"Well yeah we only napped about an hour since you tossed me through the wall and woke us all up last night. That was a great trick!"

"Thank you, Alex." Ardeth smiled a bit more and led them all toward where a few of the Medjai had a camp already set up.

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"Rick, Evelyn, Alex this is Gamal and Arebe they are leaders of the tribes of the Medjai." He introduced his friends as they reached the fire.

Arebe stood up and shook Rick's hand, looked a little uncertainly at him and then shook Evelyn's and then Alex's. Gamal nodded at each in turn from where he was making coffee. Sallah came over a few moments later carrying a platter full of falafel sandwiches.

"Oh good, lunch. How come what we eat when we're dreaming doesn't help when we wake up?" Alex to a sandwich and sat down.
Ardeth looked at his friends and then smiled a little. "I would not know, Alex. I do not think I ate."

"We didn't manage it either." Rick shrugged. "Seemed to annoy him."

Ardeth nodded. "As I recall. So, when was this?"

"We were on the train from Alexandria to Cairo." Evelyn took a cup of the coffee Gamal offered her with a smile. "Thank you."

Rick did the same with a nod.

"Are we going to try not to sleep again dad? That's gonna be really hard." Alex sighed.

"I'm not sure yet tiger. Let's just eat now okay?"

"You must be exhausted if you have not slept since last night. And I doubt that was for very long." Ardeth waved away the coffee. At the moment he doubted he'd be able to sleep even without it.

"Exhausted is a good description yeah. You weren't there when we were the second time were you?"

"No, I was awake by then, finally." He directed the last at his tribesmen.

"Now Ardeth, I have apologized already we certainly did not know that not waking you for morning prayers was going to cause any harm." Arebe sighed. "I am sorry."

"Shit." Rick muttered under his breath. "When did you wake up?"

"Hmm, late this morning, about eleven or so I would say." Ardeth smiled a little. "No harm done to anything but my peace of mind, old friend, but next time, please, wake me when I ask."

"Of course." Arebe nodded.

"Is that to be the plan then? We wake you every hour or so? It will not give you much rest." Sallah pointed out.

"Do we have a better idea?" Rick asked.

"At the moment, no." Ardeth sighed. "Eat, please. Exhausting ourselves to the point of not being able to function is not going to help either. We are, I am afraid in an undefendable position."

"I'm trying to work out some sort of a protective spell." Evelyn put in after a pause. "Maybe an incantation to Mut that would pull us away from the dreamworld and back into ours. But I'm working blind. I don't even have a prayer form to work from."

"Not one of Nefertiri's favorite goddesses?" Rick asked with a smile.

"Apparently not." Evelyn replied. "So at the moment I'm afraid I agree with your Ardeth. We don't have many options."

"Then we will do what we can. For now no one sleeps unless there is someone else awake to wake them every-- two hours? That will be more time there than here of course but it might do."

"More time?" Rick spoke up. "What do you mean?"

"Yes, I was not thinking. Both your...visits to Thebes were short were they not?" Ardeth nodded to
himself. "I slept over twelve hours."

"And?" Rick pressed.

He smiled a bit. "No harm done, my friend. Well, I learned I do well not to drink, Allah forgive me. And I can not swim in my dreams any more than I can here."

"Could you maybe put that into context for us?" Rick grumbled.

"When you vanished from the banquet hall-- our host? That should do for a title I think, yes. Our host was a bit surprised."

"I was a bit surprised." Evelyn smiled. "That was brilliant."

Ardeth shrugged, feeling a bit embarrassed by the flattery. "It worked at least. So there I was...with no idea how I was supposed to wake myself up."

"Which you didn't obviously." Alex put in, snatching another sandwich from the tray.

"No. Unfortunately not. I was rather expecting him to be-- more angry than he was." He admitted to himself. "But he only laughed."

"Not the idea he gave us when we saw him again." Evelyn shivered.

"So I realize." He agreed.

"First he told me he cut out your tongue, then he told me he..." Rick's voice was a rough whisper.

The honest horror and concern so evident in his friend's voice made him feel both honored and a little embarrassed. "Let us not invoke that here either shall we?" Ardeth interrupted with a shudder of his own. It certainly was not a thought he particularly wanted to dwell on or even yet have to figure out another way not to explain it to his nephew. "Yes, I know. So Alex said."

"Sorry, if I shouldn't have."

"You did not know any better, Alex." Ardeth found a smile for his nephew. "It was an effective threat I will admit. I was not looking forward to the morning any."

"And?" Rick set his sandwich down but took the refilled coffee from Gamal.

"He threatened, I did my best to ignore him and then he decided to finish the banquet in my honor or at least for my benefit I suppose. I can not say I really followed the reasoning." He shrugged. "But he offered me a glass of wine. And I thought that perhaps in this one thing I might believe him. It was nothing to face sober if there were alternatives at hand and Allah I thought might forgive me that small lapse." He paused. "I will say that I do not understand your fondness for the drink myself. Much of the night's performances are-- fuzzy. But eventually I recall being told that I was drunk and that we would put off my execution until the morning. And it seems it is quite possible to sleep while dreaming. Because, the next thing I recall, it was well into morning and I was still at Thebes."

"You keep saying that, at Thebes. Luxor is days from here." Sallah put in.

"It is. But that is none the less where this-- dream of what was is. Thebes as it must have been during the time of the Pharaohs. Karnak temple when it was still the home of AmmunRa." He smiled a little at the memory of the glory that had been, then shook himself and went back to his tale. "I can not say for certain that I have ever felt worse than I did when I woke. I do not handle the wine well I found."
"Hangovers are hell." Rick agreed with a smile. "Bad enough when you're used to them and have friends around to give a damn."

Ardeth chuckled. "It is good to know I am not alone then." He paused again. "Oddly enough, I think it might have saved me. Our host was a little too amused by my lack of judgement to kill me quickly."

"That's a good thing, right?" Alex put in.

"As it turned out. Yes." Ardeth agreed. "There were moments when I was not so certain, but he seemed almost as curious as annoyed. Once I had recovered a bit we had a rather long discussion of Islam." He shook his head. "I do not think he understands."

"Wait a minute, first he threatens to kill you or worse come morning and then you spend the day discussing religion?" Rick asked.

Ardeth smiled. "It amazed me too, my friend. The creature is mad, Rick. Whatever reasons it has for what it does make no sense to me. I am only thankful for whatever gave it pause and me time to wake."

"So you spent the day explaining Islam to him?" Evelyn smiled. "That's a new way of playing Scheherazade."

Much to Ardeth's embarrassment he could feel himself flush. "I do not know if I would have put it quite that way, Evelyn, but there is some truth to it. It seemed to amuse the creature that it understood me no better than I did it." He shrugged again. "And it was only the mid day I spent trying to explain the word of the Prophet, peace be upon him. Then it seemed determined to show me this version of paradise it believed us to be in. We walked down to the docks and took a boat."

"That explains the part about finding out you couldn't swim." Rick smiled.

"Indeed. It told me if I tried to kill it again, my first two attempts were less than successful, that I would find myself dunked in the Nile. Then it asked if I could swim. I said no, which did not seem to concern it any. All things considered it sounded like a better choice than the death he had planned. So, I knocked us both into the river." He chuckled. "I should have known the damned thing could swim. And then it tossed me back onto the boat with a thought and I did not drown after all." He paused again not about to go into any more of that particular embarrassment. He was still uncertain what he was going to do with the creature's obvious enjoyment of baiting him so when he had to face it again. "It was angry enough that I thought for certain it would kill me but it only laughed again and told me I was a very poor guest. It was-- a joke it had started I think. Odd as it may sound. We went back to the temple and it seemed determined to hold another banquet. I went and then just as the banquet started I awoke in my tent. So to me it was a good part of two days and one full night there and here it was the night and into morning." He shrugged again. "So if we sleep two hours what will that be there?"

"Four maybe? Double it to be safe? Six?" Evelyn sighed.

"Not quite, I would hope, but it is best to expect the worst." He agreed.

"So we take one hour naps for the night and then see?" Rick sighed. "It'll have to do."

"I'm really sleepy, dad." Alex yawned.

"I think we all are Alex." Evelyn smiled. "I could fall asleep in my cup." She handed the coffee back to Gamal. "Will you wake me in an hour then, Sallah?"
"As you wish, Sitt O'Connell." The man agreed.

"If your sleeping so am I." Rick put in firmly.

"Okay. I'm for napping. Besides we napped on the plane dad and we didn't wind up in Thebes." Alex put in.

Something odd went through his friend's blue eyes and Ardeth had no idea what to make of the look Rick gave him. "That's true, Alex. Okay, so maybe it's asleep now and we can catch an hour or two if we're lucky. Does it sleep?"

"I can not answer that I was in no shape to notice." Ardeth sighed. "My apologies."

"I'd sure as hell want to be drunk too, Ardeth." Rick clasped his shoulder. "Wake me in an hour?"

"Certainly." He agreed.

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Ardeth searched through the small supply of herbs he had on hand. Most were for healing of one sort or another a few for making the light rations he usually carried more edible. Finally, near the bottom of one saddlebag he found what he wanted. It was an old bottle with no label and a tight lid. He looked at it for another long minute and then glanced over at the pallet where his friends slept. Rick had one arm around Evelyn and Alex lay just behind his father curled on his side. He smiled a little sadly and smoothed his nephew's blond hair. "Perhaps, if all else fails, I can toss you through the wall again, hmm? Allah, hear me here if I can not take my prayers with me where I go. I am your soldier, as I have always been. I have sworn my life to keeping the creature in its grave as have my father and grandfather and ancestors beyond number. I was born Medjai and by your will I will die the same. But these friends of mine are new to this life of ours. To the dedication and pain that it requires. They are good people, young and foolish to be certain but they have never once shirked the duties and consequences of their actions. I will ask you only this, allow me the courage and the strength to keep them safe so that the Medjai may succeed and continue the task you have given us."

He paused. "As you will." He finished softly and then poured himself a glass of water and five large drops of the amber liquid into a cup and drank it down. He put the small bottle away with a smile. I doubt the headache will be any worse than what I recall from Thebes. He walked over to the tent flap and glanced out at the fire and his fellow Medjai. "I am going to try and see if I can join our friends in sleep, Sallah. I will wake them now and then if you would wake us all in another hour, please?"

"Of course, Ardeth." The man smiled a bit. "May Allah guard your rest."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed with a smile of his own. Then he gazed up at the stars and sighed. Perhaps Evelyn was right and the best way to combat the creature was with its own gods. Mut, lady of the skies and goddess of dreams, see my friends safely until morning and AmmunRa takes his place once more in the sky. The wish was certainly not going to do any harm.

He went back into the tent and shook his nephew first. "Wake up now, Alex."

"Mmm. Don't want to." The boy mumbled rolling over.

"Alex!"

"Yeah, okay. M'wake. Wasn't even dreaming, Uncle Ardeth."

"Good." He smiled a bit and then reached over and shook his friend. "Rick."
"God, this is going to be a damned long night." The American replied. "Thanks."

"Do you want to wake Evelyn?"

"Evie? Sweetheart? Wake up, hmm?" Rick shook her just a bit.

"Already?" She blinked and rolled over to look over her husband's shoulder at their son. "Is he all right, Ardeth?"

"Fine. He said he was not even dreaming."

"Me neither, I don't think. If we have the time thing figured out it must be about dawn there." She laid back down. "Another hour?" She snuggled a bit closer to her husband.

"Indeed. If we must see each other in our dreams, I hope to find you well my friends."

"Gonna join us for a nap?" Rick chuckled already sounding half-asleep himself.

"It seemed wise to have, as you Americans say, more back up and not less?" He replied.

"Yeah, thanks Ardeth. You sure you want to risk going back? He didn't actually threaten any of us, you know." A bit more alertness to his friend's voice.

"I know. But I have to sleep sometime, and who else is going to watch my back?"

Another chuckle. "Sleep well."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed again, beginning to feel the effects of the drug he had taken. He had only used it on two tribesmen when he had to perform very hasty battle surgery so he was not certain what its effects would be on someone who was well. With a sigh he moved to lay not far from Alex putting himself as was traditional between his guests and the tent flap. And it was the creature he expected to face in his dreams who's voice he heard in his memory. 'As you have always been have you not, Medjai? Guards to Pharaoh and his wives and children?' Perhaps things had not changed as much as Ardeth would have once thought.

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When he woke he lay still for a bit but then realized that the bed underneath him was far too soft for the mat on which he had gone to sleep. He sighed to himself and sat up, not all that surprised to find himself back in the same room he had awoken in the first time. I suppose the fact that I did not wake in chains this time either could be taken as a good sign. He was fully dressed in his own robes again and with all his weapons. It was almost annoying that the creature thought so little of the risk he presented but then again he was not about to argue with it if it gave him any advantage at all no matter how small.

"Good morning, Medjai." Came an unexpected voice.

He blinked and then found a smile for the young woman who had opened the door. "Tahiri."

"You remembered." She seemed pleased. "The High Priest of AmmunRa told me to see if you were awake and if you wanted breakfast."

"He did; did he?" He shook his head. "Thank you but no. Are my friends, the Princess Nefertiri and her family here yet?"

"Oh yes, they are sleeping next door. The High Priest did not tell me if I should wake them or not.
"He might have sent them another servant."

"No, let them sleep if they can. They had a long journey yesterday and need their rest."

"As you say. Are you the Princess' guard then, Medjai, in this odd new place she dwells?"

"Sometimes." He agreed. "Little need though she has for a guard most days."

"That is good." She smiled a bit more. "And the other one? The one with the hair like wheat? Is he her guard too?"

"Her husband." He supposed he should not have been surprised that the young woman saw nothing wrong with Evelyn sleeping with a man who might possibly not be her husband not with the rest of the young woman's obvious ease with no modesty at all.

"Ah well." She smiled again. "Are you married, Medjai?"

He blinked not at all certain if he should answer or not. "Not quite yet." he decided.

"Oh.. Ah well. I hope she is pretty." She giggled. "I left your clothes and those odd shoes of yours in the chest there if you wish to change." She indicated the piece of furniture.

"Thank you." He was not sure what to think of that considering as far as he could recall he had woken in the robes he had gone to sleep in which she had just said were the ones in the chest. He gave it up to more of the unreality of this place and got out of bed. "Where might I find-- my host, then?"

Another giggle. "It is dawn, Medjai, he is serving the god breakfast and seeing him into the sky no doubt."

"Of course. I had not realized I had slept quite so late." He shrugged.

"Shall I tell him you are awake, when he leaves the holy of holies?"

"I am certain he will come to see anyway." He sighed to himself. "And I think I could do with some coffee after all, Tahiri."

"Certainly." She smiled again and then closed the door behind her.

He got up and followed her out after a moment, nodding once at the guard standing outside his door. But the man made no move to stop him as he walked over to his friends room. There was a guard there as well. The man looked at him for a long moment, halbreck lowered to bar the way and then nodded and raised it. "They are well Medjai. I have let no one pass."

"That is good." He opened the door himself and then glanced in. Rick and Evie were asleep in a large bed similar in style to the one he had woken in. The bed posts this time were carved lions and from what he could tell were gilded in gold. He finally spotted Alex asleep on a smaller bed over by the balcony. He closed the door silently. "Let them sleep in peace then. Tell the servants to leave them be. I am certain-- the High Priest and I will come to see them later."

"As you wish Medjai. Will Pharaoh come to join his daughter, soon?"

He blinked at that. God have mercy, what do we do if does? "Who are we to understand the way of Pharaoh?." He caught himself just in time to keep from saying In'sh'allah.

"There is a truth." The guard agreed. Ardeth shook his head at the odd exchange.
"If the Princess her husband or their child should wake, will you tell them I am next door and at their service?"

"Of course."

"Thank you." He walked back to his own room. Tahiri was just setting up the small brazier of coals and the coffee pot upon it.

"Shall I leave it as it is or do you wish honey with it?"

"No, thank you." He sat down. She sighed but seemed to take the less than subtle hint that he needed no further service and went away.

He poured himself a cup of the strong black coffee not surprised that it tasted much as he recalled it tasting the morning he had woken with the horrible headache. Hangover, Rick had called it. He sighed hoping that the results of his current sleep would be less painful to deal with. He set the coffee aside and knelt and offered the first prayer of morning to Allah, trusting that the sun here was the same as the sun in the world he lived in when awake. He had just finished when a cool breeze stirred the curtains to the balcony. He bowed a final time to Mecca and then rose and went to sit at the small table. "Did you wish to join me for coffee?" He was rather surprised at his own acceptance of his visitor.

"Why thank you, Ardeth." The creature smiled and sat down as well. "I was not certain I would see you again so soon."

"It seemed to make as much sense as trying to stay awake or face you one at a time."

The creature smiled a bit more and then took a long swallow of coffee. "And yet here we are."

"Is it not a bodyguard's job to face the enemy first?" He returned.

Another smile. "So it is. So it is. Did they tell you of their arrival last night?"

He kept his reply to a nod.

"A rather cruel lie I will admit about cutting out your tongue. But I thought the threat might keep O'Connell civil and it would be rude to have to kill Nefertiri's husband while we were sharing a meal in her honor."

"Your-- sense of hospitality is..unusual but appreciated none the less."

His host chuckled. "Why thank you, Ardeth. It is a good thing I do not take lessons in manners from my guests."

He acknowledged the point with a nod. "Did your god enjoy his breakfast?"

"As always." Another chuckle. "Are we going to debate religion again so early in the morning?"

He started to reply and then recalled Evelyn's comment about Scharazade and it took all his self control not to flush.

"Oh, now that is a tale I must hear. Who is this princess you are thinking of?"

"You want me to tell you the tale of the 1001 nights?" He could not keep the surprise from his voice.

"Is that what it is called? Certainly. Does it take that long to tell?"
"No." He shook his head and poured himself more coffee.

"Pity." A smile. "Think of all the nights I could enjoy your company."

And damn the creature back to hell if he did not flush.

"Ah Medjai, you are so fun to tease." A chuckle. "Start your tale then."

He sighed and took a swallow of coffee before beginning. His host was silent though the very start and he had to wonder if his host could not understand the Sultan's brother's obsession for the first Sultana all too well.

"That is truer than you know, Ardeth. Far too true at all." There was such sadness to the soft the reply to his unvoiced question that he paused in the telling of the tale.

"Do you want to hear the rest?"

"Certainly." His host replied with an odd look to his eyes but he leaned back in the chair and sipped more coffee. So Ardeth explained of Scharahzade's marriage to the Sultan and how she began a story each night and then would not finish it until the next day so that he would not kill her that night.

"Ah, I see why you thought of this tale then." His host smiled. "It is not such a bad bargain is it? I get another story from your princess’ cache of tales, and you get to keep your head?"

"I could think of worse." He agreed.

"Why certainly, I could ask for more than a story now, could I not?" His host chuckled.

He kept from praying to Allah for deliverance but it was a close thing.

That just made the creature laugh even harder. "Oh, I must give thanks to Ammun for allowing me the joy of your company, Medjai, for I am certain I have laughed more in these last few days than I can recall."

"That does not seem like paradise to me." He challenged his host's earlier claim.

A more serious smile. "Compare it to three thousand years of undying horror as your body is eaten and rotting around you, Medjai and then tell me if it is not paradise, in that comparison."

He looked away at that and set the coffee aside. "I will pray every morning I awake here or in the true world that Allah will be merciful to me and I will never know."

A chuckle. "You do fear it then do you not, Medjai?"

He met those almost black eyes with his own. "How in the name of Allah could I not?"

"Then perhaps you will be a better guest and have more care with your manners."

He sighed. "I am sworn to keep you in your grave, monster. I am sworn to protect the friends who sleep next door and I am sworn to defend my tribe onto death. And yet all of these things will no doubt earn me nothing but the horrible fate you have promised me. So all I can do is trust that Allah will reward me in Paradise, when I finally perish."

"Then it shall be an interesting few nights of tale-telling to keep me entertained, will it not?" Another smile.
He sighed and fell back on the only response he could. "As you say."

A chuckle and then his expression grew more serious. "My other guests have woken. Come we shall go and let them see that I have not started cutting you to pieces yet; so that O'Connell will leave my god his temple intact perhaps."

Ardeth smiled despite himself at the resignation to the creature's tone. It was he had to admit probably not that far off the mark for his friend. It brought to mind the second time he had seen Rick standing in Hamanaptura and threatening to blow them all to Paradise with that stick of dynamite.

"Why does that image of him not surprise me at all?" Imhotep sighed. "Tell him to behave, Ardeth. I am enjoying the game as much as any man but if he harms this building I will see him punished if I must destroy your whole world to do it."

And that made him cold even in the warm sunlit hall they walked into. "And you wonder why I am a poor guest."

A smile. "I have limits to my hospitality Medjai. I will not take insults to my god or his dwelling. Can you not understand that?"

He sighed because it was something he could understand all too well. And he realized with a start that no matter what else had been said the creature had not once berated Ardeth's belief or Allah. And that made no sense at all.

"It seems we still do not understand each other, Medjai. So, let us all keep civil for this day and we shall see if your unfinished tale and unexplainable god will earn you another day of paradise."

"In'sh'allah." He could not help but voice.

"Of course." The damned thing agreed with a smile. "Could it be otherwise?" Another chuckle and then he nodded to the guard and then smiled a bit more. "Why do you not go first?"

Ardeth raised one eyebrow thought of his friend's most likely reaction to the opening of the door and then knocked. "Rick? Evelyn? Alex? Are you awake and may I come in?"

Silence and then Rick opened the door with a snarl and Ardeth found himself slammed against the wall. "Don't do that to me again!"

"What?" Ardeth sighed. "Rick?"

"Nothing. Never mind, sorry. I didn't know where you were."

"Ah, my apologies, I was..." He smiled just a little despite himself. "Explaining Islam again."

"Scharazade would be proud I am certain." The creature walked in as well. "It is good to know you are as courteous to your friends as your enemies, O'Connell. Good morning Princess, Alex shall I have the servants bring breakfast?" It asked in perfect Arabic.

"Now we're guests?" Rick's voice was disbelieving. Ardeth shrugged, more than a little relived that the creature's teasing reference was overlooked in the confusion. Allah had to know he did not want to explain that to his friends especially not with Alex there.

"You most certainly are. Did you not tell them that Ardeth? That you are all my guests, for the moment of course." That was in Egyptian and it made his head hurt a bit to try to think from English to Arabic and Egyptian all at once.
"Of course." He replied with a sigh, deciding Arabic was the easiest and least bothersome choice of languages. "Until you decide we are not."

A chuckle. "Just explain it to your brother and I will keep my end of the bargain."

He nodded and then did as the creature suggested and explained to Rick that at the moment they were guests but that there was no guarantee of the odd hospitality and that any threat to this place itself would be considered an act of blasphemy and would no doubt get them killed or worse. His friend did not seem pleased either but it was not a situation either of them were certain how to better at the moment.

"Breakfast?" The creature asked again.

"Can we, mum?" Alex looked at his mother. "Dad? Uncle Ardeth?"

Evelyn sighed. "I suppose it isn't going to do any harm. Is there coffee to be had, priest of AmmunRa?"

And that made the creature chuckle. "Well now, it seems that it is possible to find me a title I do not mind answering too. We have as much coffee as you would like, Princess...are you as fond of philla bread and fruit as I recall?"

A surprised smile. "You remembered that of all things?"

"Of course. I am your host am I not? Coffee O'Connell? Alex? Tea?"

"Tea would be great." Alex put in.

"Very well." The creature leaned out the door gave someone in the hall an order and then gestured at the balcony. "AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt has given us another fine day to enjoy. Shall we have breakfast outside?" And he walked out past the curtains.

"You weren't kidding about him being nuts were you." Rick muttered.

Ardeth had to smile at his friend's use of more odd slang but he nodded. "No, the only suggestion I have my friends is to play along with the insanity until we can wake."

"Wonderful," Evelyn sighed. "Well then, please tell the High Priest of AmmunRa that I'll be happy to join him for breakfast as soon as I find a way to get a comb through my hair." She rolled her eyes and went over to the small table and rifled through the chest there.

"Evie, for the love of God will you stop opening things without warning me?" Rick sighed.

Ardeth chuckled despite himself.

"Come on Uncle Ardeth they're always like this when they wake up." Alex took his hand and pulled him out onto the balcony after their host.

Servants had come up the side stairs and were setting up chairs around a collection of small tables. On one was a brazier already simmering coffee, on another a collection of fruit and some sort of pastries and on the third plates and goblets and wet towels. Their host was standing by the railing overlooking the temple.

"Your tea will arrive shortly Alex. The cook said he would make you some as well, Medjai, if you promised to drink it. Do not make me regret telling him you would."
"I had no idea I had so annoyed your cook."

A chuckle. "The only one of you who has managed to eat anything of the food prepared is young Alex here. Speaking of which, do help yourself. Where are your parents?"

"I told you it was useless to wait meals on them, right?" Alex put in calmly and went to get a plate. Ardeth watched his young nephew in surprise only then realizing that the creature looked equally startled.

"The young are so flexible in adapting to challenge." His host smiled again.

"Sitt O'Connell says to tell you that she and her husband will join you for breakfast as soon as she makes herself presentable."

Ardeth smiled a little himself at the memory of Evelyn's exasperation.

"The Princess forgot you are not one of her pages, did she?" The creature chuckled. "Nefertiri could never be anything less than beautiful, but we shall certainly wait on her, if you wish."

"I have had coffee and prayer already this morning. I can wait."

"How odd, we have something in common after all." A quirk of a suppressed smirk.

He rolled his eyes. "Allah give me strength."

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Imhotep watched his guests not bothering to try and hide his fascination or his amusement. Breakfast was a rather silent meal with Alex doing much of the talking, or asking rather. The young man was full of questions and after the first few resulted in nothing horrendous occurring he continued to ask.

"So if this is really Thebes...are we in the past now? I mean like could we get on a boat and go to say Athens?" He nibbled absentely on a piece of toasted bread. "That could be really fun."

"Athens?" He returned the question with a smile.

"It's the capital of Ancient Greece, you know Alexander and Socrates and Plato and all those guys."

He shook his head. "I think perhaps I might know them by other names."

"Iksandrios? Acheawa?" Evelyn supplied with a smile at her son.

He nodded finally. "Ah yes, the upstart Tolemys. Not that they were all bad Pharaohs, but the glory was fading by then."

"All things fade in time." Evelyn agreed.

"Do they?" He shrugged. "As to your question of where this is, young Alex, it is exactly where it appears to be. I am only the High Priest of AmmunRa. So even I can not tell you how far this world of the gods making extends. But if you like I will ask my god come this evening if he has noticed your Athens, was it? While he was sailing the sky."

That seemed to confuse the boy. "Really? You can talk to him?" He asked finally.

Imhotep chuckled. "Certainly, it would be rude to do otherwise would it not? If you have finished your meal we can go see the temple. Ammun would be honored by your presence, as I am, certainly." He rose to his feet with a smile. "Medjai? Princess? O'Connell?"
The three adults glanced at each other and then finally Ardeth rose to his feet as well. "It is a beautiful sight, I will admit. And it will do me good to walk a bit. I am going to get lazy with all this rest."

Imhotep laughed. "I will take you hunting again if you promise not to try and kill us both."

Ardeth glanced at his brother and then chuckled at whatever he saw in the American's eyes. "What is life without a little risk?"

That got an answering grin from O'Connell.

"Ammun grant me guests with manners." He sighed but it was an amused sigh and he knew it.

"What you want us to go home already?" O'Connell asked with feigned surprise. "We just got here."

"So you did." He agreed. "And my cooks will never understand if you do not eat at least one of the banquets they prepare. Perhaps I should have them not prepare one and you will actually be here for dinner." He looked over at the two warriors with a smile. "There you have it Medjai, a challenge. We eat what we catch and that alone. I at least have dinner."

"As you say." Ardeth replied formally. "We shall see what Allah wills."

"So we shall, Medjai, so we shall. Do you like boats, young Alex?"

"Sure. Are we going to fish? Fishing isn't very exciting."

"No, your uncle does not like to fish and it would be rude to take my guests on an outing they would not enjoy, would it not?"

"Well I guess so. Can't say I enjoyed that train ride last time much. You were really creepy."

Imhotep blinked a little surprised. His parents were concerned that this question at least might lead to trouble and moved a step closer. And there was more of that studied calmness from Ardeth. "Was I then? I suppose so. You were very brave you know."

"I was? I was about to pee my pants when you took that mask off. Yuck...no offence."

He chuckled. "None taken. And you handled it all with bravery. I am sorry I was such a rude host. I was a bit out of practice with dealing with people."

"Well, I'd think so. Being buried and all for thousands and thousands of years...Bleeck." The boy shuddered.

"Sometimes, young Alex, I would agree with that." He sighed and then glanced up at the sun and thanked his god once more for this wondrous paradise.

"Can we go see Thebes mum? Dad?"

Concern and confusion so easy to see in them both and then O'Connell glanced at Ardeth again the question obvious in his thoughts. The young Medjai shrugged just a bit but nodded. So I am mad and to be humored am I, Medjai? Better than outright hatred or all of you running off into the desert to escape I suppose. Ammun I had not thought of that. Now watch all of you idiots dive overboard at one time. And you can not even swim. He sighed. "Can you swim, young Alex?"

"Sure. Uncle Ardeth says you can too. Did you really save him from drowning?"
"It seemed like the thing to do. Ammun alone knows why I bother." He smiled a bit more. "But who else would entertain me with stories and explanations of Allah if I were to let him die now?" He raised one eyebrow and glanced over at the Medjai as he spoke. It was too the young man's credit that he managed not to flush. Nefertiri seemed a bit uncertain about the whole thing and O'Connell was just annoyed and definitely not believing him on anything he said.

"Okay then." Alex agreed. "So you aren't going to toss him in the river right?"

"Hmm, amusing and-- entertaining as that might be, no." He smiled a bit more. "Tahiri will get tired of drying out your clothes, or not come to think of that." He laughed. "Really Medjai there are children present, I am not certain you should even be thinking such things. He truly does not have very good manners you know Alex."

"That's why he makes a good part of the family." Evelyn said with a cold smile. "We're all rather bad at it."

"As you say, Princess. Shall we go?"

"After you." She gestured at the stairs. "We are going to the docks?"

"We are." He headed down the stairs and then paused. "Put the dagger away O'Connell or I will not miss when I toss it back. Keep your brother on a leash if you must Ardeth and do not make me ruin this day by dragging you all to the boat. It is a tour, not a procession of prisoners, entertaining though that might be. Shall we?" He did not bother to turn around as he spoke only finished walking down the stairs.
"I don't think nuts really covers it, Ardeth." Rick muttered as he put the knife away.

"No, perhaps not. Why did you draw that anyway?"

He shrugged. "Wanted to see what he'd do. Can he really hear what we're thinking?"

"Apparently, although he does not seem to grasp English yet so you have an advantage there. I tend to think in Arabic but I will try to do so in English more often."

"It's some help anyway." Evelyn sighed. "This is very unreal, Ardeth."

"I recall thinking that myself both today and yesterday." He agreed.

"Oops..." Alex stopped suddenly and then blinked in surprise. "Gotta go."

"Sallah will be waking you. Tell him not to worry when I do not." He turned to Evelyn. "He will wake you last so let him know the laudlum will undoubtedly keep me asleep for a bit longer than an hour."

Alex had vanished halfway through his explanation.

"What the hell did you think you were doing?!" Rick growled, and he was saved from his friend's grip by the fact that he vanished too.

"Ardeth..." Evelyn sounded both amused and annoyed.

He shrugged. "I was not letting you face this alone if I could help it. MaSalama Evelyn."

"I'm a big girl now, Ardeth, I don't need a bodyguard." She smiled and then blinked once and vanished.

"As you say." He smiled a little.

"I have the rudest guests." The creature sighed from just behind him. "It will not last you know."

"No, I rather imagine it will not. But, it is good to know they are safe." He forced down a deep breath. "So, am I guest still or shall I expect something more-- entertaining?"

A chuckle. "That was a very foolish thing you know. Sometimes it is possible to wake oneself from a dream if it grows too unpleasant. I doubt this drug you took will allow that."

It took what courage he had to only nod.

A smile and then a chuckle. "You are an intriguing guest, Medjai. You are that. Come I promised you a day of hunting and a tour of Thebes. Should I revoke that just because the others declined to stay? Hardly."

And once more the transition from trying to face a horrible death with courage to trying to accept this unreal hospitality and ease left him close to exhausted. "I truly, do not think I want to hunt."

"No?" Something that might have been surprise and then a sigh. "Sit down."
"What?"

"Sit. It is cool yet and the view is fine." His host simply took a seat on one of the steps. "I am not
going to kill you today, Ardeth. It is that simple. I can even say with certainty that I am not going to
kill you tomorrow."

He sat down with a weary sigh himself. "It seems foolish to ask and risk changing your mind, but
why not? What does it do to prolong this-- cat and mouse game you play?"

"I enjoy your company. I enjoy seeing what new things you will come up with to annoy me and I
enjoy the challenge that just perhaps you will find a way to escape before I grow tired of the game.
All of that is more than worth putting up with your bad manners, Ardeth."

"I am no man's pet, creature. I will be damned before I will be yours." It came out harsher than he
expected.

"Think seriously on that, Medjai. Being damned is not something I should think you or I would take
lightly. Do you understand?"

He closed his eyes and kept the fear back with as much will as he could. "Yes."

"So, consider it this way instead. You are here now as my guest because it pleases me to have you
here. I ask only that you refrain, mostly, from trying to kill me when my back is turned, little good
though it does you to try anyway and you may walk the halls of Thebes in your dreams. And if you
are an entertaining enough guest perhaps I will not need to invite your friends back so quickly,
hmm?"

He took a deep breath both to calm himself and buy even another second to think. "I-- do not
understand you creature." He admitted finally.

"I know Ardeth. I know. So, if you do not want to go hunting, do you play hounds and jackals? It is
a bit early yet for even me to feel like discussing religion with you."

"Hounds and Jackals...? No. I have heard of it, but no one plays it anymore."

"Well then I have something to teach you. Come?" The creature rose to his feet again and smiled
down at him. "Really Ardeth even Nefertiri managed to use my title."

"I am Medjai, creature. We are, as you well know, not given to be pleasant. And I give no respect to
the monster I was sworn to keep in its grave when I was a boy."

A sigh. "As you say, Ardeth, as you say. For now that creature is your host and is going to teach you
to play Hounds and Jackals. Look at it this way, if it will help appease your conscious to that
unhappy god of yours. If I am here playing host to you, I am certainly not out destroying Egypt, am
I? Now is not that doing your sworn duty?"

He blinked not certain what to think of that. "Allah please have mercy on me. I am only one Medjai
God of the Prophet. I am not fit for this."

"You do fine." His host grinned. "Come on now."

And Allah help him because all he could think of to do was follow.

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Rick rolled to his feet as Sallah woke him and started cursing his friend before he even reached Ardeth's side. "Okay, you have done some stupid things before, Ardeth, but this one is just dumb, okay? It's that whole save the girl, kill the creature, crap all over again and I thought we'd gotten over that the first time we went through this. We're a team, remember? We've always done better with this mess when we're together."

"He said he'd taken laudlum." Evie came over to sit beside him and reached out to take Ardeth's pulse. "He isn't chilled so I doubt he took too much but..."

"We aren't waking him are we?"

"Allah have mercy, he did what?" Sallah put in with disbelief. "Why?"

"Because he thinks too much like a bodyguard." Evie replied with a smile. "And he is too good a friend to want us to face the creature alone."

"Will he be okay mom? Dad?"

"I think so, Alex." Evie sighed. "Shall we see if we can go back and join him for this?"

Rick took a deep breath and then nodded. "I'm still tired enough I might manage it. Can you two give me thirty minutes or so, and then wake me before we try this together, Evie? Just in case?"

He didn't even have to explain the just in case she just nodded. Just in case their departure left their friend a prisoner instead of a guest. Rick wasn't certain yet what Imhotep had planned but it seemed clear enough that he'd spent more time with Ardeth than his friend had said. Even this last hour it had been pretty obvious that Ardeth had been 'awake' before they had. What had he said when he'd come in? Rick hadn't been listening. He'd been too worried at first that his friend wasn't there. Panicked was closer to the truth, because Ardeth, of all of them, was the only one the monster had threatened. And then he walked in as if everything was fine and Rick had been relived and so damned angry he could of spit. But Ardeth had said something about explaining Islam again. That was it. So, how long had he and that thing been talking and why had it let Rick and Evie and Alex sleep?

"Rick?" Evie pulled him from his thoughts.

"Yeah, just trying to make sense of it I guess. Okay..." He went back over to the pallet of blankets were he'd been sleeping earlier. "You okay, Alex?"

"Still a little sleepy, dad, but yeah. That's just awfully strange you know."

"I noticed." He kept himself from ruffling his son's hair. "Stay with your mom for a bit, huh? I'm gonna go pound some sense into your uncle."

"Oh that'll work." Alex rolled his eyes. "He's as stubborn as you are, dad."

"That my young friend is a greater truth than you know. I will wake you in thirty minutes then O'Connell." Sallah shook his head. "I will go send someone for Selim. If anyone can talk sense into our leader here, it will be Selim."

"Good." Evie agreed. Rick smiled a little and then took a deep breath and tried to clear his mind. He'd gotten out of the habit of catching sleep whenever and wherever he could that he'd learned in the legion so long ago but he doubted it was a skill he'd lost.
"You have a quick grasp of the game, Medjai."

Ardeth shrugged. "It is something like backgammon, but harder."

"As I have never played that one I will assume you are correct." Imhotep rolled the sticks out onto the table and moved his piece forward.

"Selim tried to teach me chess. But I do not have the patience for it." Ardeth looked the board over and then tossed the sticks himself counted out the number of moves and then frowned and moved one piece forward.

His host chuckled and then looked over at the door in surprise. "Does O'Connell not know the meaning of courtesy?"

"Rick? No." Ardeth smiled despite himself.

An odd smile crossed the creature's face as he stood. "He truly expects me to have you in pieces you know and is thoroughly angry at you for putting yourself in such a position."

"That sounds like Rick." Ardeth agreed. "He is here, then?"

"Down the hall. Come, I see no reason to let him toss my guards around or get himself injured in the process."

Ardeth headed out into the hall and grabbed the shoulder of one guard rushing into the fray. "He is confused. Let him be." He pushed forward. "Enough!"

And Allah be praised it worked, because the guards and his friend all paused in the scuffle and looked at him.

"My guests have the damndest manners. Are you all right, O'Connell?" The creature asked in amusement.

"Fine." Rick's reply was cold. "You okay, Ardeth?" His friend asked in English.

He nodded. "Once again my friend I thank you for the concern. Evelyn and Alex?" He replied in the same.

"I-- thought maybe they should stay awake."

"It was good of you to worry, but truly, I am well." He shrugged.

"Will the Princess and your son be joining us, O'Connell?" The creature asked in arabic.

"Sleep is inevitable so I must assume that they will." Ardeth answered. "My brother only thought it prudent to make certain of their safety first."

"In case I had you in chains no doubt, Ardeth. Not that it was not tempting."

He closed his eyes and gave one more prayer to Allah for patience. "Can you wake yourself up and tell them I am fine?" He ignored his erstwhile host for the moment and spoke to his friend in English again.

"Are you really?"

"As you see, no harm done. I have a pardon it seems for today and tomorrow."
"Well that's good. Then what?"

"As Allah wills I suppose." He replied.

"You could at least do me the same courtesy, I extend to your brother Medjai and speak a language I know." The creature pointed out in the old tongue.

"As you say." He agreed switching back to Arabic. "You knew my manners were poor when you started this."

"So I did." A chuckle and the creature brushed past him and down the hall toward the rooms he and Rick and the others had. "Do not worry so, O'Connell, I am enjoying his company too much to kill him yet. Besides, as you said who else is going to explain Allah to me?" Another more teasing smile. "An odd thing to live on is it not Medjai tales and religion?"

"Allah may direct me as he will, creature. I am his warrior."

"He is a fortunate god then." Another chuckle that did nothing to alleviate Ardeth's discomfort. Any moment now his friend was going to realize there was more beneath their words than there seemed and Allah he did not want to explain that. He was not even certain he wanted to think about it.

"Convince your brother of your continued good health and explain to him the rules he should abide by to continue his own and yours as well. One Medjai is enough to try any host's manners, two of you might drive me mad."

"Like it's a far trip." Rick muttered to himself.

And that only set his host to laughing again. "Really O'Connell that was rude."

"It was true too." Rick replied.

"Perhaps, perhaps, but then again, perhaps I have a plan to all of this. Now which of those is more to be concerned about? Do join me when you are done Medjai, I shall endeavor to find us some entertainment for the noon meal."

He gripped his brother's arm tightly. "As you say." He waited until they were alone in the hall or as alone as they were likely to really be with a creature who could read their thoughts.

"What the hell did you think you were doing, getting yourself stuck here, Ardeth?"

He shrugged and let go of Rick's arm to cross his own over his chest. "What was I to do? Leave you to face it alone? With Evelyn and Alex perhaps caught in the crossfire? I think you know me better than that by now, my friend."

"I also thought you had half a brain or more. It can kill you."

"Yes, I realize that. It could, if it wished, kill us all. He could have me pleading to die and you and your son fed to the crocodiles while he pretended to hold a banquet for your wife. I know, Allah have mercy, I know. But I will be damned..." He took a deep breath and let it out. "I will be damned and dead before I think about leaving you to face it alone."

"So why don't you tell me how long this ladlum you took will last and I'll tell Sallah to let me sleep for a while." Rick sighed and then offered his hand.

Ardeth could not help but smile. "And what will Evelyn think of that?"
"Probably that she should come join the party." Rick shrugged. "The more the merrier, right?"

"As you say. And I suppose it would be equally unfair to expect Alex to stay awake."

"Probably impossible. And I'd rather be here with him now than have him doze off tomorrow."

"A good point. Very well then. I shall expect you all back soon. If our-- host will allow, I will be in the room it seems to have given me and wait for you there."

"Fine. Any idea how long you'll be under?"

"No, I am hoping for another three hours or so. Simply tell Sallah or whoever is guarding us to try to wake me every hour and when he succeeds to wake you as well."

"We aren't real good in long term planning are we, Ardeth?"

He chuckled. "Sometimes one can only trust to God, Rick."

"Easy for you to say."

He found a smile but it was with less humor than he may have liked. I trust in Allah as much or more than most men my friend, but here...here I am not even certain he hears me.

"There's Sallah. See you soon."

"In'ash'allah." He offered and berated himself for doubting it for a moment. Then he was alone in the sunlit hall and all he could do was shiver. He walked back to the room the creature had given him and finding no one present went to stand at the balcony railing. Under almost any other conditions he supposed he would truly enjoy this opportunity to see Egypt as it had been, the glory of upper and lower kingdoms, of Pharaohs and the glories they had built for themselves and their gods. Right now it only saddened him a little that he could not find the wonder or the enjoyment. There was a legend somewhere, he knew, of a man who spent eternity waiting for a blade to fall and end his life and never knew exactly when that blow would come. It was a subtle damnation but not one that he found easy to bear either.

"Hey Uncle Ardeth!" Alex's voice was a pleasant shock.

"Hello Alex." He smiled at his nephew as the boy came over and sat on the railing next to him.

"Mum and Dad should be here in a bit. I fell asleep like that." He snapped his fingers.

"I see. That is good. You need your rest, I am sure."

"Dad was kinda angry at you wasn't he?"

He chuckled. "Your father is a good man, Alex. It is only that sometimes he does not seem to distinguish between anger and concern."

"Yeah, he's always like that, even with me sometimes." A sigh. "I don't think dad had a lot of good times when he was a kid so, he gets kinda stressed when he thinks maybe something is going to mess up mine, you know?"

He looked over at his nephew in surprise. "That is a very wise thing to say, Alex."

"Thanks." A smile. "Dad's not always that hard to figure out."

"We shall endeavor not to let him know that of course."
Another smile and then Alex stuck out his hand. "Deal. I'll keep mom and dad out of trouble if you will."

"It is always good to have help." He agreed solemnly and shook his nephew's hand. A few archangels should be just about enough. He added silently.

"Hello Ardeth, Rick tells me you're paroled, is it?" Evelyn asked as she walked over to join them.

"Paroled?" He shook his head. "A stay of execution at the least."

"Good." She smiled and then to his surprise reached over and kissed his cheek. "You're a good friend Ardeth Bay. Thank you."

He felt himself flush at that. Alex just giggled.

"Geesh mom, dad's gonna be jealous."

"Please," Ardeth sighed. "That is not proper Alex."

"What dad being jealous? Dad's jealous all the time."

Evelyn just laughed. "Never mind Alex. And Ardeth's your uncle so it's perfectly fine."

"Okay, if you say so, mum."

"What's perfectly fine?" Rick walked over and took up a perch not much different from Alex's on the other side of Evelyn.

"Mum kissing Uncle Ardeth."

"Alex!" His and Evelyn's voices overlapped.

Rick just laughed. "Do I really want to know what got this started?"

"No." Ardeth sighed but he smiled none the less. "I am certain the explanation would be-- not nearly as amusing as it sounds."

Evelyn just leaned over and kissed his cheek again. "There now no one missed anything."

Ardeth glanced eastward. "Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim."

"Now there, is a prayer I can agree with." Rick chuckled. "So where is our host?"

"It's noon, he's probably down at the shrine of Ammun I would think." Evelyn looked up at the sky and indeed the sun was directly overhead.

"Do you really think Ammun talks to him, mum? I mean like, hello how are you and all that?"

His mother looked uncertainly down at the temple below. "I-- don't know Alex. Here, I suppose, it's just possible."

"Now there's a happy thought. First it's undead walking mummies and plagues of destruction. Then it's reincarnated Princesses, walking mummies, zombie cannibal pygmy things, half scorpion men and armies of Anubis. And now we've got tank eating sandstorms, one again living dead guys and gods. And I thought getting out of the desert alive after Hamanaptura the first time was going to be the hard part."
Ardeth had to laugh. "What is life without challenge, my friend?"

"Like I'd know?" Rick replied.

"You forgot the wall of water and the crazy curator and the really creepy lady and the big guy who Uncle Ardeth finally killed, dad." Alex supplied helpfully.

"Not the sort of thing you really forget, Alex. I'm sure your father was only being concise."

"Doomed flights and walls of sand and armies of entranced Egyptians should be on the list somewhere too should they not?" Ardeth smiled.

"Right. And crazy midnight attacks by crazier arabs and salt acid, and those damned beetles right?" Rick counted the last three points on his fingers. "Did I forget anything else?"

"I resent the first remark but no I do not think so." Ardeth replied but he could not help smiling.

"Cursed books, cursed chests, the bracelet of Anubis and almost being sacrificed twice." Evelyn smiled as well. "That's all I can think of."

"Great. So this should be a walk in the park, right?"

"Certainly." Ardeth snorted.

"How come I don't get to hear the good stories?" Alex asked after a pause.

"Some stories are better told in small pieces." He answered and was surprised to find that the thought did not make him as uncomfortable as he had expected. Allah, but it was good to have the others here with him.

"Medjai? Princess?" Came the uncertain voice from the curtained doorway. He turned as Tahiri stepped onto the balcony and then knelt, arms crossed over her chest, hands on her shoulders, and head bowed. He looked at Evelyn with a shrug.

"Please, that really isn't necessary. Oh my..." She looked a little flustered. "Do get up, please?" She tried in ancient Egyptian.

Tahiri rose to her feet and smiled shyly. "Thank you, Princess." She glanced at Ardeth and then to Rick and finally Alex. Rick at least was doing a reasonable job of not staring at how little the young woman was wearing. Alex was not.

"Tahiri this is Rick O'Connell and his son Alex. Princesses Nefertiri's husband and son." He gave the introduction in Egyptian first and then in Arabic for Rick's benefit.

"Greetings to you both. I-- am afraid I am not certain of the proper form of address Princess."

"Call them by their names, Tahiri. We do not really need all the formality." Evelyn smiled.

Tahiri blinked in surprise but then nodded. "As you say, Princess. So shall it be done. I came to see if you wished for your mid-day meal here Medjai? The High Priest said you would be here for the day?"

"Did he? Confident of him but true none the less. Very well, yes please, is there something in particular any of you would like?"

"We just ate breakfast. This going in and out of time is going to take some getting used too." Evelyn
sighed. "Just something cool to drink, please." She answered, speaking as much to Tahiri as she was to him.

"As you wish, Princess." And the girl backed out of the balcony and through the curtains.

"Nice wait staff at least." Rick smiled a little.

Evelyn smacked him on the arm without even looking. Ardeth smiled himself at the comment.

"She seems nice enough." He agreed. "If not very modest."

"All things considered, Ardeth, she was wearing more than I expected." Evelyn sighed. "I'd forgotten how little that usually was."

"Did you really dress like that mom?" Alex's eyes were wide. "Really?"

"Then again, maybe it's not such a bad place to visit." Rick chuckled.

"Come Alex I think we will let your parents argue this themselves. I am learning a new game. Do you want to learn Hounds and Jackals?" He walked back into his room with his nephew.

"There going to be all smoochy, aren't they?" Alex sighed with the normal exasperation Ardeth recalled from his previous visits.

"Very likely." He smiled. "They love each other a great deal."

"Yeah...ick."

"As you say." He went over to the chest by the wall and pulled out a set of game pieces and the intricately carved board he had found there on his previous visit and set it on the table. "Do you want to learn?"

"Sure. Looks kinda like Snakes and Ladders."

"If you say so." He agreed. They had just set the game up and he had explained the basics to his nephew when he felt the wind blow from the wrong direction. He smiled a bit. "I thought to try and better my game."

"What?" Alex looked up and then blinked. "Oh, hi."

"Hello to you too. I see the other guests are back." The creature walked over and studied their game board for a moment. "Hounds move this way." He traced the line on the board.

"Ah, my mistake." Ardeth agreed. "Rick? Evelyn? We have-- our host back."

The creature chuckled. "Really Medjai, one would think you did not care for my company."

He raised one eyebrow. "And this would be mistaken, why?"

A smile. "I am saddened to see the-- interest is so one sided, certainly." A more teasing smile.

He kept his expression as blank as he could. "When it rains in Aswan, demon."

Another laugh. "As you say. Hello O'Connell, Princess. Ardeth and I are teaching your son to play Hounds and Jackals."
"There are worse games to learn." Evelyn replied with a small smile. "Was Ammun pleased with the midday?"

"All is as it should be with He who rules all Egypt." The creature agreed. "That is an odd phrase in your language is it not, Ardeth?"

He shrugged. "Arabic is the language of the Prophet, peace be upon him, and is therefore the language of Allah. And there is no God but Allah."

"Are we still debating that?" The creature smiled and reached over to move another piece on the board. It took all of Ardeth's control not to move away as it brought the man right next to him. "I am beginning to wonder if we will ever get to the next tale, Ardeth. Your princess had more imagination."

He nodded. "I am only a warrior of Allah, monster. What need have I of imagination?"

One arched eyebrow. "Entertainment?" And then it chuckled again. "When you land here young Alex your piece must move this way."

"Like snakes and ladders." The boy agreed looking at them both oddly. "It's a fun game."

"Most games are." The creature agreed. "Set the table up on the balcony will you Medjai? We can continue the game while we eat."

Ardeth forced down a deep breath. "Do you wish lunch outside or inside Princess? Rick?"

His host gave him a glare that contained as much amusement as annoyance.

"Oh certainly, if the High Priest of Ammun wishes to take the meal outside, we should oblige him. We are his guests after all."

Evelyn returned. "But you can move the table yourself, priest. I do not recall loaning you my bodyguard to move furniture."

Ardeth smiled a bit himself at that.

There was a moment's pause and then the table the game had been on simply moved through the curtains as if carried. "As you wish, Nefertiri. Medjai, Alex. Shall we?"

"Um, sure." Alex got up and then paused half-way to the balcony. "Should I bring my own chair?"

The creature laughed again. "Far be it from me to be so rude." Another gesture and the chairs followed the table. "There. Satisfactory Princess?"

"Smashing." Evelyn returned with a smile. "Come on luv, you can show me what you've learned." She followed Alex outside.

"Medjai?" The creature looked from him to Rick and then back. "Am I going to need to remind you of your manners, O'Connell?"

Ardeth looked over at his friend only then realizing the anger that underlay the calmness in the now hard blue eyes. "No." Rick replied quietly, the one syllable of Arabic flat. "Just don't make me remind you of yours. Let's go join the rest of the family, Ardeth."

He nodded and walked past Rick as he headed for the balcony. "Are you all right?"

"Me? I'm fine." Rick replied in that same odd tone. "Later Ardeth, let's be polite and all."
"Certainly." He agreed. "I apologize if I have angered you again my friend."

"I'm not angry." Rick replied. "Yet." But the look he gave the creature made Ardeth doubt his friend's words none the less.

The creature only laughed again and followed them outside. "You will do me the courtesy of eating for a change Medjai?"

"No, thank you." Ardeth replied calmly. "Breakfast was fine."


"Okay, mum?" Alex asked.

"Certainly." Evelyn replied.

Tahiri appeared not a minute later with another servant who carried a small table and a basket. The woman had another basket and a jug of something Ardeth assumed was the hibiscus drink in question. The table was set up and fruit and dolmas and tahini placed carefully. The women filled five goblets of karkaday and then bowed and left.

"You really should not stare so, Alex. Not that they mind I am certain but it might be-- misinterpreted, no?" The creature picked up a goblet and took a sip.

"Well it's kinda hard not to, you know." Alex flushed a bit. "But I'll try."

"Don't give my son lessons in manners, priest." Evelyn said coolly.

"Well I doubt he will learn them from the rest of his family. I have the rudest guests."

"I like my family the way they are." She returned.

A smile. "As you say. Come now Alex, Medjai let's see what you have learned of the game." And the creature took a place by the game board. Ardeth glanced at Evelyn and then Rick and then joined Alex by the board as well. "Shall we start it over and you two can play against me?"

"Okay with me. Uncle Ardeth?"

"Fine." He took a drink of his karkaday. Allah alone knew how he expected to get through this with any dignity or without his friends realizing what underlay the game of words he and the creature were engaged in.

A chuckle from his host. "You might want to choose a battle you can win for a change, Medjai. You do seem to find yourself with unattainable objectives. I have always enjoyed-- attaining my goals, myself."

He drew a very detailed image in his mind of turning the key that kept the creature's sarcophagus locked into place with a click and then met his host's eyes with a smile. "Then we have something else in common."

More anger than he had seen since the creature had slammed him to the deck of Senmut's boat and then a cold smile. "Be careful with that one, Medjai. There is actually room for two."

He nodded once in acknowledgment.

"Am I missing something?" Alex asked a bit uncertainly.
"Nothing of importance, Alex. Only an ongoing argument of sorts." Ardeth answered after a moment. "Let us see what we can do with the board shall we?"

"Okay." Alex nodded.

He did his best to concentrate on the game but keep a good portion of his attention on both his host and his friends. Because there was undoubtedly something Rick was angry about and the creature seemed as amused by it as it had been with Ardeth's discomfort at its earlier teasing.

"As if I should not be entertained by both?" The creature asked suddenly in the language of the Medjai.

Ardeth sighed and then moved another piece on the board, glad at least that Alex couldn't understand the conversation.

The creature smiled and then surprised Ardeth completely by reaching over and taking his hand and moving the piece back to where it had been. "You miscounted."

He pulled his hand away with all the self control he could and barely succeeded at keeping the curse that came to mind silent. And damned if that did not get another smile from the damned thing.

"Really Ardeth, is even my title so hard for you to say?" The creature rolled his name with annoying familiarity.

"I will give no honor to a creature I am sworn to defeat." He reminded the thing once more.

A sigh and then a more teasing smile. "That is all right, Ardeth, it is not my honor I am interested in exactly." Then it simply leaned back in the chair and took a drink smiling as it did so. "Toss again, Medjai. It is your move."

"Alex." Rick's voice was full of that same coldness as earlier. "I don't think your uncle needs your help in this game. Why don't you see if you and your mom can find another board? All right Evie?"

"Are we boring you O'Connell?" The creature asked with another smile. "I might be-- persuaded to teach you to play too if you like."

"When hell freezes over." Rick's reply was cold.

"Dad!" Alex grinned. "We aren't supposed to say words like that."

"There's a time for everything, Alex."

A chuckle from the creature across from him. "Oh, I certainly hope so." Then it rose and gestured for Alex and him to follow. "Let us find another-- amusement for the afternoon young Alex. We are--boring your parents."

"I guess. This is going to be another of those things no one explains to me right? Like that Hem-Dahi thing."

Ardeth rose to his feet gripped his nephew's shoulder and very calmly pushed the boy behind him.

The creature only sighed and then something that could almost have been sadness crossed its face. "There are some things, young Alex, that are better never spoken of and avoided at all costs. Would you not agree, Ardeth?"

He took a deep breath and then nodded. "I will not argue with you on that point."
"Oh, I know from where I speak, Medjai. I do. You will too-- eventually." A cold smile. "Come now, we shall find some other entertainment."

"Why don't you walk with me, luv?" Evelyn put in. It left him and Rick between them and the creature. Little defense but all they had to offer at the moment. Rick reached over and squeezed his shoulder tightly.

"Over my dead body, buddy." His friend whispered in English.

He found a smile. "Thank you."

"So how shall we entertain ourselves this afternoon, Princess?" The creature asked as they headed down the hall.

"You said something about hunting earlier didn't you? Let's take that boat and see what the gods grant us."

"As you wish."

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"Here, I have a thought." Arebe pushed Sallah aside and then pulled their still unconscious friend up into a sitting position. "Hold him for a moment." He took the bottle he'd liberated from the O'Connell's friend's first aid kit and uncorked it. The thing smelled vile enough and held it under his friend's nose. A moment later Ardeth coughed once then again and then struggled a bit in their arms. "That is it. Come now, Ardeth, wake up." He waved the vile smelling thing again. Another choking cough and Ardeth's eyes opened.

"Arebe?" His voice sounded odd but it was at least a question.

"Yes. Allah be praised, Gamal wake the others."

"I-- do not..." Ardeth's eyes closed again and Arebe gave a moment to ask Allah's forgiveness and slapped his young leader hard.

"Ardeth!"

"Yes. Thank you Arebe." He swallowed. "Allah, that is unpleasant."

"Are you awake, Ardeth?" Rick O'Connell asked his voice sharp.

"Yes, I think." Their young leader replied. "Fuzzy yet. Slap me again, if you must, Arebe."

"Drink this." Gamal's first wife pushed a cup of coffee at him. "You will need to get up and walk as soon as you can."

"As you say, Ayisha." Ardeth drank the coffee with a grimace. "Do these-- hangovers, as you call them, always make everything taste so foul?"

"Usually." Rick O'Connell agreed.

"Are you all well? It is approaching time for morning prayers." Sallah put in quietly. "We tried waking you for the last few hours but..."

"That really was a bit foolish, Ardeth." Evelyn pointed out.
"So I am beginning to believe, my friends." He set the cup aside and then started to stand. Or attempted to anyway. "Allah..."

"Here, help me with him, Sallah." Rick came over and took one arm and Sallah the other and they pulled him to his feet. Arebe sighed and rose as well. "We'll walk some, Ardeth then you'll feel better."

"You sound, as if you know, from where you speak, my friend."

The American chuckled. "Sometime I'll tell you the story of the bar I first met Jonathan in and exactly how-- under the influence I was when he picked my pocket and stole that damned key."

"I will look forward too it." Ardeth replied with a smile. "Are you certain this will work?"

"Yeah. We'll keep you awake won't we Sallah?"

"If I must recite the entire Koran to do so." A warm laugh. "I could sing but we would scare the camels."

"Allah forbid. I will walk." Ardeth chuckled. "Sallah would scare camels in Cairo if he sang in Alexandria."

"I'll teach you some old drinking songs Sallah and we can annoy the hell out of him if he does something this stupid again."

"There is some good logic in that, my friend, there is indeed." Sallah smiled. "Are you listening Ardeth?"

"Unfortunately." Was the muttered reply but he smiled none the less. Arebe turned back to his other guests leaving the three men be for the moment.

"Are you well, Sitt O'Connell? Alex?"

"Fine. We were on a boat on the Nile and uncle Ardeth, dad, and-- the bad guy were trying to catch dinner. I wanted to try too but mom said I couldn't have a bow."

"You'd probably shoot something important with it Alex, like your father." Evelyn smiled affectionately and ruffled her son's hair. "It's better to learn a weapon on solid ground and well before you try it on a boat and get startled by a hippopotamus."

"Okay mum." The boy agreed.

"I do not understand these dreams of yours Sitt O'Connell. But we have not been idle in dealing with He who shall not be named either." He smiled and then handed her the golden book they had unearthed in the sand. "How did you know it was there?"

"Someone was gloating when they shouldn't have." The woman replied with a smile. "Does your father still have the key, Alex?"

"I'll go find out." The young man ran over to where Ardeth and the others were.

"There's another chamber 100 feet or so east of there. Or there was. If it hasn't collapsed completely it's full of treasure. We're looking for one piece in particular." And she drew a piece of paper from one pocket and showed it to him.

Arebe looked at the drawing and nodded. "As you say, Sitt O'Connell. If it will help defeat the
"There's probably going to be a statue of Osiris holding it, or one of Horus the Avenger."

"We will look. Do you want breakfast or only more coffee, Sitt O'Connell?"

"Both." She smiled. "Thank you for your hospitality, Arebe. These are trying times for us all."

"We are all warriors of Allah, Sitt O'Connell. Hospitality is little enough to offer."

"If you only knew Arebe. If you only knew." She whispered to herself in English and Arebe did not bother her with the fact that he spoke that language as well.

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"Feeling better?"

Ardeth finished buckling his boots with a sigh and looked at his friend. He had bathed quickly in the night chilled water from the oasis well and it had cleared the last of the drug's fuzziness from his mind. "I am."

Rick nodded and handed him another cup of coffee. He took it with a smile and sipped it thankfully. There was silence for a long moment but his friend made no move to leave.

"Are you still angry with me?" He tried finally.

"No, not really." Rick shook his head and sat down not far away, picking up a rock from the desert floor and turning it over absently in his hands. "But, I'd like a promise that you won't do something that stupid again."

He sighed. "I thought you understood why I did it."

"Yeah. I do. Did. Whatever. But Christ, Ardeth what if they couldn't have woken you up, huh?"

"I have-- how did you put it? Been paroled for now, have I not? There is no harm done."

"If it's only temporary it isn't parole. And besides, didn't look to me like the damned thing was keeping things peaceful."

It took all his control not to flush at that. "Peaceful is not the word I would have chosen, no."

Silence for another long moment. "Want to fill me in?"

"On what?" He tried for more calmness than he felt.

"You aren't that blind are you, Ardeth?" A sad sigh.

"Blind? Blind to what? Oh..." And he did flush despite his best effort not too.

"I'll take that as a no." Rick flipped the stone in his hands again. "Is that why he didn't kill you?"

"What that he finds me entertaining?" Ardeth sighed himself and took another swallow of coffee.

"Entertaining-- isn't the word I was thinking of."

He was silent himself for a bit and then asked Allah's forgiveness and voiced it. "That he finds me-- attractive then?"
"I was looking for a polite way to put it." Rick agreed with a small smile.

"Why? It is not something the creature is polite about at any rate." His voice came out rougher than he had meant it too but Allah knew it was maddening enough to deal with.

He looked up as the rock dropped from his friend's hands and one reached over and clasped his shoulder. "You want to tell me what that means? Like maybe the whole story this time?"

"What? Is it so hard for you to understand that I would keep what dignity I can? I thought we were friends O'Connell." He brushed the hand away and rose to his feet.

"And I thought you had sense enough not to get yourself killed or worse. You're my friend dammit. Don't you get it, Ardeth? If it wasn't for you, I'd have lost my son. And then Alex wouldn't have brought Evie back. And I'd be dead, if I was lucky. And I owe my whole family's life to you, you idiot! And then you go and get yourself almost killed or damned to hell or worse and all for our sakes again. Hell yes, I'm angry! But I'm trying to help, okay? Stop being so damned stubborn!"

He sighed, feeling the anger dissipate slowly and then surprising himself he found a smile and turned back to his friend. "You have no room to talk."

Rick blinked and then smiled a little himself. "Well no. Sorry? Okay?"

"As you say my friend. We are together in this, are we not?"

"Yeah." Silence for another long moment and then Rick's hand rested back on his shoulder. "You're okay?"

He had rarely in his life heard that level of seriousness in his friend's voice. "I am." He replied firmly. "Do you want me to swear it to Allah?"

A smile. "No. I'll believe you. Just.-- see that you keep it that way, okay?"

He nodded still not certain he understood all of his friend's concern but more than willing to let the subject drop. "Where are Evelyn and Alex?"

"Alex was still eating breakfast and Evie's got a whole bunch of guys digging at Hamanaptura."

"Your wife works miracles, Rick. Do you realize what it takes to get the Medjai to even consider stepping foot within the remains of Hamanaptura?"

"Probably exactly what it is now. How the hell do we stop that thing?"

"Yes. That would be about it. What does she have them looking for? I thought they had found the book of AmmunRa?"

"We've got that. Now we're looking for another spear like the one of Osiris. She seems to think this one will belong to Horus."

Ardeth nodded. "The avenger? It might indeed. Very well, shall we help them look?"

"Why not?" Rick shook his head. "I really do hate this place you know."

"We all do." He agreed but they walked down into the ruins none the less.
They settled into the hotel in Aswan with little difficulty. Tourists had become scarce since the war in Europe had started. Ardeth found himself picking absently at his dinner as they all sat at the rooftop restaurant however. There was little chance of staying up all night and no real profit in it if they were to reach Ahm Shere tomorrow. Another night of hour naps did not appeal to him or the others, but thy had on other options. He was not looking forward to what awaited them this visit. And not being certain that his stay of execution was still in effect in the odd time they were slipping in and out of with sleep made him even more uneasy. He joined the other Medjai in prayer and then rolled up his mat with care. "Once again most companionate Allah, I pray for your guidance and your mercy. I am not afraid to die, if that is your will. And I will do my best to face it bravely in whatever form it takes. But I am only a man, oh most merciful, and so I pray you will lend me strength to face this creature once more. I would do my friends proud Allah, and they will be there with me. As you will it, so shall I obey, as always."

"You sound like a man preparing for his execution." Arebe's voice surprised him and he turned to look at his friend.

"I suppose in a sense I am." He agreed.

"He has threatened your life then, as young Alex has said?" Gamal asked.

Ardeth shrugged. "It makes many threats my friends. How am I to know when or which ones it will choose to carry out? All I can do is trust to Allah and hope that perhaps I will be able to do it some damage when I die."

"We would go with you to face it if we could, Ardeth." Arebe's usually warm face was drawn and sad.

"I know it. But then who would watch over our sleep so that we can be awakened and pulled from this dreamworld the creature haunts?"

He found a smile. "Let us not plan my funeral quite yet, alright?"

"As you say." Arebe agreed. "Allah go with you into sleep then, Ardeth."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed.

"There are moments when I can see why the English are so fond of drink." Gamal muttered quietly. "I could use one."

Ardeth chuckled. "It is not worth the next day my friend. Trust me on this."

"As you say." The other Medjai nodded. "Shall I wake you in an hour then, Ardeth?"

He nodded. "It will be another long night for us all."

"As Allah wills." Gamal agreed, but he clasped Ardeth's shoulder.

He nodded himself and then headed to bed. They had all discussed having separate rooms but given the nature of the emergency, propriety was stretched and once again those trying to sleep did so together. Evelyn and Rick had one bed, Alex the second, he the third and one more against the wall for Gamal, Sallah, Arebe or whichever of the other Medjai joined them in their watch and was not on duty. He noticed that Rick or Evelyn one had moved Alex's bed closer to theirs but doubted the boy would mind. He paused for a moment and then laid his sword by his side and one knife under his pillow and laid down as well. "Sleep well, my friends."

"Worth hoping for at least." Rick agreed.
"Ma Salaama, Uncle Ardeth." Alex said with a smile.

"And to you, Alex." He smiled back.

"May Mut in her wisdom grant us all pleasant dreams." Evelyn's voice was soft even in the ancient Egyptian.

"Goodnight Nefertiri." Rick chuckled.

"Goodnight Rick." She returned and there was silence.

And Allah help him but it was so easy to fall asleep. And it seemed like only a moment before he was awake and in a bed he was becoming all too familiar with.

"Your timing has improved at least." Came the voice he had not wanted to hear. "I was wondering if you would like to join my god and I for breakfast Medjai."

He rolled out of bed, checking his weapons without really thinking about it and then sighed. "Are you always awake before dawn?"

"Do you not start morning prayers before dawn yourself Medjai?"

"As Allah has decreed."

"See? Yet another thing we have in common." The creature smiled. "There is coffee on the table. You have time for a cup."

"How long have we been here?" He poured himself a cup and sipped it thankfully.

"We?" The creature smiled a bit. "What makes you think I invited the others? That is hardly required you know."

He finished the coffee slowly and then turned to face the damned thing again. "Shall I be-- honored by the distinction?"

A chuckle. "If you wish. You do realize of course that it is four days since your first visit, Medjai?"

"I rather expected it might be." He set the cup down. "So, do I die today or do we play this foolish game again?"

"Are you ready to die?" The creature returned with a smile. "Come, we shall see Ammun and he can decide your fate for today Medjai."

He swallowed hard but nodded. "I will see your god, creature. But I will never believe there is any true God but Allah."

"As you say, Ardeth. As you say." The creature only smiled again and then rose from where it sat. "Bring another cup of coffee if you would like. You were sleeping soundly."

He looked at the damned thing in confusion. "For how long?"

"Almost half an hour surely." A chuckle. "I like to watch you sleep."

"You are mad."

"We have determined that." The creature replied with that same odd humor. "Will you come greet AmmunRa this fine morning, Medjai, and see what your destiny holds?"
"Do I have a choice?"

To his surprise the creature stopped. "In this? Yes. No one comes before Ammun who does not wish to be there. You may stay here and I will return within the hour to tell you of his decision or you may come and hear of it yourself."

"If Allah wills that it shall be this lost god of yours that prescribes his will in this ghost of a city that was, who am I to argue?"

"Well said Medjai, you see you are learning to debate this well. I hope Ammun grants you your stay of execution. I am enjoying the part of the Sultan in this tale of yours. Tell me of your princess Scherazade as we walk."

"You want a tale now? What if your god tells you to kill me this morning and you never get the end of it?" He asked as they made their way through the quiet halls of Thebes.

"Then that is the will of Ammun, Medjai, and I shall abide by it. But he is a kind god so I will see if he minds if I do not kill you today."

Ardeth did not answer that comment. He was in no hurry to die here or in the real world, but this on going game of yes or no was exhausting.

"I think I shall ask him for leave not to kill you for the time it takes you to finish your story, Medjai. We shall be true to the tale of your princess. That seems fair enough, does it not?"

"In the story of Scherazade, creature there is no death at the end at all."

"Really? He lets her live after all?" The creature chuckled. "She must have been far more charming than you." A smirk. "Perhaps you could take a lesson there."

"Go to hell." He repeated calmly enough he thought.

"If you keep inviting me Ardeth, we shall go together, just to show you what a poor idea that really is."

And Allah how was he supposed to answer that? He said nothing instead.

"So Scherazade has married the Sultan and he is going to kill her on their wedding night because he is mad and his first wife was trying to kill him and committing adultery with his brother and planning on making him Sultan instead. That was the basis for the story was it not?" The creature paused as one of the attendants came forward with a jeweled collar, headdress and robe.

"It was." He agreed, pausing as well and waiting while the creature took up the regalia of the High Priest of AmmunRa.

A smile. "There see you thought my title at least, Ardeth, and you still have your soul."

"You may dress in anything you please, it does not make you any less damned."

"See how little you know, Medjai?" A warm laugh. "It does exactly that foolish warrior. So, tell me the first tale of your Princess."

He sighed as they continued out into the great forest of columns heading the other way this time. "Once there was a young shepherd named Ali Baba who lived with his brother in the caves outside Baghdad."
"You are going to tell me a tale of Ishtar while we are walking through the dwelling of AmmunRa?"
The creature paused again.

"No, I am telling you a story about Ali Baba, who could have been a better Muslim, I am certain, but was none the less a believer in the true faith." He almost kept the amusement out of his voice. "What did you expect?"

"You are in an odd humor this morning Ardeth. It becomes you."

"One finds that after facing impending death and worse time and again, that the prospect of learning whether you will die or not once again becomes amusing all on its own creature."

"Hmm, I shall have to remember that. And you will have to save your tale for either me later or whoever is so foolish or stupid as to summon you from the horror of undeath."

He shook his head. "Death you may be able to bring me creature. But my soul, unlike whatever you once possessed, belongs only to Allah."

A chuckle. "We will see. Leave your boots Medjai this is sacred ground." He indicated the door before him.

Ardeth debated for a moment and then decided that if the Christians were kind enough to remove their shoes when they went to a mosque, he could be as courteous in return. He unbuckled his boots and set them beside the door.

"Thank you." The creature said with what sounded like genuine thanks and then raised both arms bent at the elbows and the door swung open without a sound. A gong sounded from inside the darkness and then a rustle of what might have been wings or robes. And the creature went to both knees and pressed its forehead to the ground as if it faced Mecca and then raised up to its knees again. "Blessed be the void that births all life. Blessed is the goddess Mut who births the stars in the sky and the Nile that give us life. Blessed is Umat, the father of gods. Blessed is Osiris who rules the next world and blessed, oh blessed, is his son Horus, the Avenging one, who freed the world from the jaws of Set. Great Horus grant your father's father, the sun, freedom once more from the land of your father the Great Osiris. Hail to thee, AmmunRa, lord of all Egypt, King of all the gods of both kingdoms. Be praised, oh my god and alight your barge once more to sail across the sky and light the path of the day. Grant us, oh god of gods another day of paradise unworthy though we all may be. Come-- I beseech you in the name of Egypt. Oh my god grant us light."

And there was another sound now like a sigh of wind but with no wind at all and from somewhere deep within the darkness a light came slowly forward and all around him the pillars began to shimmer with something like sunlight in this place where no sun could have entered, for he knew that the room was carved from a solid block of granite and there had never been a window of any sort. And the light came forward, and Allah have mercy on his soul but it came on two feet. And it was no more human than his host, but Allah he was beautiful.

"Imhotep." Said a voice that was nothing like a voice at all. "Arise and give thanks for I have blessed this day and you are once more welcomed in paradise."

The creature rose to its feet and then bowed from the waist before straightening and holding out both arms palms up bent at the elbows. "All praise to thee AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt. I am once more your servant in all things. May I serve you this day, oh great god?"

"As it has been. As it is. As it shall be." The god answered. "You have pleased me Imhotep and I am well pleased indeed. Dream you the dreams of the faithful Priest and walk once more in the Egypt
that was."

"As you have commanded oh my god."

And then the ram's head turned and looked at him and it was all Ardeth could do to stand and not flee.

"Welcome to thee Child of Allah. You walk a path unknown to you, Medjai."

"I-- walk where Allah wills me oh god of the Egypt that was."

Silence. "Was. Is. Shall be. All is Egypt Medjai. As she has always been. Blessed is the land of the Nile."

He managed to nod.

"You come seeking death, Medjai?" Asked that voice that was not a voice.

"No, oh great Ammun. I come-- seeking only the will of my God."

"I should count that impertinence, that you think I am a messenger of Allah."

He found the strength for a deep breath, and closed his eyes expecting to open them again in Paradise.

"Brave child. He pleases me Priest. And he has work yet for his God and for me." A laugh that brightened the room even more and made Ardeth open his eyes and risk a glance at the face of the sun. And he had to smile at the joy. "Much work and much pain you have before you, child of Allah. But your god is not without mercy and his gifts are many and great. You walk with his blessing and mine warrior. Fear not for your death yet, Medjai. But remember this, if you do not embrace it now it may not come again when you wish it most."

He took another deep breath that tasted like the first breath of morning. "I will live and die when Allah commands it, oh god of both kingdoms of Pharaoh."

"He is charming, priest, when he tries." Said the god and then it turned back to the creature that had stood silently. "Serve me well, Imhotep, and I may reward you yet."

"There is no greater reward I could ask for, my god."

"There is always greater reward whether you ask for it or not Priest. But we shall see if you earn it. You know what awaits you if you fail."

Sadness and horror in the creature's eyes that even Ardeth could not doubt in the light of Ammun. "I will never forget."

"See that you do not. I am hungry priest and have traveled long to bring light to the two kingdoms. Let me feast and I shall bless you again before my battle with Set begins again."

"As you will it oh great god." And the creature stepped aside and the light soared through the door and across the table Ardeth only then noticed full of food and then up and then it was gone and there was the brush of sunlit pink to the sky outside the windows he could see through the doorway. And the table was empty. He could not have found his voice if his very soul had depended on it.

"My god finds you charming, Medjai. You should be honored."
He could not even think of what to say to that.

A surprisingly gentle chuckle and a strong hand on his arm that guided him forward. "Come sit, Ardeth. It will not seem so bad in a bit."

"Allah forgive me." He found his voice suddenly and sank to his knees not caring what the creature beside him thought or did. "There is no other god but Allah."

"We are not in the world of your god right now Medjai. Let that be answer enough."

He looked up at the man who stood beside him. "Will you cost me soul after all, creature?"

"No, Medjai, I think AmmunRa has proven to us both that your soul belongs only to Allah." And he had no name for the look in the creature's eyes. "Sometimes Ardeth, it is better to remain ignorant of one's future, but we are chosen of the gods you and I, Medjai and are not so fortunate. Come, I will give you a place to pray to Allah so that you may calm your soul." The creature held out one hand and it took more strength than Ardeth thought he had to find his feet without it. A sad smile and then a sigh. "You are a most stubborn man, Ardeth Bay." They walked back out of the shrine and into the columns. He did not notice when they came out to the courtyard but the creature stopped. "East." He pointed behind them. And Ardeth did not care what the creature thought or did he only went to his knees and begged Allah for forgiveness.

He was still praying when Sallah shook him awake. And he could only push away from his friend's hands and find his feet and leave before anyone asked him anything.
Rick found Ardeth almost an hour later up on the roof facing east on his knees. He'd wanted to be angry at first, because Ardeth had scared the shit out of him again, pushing out of his Sallah's grip and then past the startled Medjai at the door, gone before Rick could really react. But whatever had brought his very brave friend to this point had to be worse than almost anything Rick could imagine. The only thing he could compare the look he'd caught in Ardeth's eyes too was how he'd felt when Evie had died in his arms. Lost. So he didn't say anything, only moved over and sat beside his friend and waited. He hated waiting; had never gotten any better at it, but when it had to be done he did it. And Ardeth needed him. That much was certain.

Finally, softly, his friend spoke. "Go back inside."

"No thanks."
Silence again, then a sigh. "Evelyn will wonder where you are."

"I told her I was going to stay with you for a while. She and Alex might catch a bit more sleep."

Another long silence. "You should be with her then, in case they wake in Thebes."

There was just the barest catch of his friend's voice on the last word. "No. I don't think so." He shook his head. "She's a strong woman she can survive an hour or two of sleep without me."

"Would you stake your soul on that?" Ardeth asked finally.

"Yeah, I would." He agreed. "It isn't my soul or Evie's I'm worried about."
Silence again long enough to make Rick grind his teeth in frustration. "Can a man live without one?" Ardeth asked finally and it was almost a surprise enough that he had to think for a second himself to answer.

"I've seen my share of people who I'm pretty sure don't have one, yeah."

"So have I." Ardeth agreed and they were silent some more. "Will you not leave me be?"

"No," Rick shook his head. "I owe you too much for that."

More silence and then softly. "Do you fear death, Rick?"

"Yeah, I guess. I mean it's going to happen someday but I'd like to put it off for as long as I can."

Ardeth shook his head. "Not dying. Death. Do you fear death?"

"Being dead you mean." He decided. "No."

"You are a fortunate man then."

"I am." He agreed quietly. Then he asked. "Do you? Fear death Ardeth?" Odd to use his friend's name like that but it seemed appropriate somehow.

"Not until now." Ardeth answered softly. "Now, I think I would beg not to die." A sigh. "It would have been kinder to have killed me."
"Probably why it didn't." He said finally.

"As you say." Ardeth agreed. More silence. "If a man can live without a soul can he live without God?"

"Lots of people do that too." He pointed out, even more worried now. Because no matter what the damned thing had done to his friend he'd never expected Ardeth of all people to lose faith.

"That is true." His friend nodded once. "I would have rather died."

"So you said. I've heard you tell me a dozen times, Ardeth. Allah is merciful; he will understand."

"No, I do not think so."

"We're only men Ardeth, who are we to presume to know what Allah wills or not?"

Silence and then his friend began to shake. "I believe-- in my heart, that there is no God but Allah."

He reached over as cautiously as he knew how. "Then believe in the fact that He'll forgive whatever it is you can't forgive yourself for." He rested one hand gently on his friend's shoulder, more relived than he could even admit when Ardeth didn't flinch. "God can forgive us a lot more than we can forgive ourselves, Ardeth."

His friend only repeated that last phrase in Arabic, over and over. There is no God but Allah. Rick closed his eyes. He hadn't felt this damned close to tears since Alex had first been grabbed by the curator and Anck-su-naumun. When he'd reached the top of the bridge and realized there was nothing he could do to reach his son. He hadn't cried then because that would have been admitting he'd lost. And he'd been too torn to find tears when Evie had died, too torn and too lost to do more than shake and grow steadily angrier. But it was hard suddenly to not just tear something apart with his bare hands. He wanted to be angry. Angry was easier than fighting back tears, but Ardeth didn't need him to be angry right now. Ardeth needed him to be strong. And he owed this very torn man beside him everything that meant anything to him in the world. So he could fight the tears just fine, and the anger could take a leap.

Finally the soft repetition stopped and the slight rocking that had accompanied it stopped too. Rick wasn't sure he was relived or not because there was only another long silence.

"Do you have anything to drink with you, Rick?" Ardeth's voice was still quiet, a little rough, but steady.

He pulled out the silver flask he'd started carrying years ago and never quite gave up. It only had a few ounces of brandy in it but he'd found it useful every now and again to calm someone who was close to panic or even death once or twice. Then he remembered that his friend didn't drink, and had probably meant did he have any water. Since Ardeth had to be thirsty after repeating that prayer over and over. "I could get you some water." He offered as gently as he could.

"No." Ardeth shook his head and then reached out his hand for the flask. Rick blinked, startled, and handed it to him. It hurt to see that his friend's hands were shaking almost enough to keep him from opening the bottle. Finally he did and took a sip of the whiskey. It had to burn like hell, because it usually burnt Rick's throat and he was a lot more used to it than Ardeth was. But his friend didn't even cough just took another drink.

"You'll make yourself sick." He warned.

"Fine." Another swallow.
"I thought you didn't drink."

"I did not." Another swallow. "It tastes horrible you know."

"It's for emergencies, Ardeth, not for enjoying."


"You're welcome." He answered. "Does it help?"

"Not yet. Perhaps it will when I feel it." Ardeth sighed. "How do people do it, do you suppose?"

"Do what, Ardeth?"

"Live without souls-- without God?"

"Probably like most of us, they breathe and eat, sleep and drink." He offered.

"It will take-- a great deal of-- getting used to I suppose."

He took a deep breath. "Living without a soul or without God?"

"Yes." Ardeth answered quietly. "It would have been kinder to kill me. No matter how long it took to die."

He swallowed down the tears again. "I'm glad It didn't. I need you."

A chuckle that made him cold because it was so damned lifeless. "Do you?"

"Yeah, I do."

"I will try not to fail you too, then."

He squeezed his friend's shoulder as gently as he knew how, as gentle as he'd been the first time the doctor had put his son in his arms. And oddly enough he found himself thinking the same damned thing. Just don't drop it. "You never have, Ardeth."

"I can not guarantee I will not."

"I wasn't expecting one." He answered.

A nod. "I-- am so tired, Rick."

He nodded. "Then we'll sleep." He forced down the tears one more time. "I'll go with you."

"Would you?" Something like hope to his friend's voice. "I do not think I can go alone, not again."

"All the way to hell." He promised.

Another chuckle with no more humor than the last. "Eventually my friend, that is all too likely." And he laid down where he was. Rick swallowed again and did the same. Finally, hesitantly, he touched his friend's shoulder again.

"How bad did he hurt you, Ardeth?" He asked it as gently as he could.

"Hurt?" His friend shook his head. "He did not hurt me at all, Rick. He only took my soul."
"Then we'll take it back." He didn't know what else to offer, but God he meant it.

"You sound so certain." A sigh. "Sleep well."

"And you. Ma Salaama, huh?"

A shudder. "Not anymore."

He paused and then translated the phrase out. Go in God's peace. "Allah will forgive you, Ardeth." He promised softly.

"As you say. Whiskey is more exhausting than wine."

He nodded and wished despite himself that his friend hadn't drunk it all. He could use a few swallows himself. "Then go to sleep. I'll guard your back." He hadn't been able to last time, hadn't even been there when the damned thing had hurt his friend so much, but he'd do it this time.

Silence again and then a sigh. "He did not harm me, Rick."

"So you said." He agreed.

More silence. Then strong muscles tensed. "Is that what you think?" Ardeth's voice was a bit unsteady.

"Is what what I think, Ardeth?"

A chuckle that made the other two sound normal. "It would have cost me far less to have only been forced to its bed, Rick."

He took a deep breath and let it out. "That supposed to make me worry less?"

"It is only truth." A tired sigh and he could hear the whiskey in his friend's voice. "Death would have been kinder. Tying me to the pillars and lashing me until I screamed would have been kinder. Taking out my tongue could not have hurt so, and neither rape or the Hom-Dai would have cost me so much."

He shuddered because there was no doubt in his friend's voice. "Then tell me what he did."

A sigh. "He took my God from me, Rick, and damned my soul as surely as it is damned itself. Now I only have to wait until I die."

"Then we won't let you die until we fix it." He said firmly. "Okay?"

Silence for a long while. "And if it can not be fixed?"

"Then I'll tell you about a place called Fiddlers Green Ardeth and we'll see."

"Scherehazade indeed..." A chuckle, with something like humor to it but it was probably the whiskey. "Evelyn will be jealous."

He chuckled himself. "You're drunk. And you couldn't get so lucky."

Another chuckle. "As you say. Good night, Rick."

"Good night, Ardeth. See you in Thebes or in the morning whichever comes first."
A choked sob and his friend turned to him and buried his head against his shoulder. "In'sh'allah."

"Yeah, wouldn't have it any other way." He let himself follow his friend into sleep and found himself praying for the first time in years that it was true.

"Rick?" Evie's voice was a soft whisper. "Wake up, hmm?"

He blinked and realized that he wasn't where he expected to be. It took him a moment longer to remember where that was, Aswan, the roof... Oh hell, Ardeth. But his friend was still tucked against his side, sleeping. But they weren't in Aswan anymore. "Hi sweetheart."

Evie smiled. "I see you found him."

"Yeah." He smiled himself and then pulled away from the man sleeping beside him and sat up cautiously. "Where's Alex?"

"Still only sleeping I think." She shrugged. "I woke up here not long ago and came looking for you and Ardeth." She looked sadly at their sleeping friend. "What happened?"

"I don't know. He didn't actually say." He shrugged. "It wasn't something I was going to really press, you know?"

"No. Of course not." She agreed. "He looks to be in one piece, even here, I mean."

"Yeah." Rick was more than relieved about that himself despite what Ardeth had said. But apparently he'd been telling the truth. It didn't look like whatever Imhotep had done had actually hurt him any.

"What time is it?"

"Here? Some time in the afternoon I think." She glanced outside. "About four?"

"Great, guess we can expect another dinner invitation then."

"Or something." Evie agreed. They moved over to the small table that was back where it had been and no longer on the balcony. By unspoken agreement they didn't wake Ardeth but they didn't leave him alone either. Rick didn't like to admit it, even to himself, but it felt too damned much like a suicide watch all the same. The door opened and the girl from the other day peeked in smiled a little and then came over to kneel beside Evie's chair. She whispered something to Evie.

"We're glad we're here too." Evie answered in both the language he didn't speak and then in English. Another whispered few sentences from the girl. Evie's eyes darkened to a shade Rick knew meant danger and she said something that caused the girl to gasp and then flush and shake her head desperately. Evie smiled and then said something else and shooed the girl out the door.

"What was that?"

"She said that our host wanted to see us, right now, in the main hall. All three of us. I told her to tell him that this was his fault in the first place and he could go to hell. She didn't want to take that message but I told her just to tell him it was from us and he'd understand."

Rick chuckled despite himself. "Well he'll know it's real at least." He looked over at his sleeping friend. "But maybe we should wake Ardeth before the damned thing gets here, huh?"

"He'd probably appreciate it." Evie sighed. "He looks so-- lost Rick. What happened?"
"I wish I knew." He got up and went over to the edge of the bed where Ardeth was still sleeping. "Wake up, Ardeth we're going to have company."

"What? Rick? I do not..." It was all his friend had time for before the door opened with a bang that brought him around with his pistol drawn and reaching for Evie. And Ardeth, bless him, was on his feet as well sword in hand.

Imhotep stood in the doorway looking at all three of them like he was one moment away from wiping them off the map. And despite his better judgement Rick found himself stepping forward to put himself not only between the thing and Evie but between it and Ardeth. He wasn't letting his friend die now. Not when he'd promised to make it right first.

But Imhotep only stood there and then he sighed and shook his head. "This will not do. What is wrong with you, Medjai?"

Like you don't know. Rick thought angrily to himself.

"O'Connell I am not in the mood to be hospitable. Be civil."

"I have told you Rick, no-- harm done." Ardeth's voice was almost as quiet as it had been on the rooftop.

"Like hell," he replied. "Once you realized where we were and that we weren't dying right this minute Ardeth, you could have cared less who was at the door. So we damned well fix this now." He smiled coldly. "Why don't you recite us something, sweetheart?"

Evie smiled as well and for just a moment it wasn't his wife standing beside him and she began to speak and Rick fired his pistol once straight at the thing's chest then tossed the gun to his very startled friend and lit the stick of dynamite he pulled out of his vest. "Fetch." He tossed it out onto the balcony behind them.

Imhotep roared and the dynamite came back in the window unlit, the bullet paused just an inch from the man's chest but Evie bless her finished the incantation with a smile.

"You unmitigated idiots." The creature snarled and Rick felt himself picked up and slammed hard against the wall. There was a roaring in his ears and then another sound sharp and loud and the force holding him against the wall vanished. He blinked to see that Ardeth was standing just in front of him holding Rick's pistol. And Imhotep was staring in disbelief at the bloody gash along one arm. Then Ardeth was slammed back into the wall as well and the pistol went flying. "For your information Princess that spell only works once. And this is the Tuat so you can not snatch my soul even if it did work again." He gash was healing with remarkable speed but it obviously still hurt. "And I am not mortal either." He looked from Rick to Ardeth and then back. "Fools. I should make you pay for that O'Connell."

"Try it." He grinned.

"Try it." He grinned.

Something like a smile. "Fine. Guards..." Rick felt himself pinned against the wall again and he couldn't even breathe much less move. "Escort the Princess next door and see that she stays there and safe no matter what she says until I can see her. And bring that one with me, if it kills him."

Rick heard Evie curse and struggle but he couldn't turn his head to look at her. Ardeth tried to move as well, Rick could tell that too, but he didn't seem to have any better luck. And it was getting so hard to breathe. Grey spots danced in front of his eyes and then the pressure was gone but so were Evie and Ardeth and the door was bared or locked or something. He turned back to the balcony, but
recalled all too well that it was a good four story drop to the ground and there wasn't anything he could climb too from it. The nearest one being what had been his and Evie's was a good thirty feet to his left. He was very effectively trapped.

Ardeth struggled as best he could in the guards grip but the creature held him mostly immobile. Finally he was pushed into a chair and held there by nothing he could see. "Leave us." The creature waved the guards away. "Stop fighting so hard Medjai. You will hurt yourself."

He smiled to himself and pushed harder. It was hard too breathe, as if he was straining to lift more weight than he could imagine. But he pressed against it none the less, until his vision grew grey about the edges. Then just as suddenly the force holding him in place was gone and he got to his feet with a gasp.

"What is wrong with you, Medjai?" The creature repeated. And it was almost enough to make him laugh. Then he did, first a chuckle and then a laugh that almost did not stop. So close to hysteria he could see the edge like a sword blade in sunlight. Oh there are dragons this far off the map, Ardeth, and madness in the shadows. Oddly the voice in his head sounded a great deal like his sister’s. Then again perhaps madness would not be so bad. He chuckled again.

"Stop that." His host growled and shook him once hard. "Now sit down, or I shall have your brother dragged in here, and he can suffer in your place."

That made him blink, and the coldness of reason settled back around him. He had already lost his own battle, but he would not take Rick of Evelyn with him to hell. He sat down without complaint.

"I thought I told you in no uncertain terms what would happen if you or O'Connell damaged this place?"

"You did." He agreed. "Rick does not listen very well."

"No. So I am beginning to realize. He is considering it now though." The thing chuckled. "He truly does expect me to tear you to pieces, Medjai."

Ardeth shrugged. "I rather suspect he thinks you already have." It should have bothered him, should have made him angry or disgusted or something but it was all too distant for that. "Are you going to?"

"Tear you to pieces?" His host asked with a smile.

"Torture, rape, kill? Whichever? All?" It sounded so unreal to simply ask but he was curious.

"Curious, yes, I can-- see where you would be." The thing looked at him with an expression Ardeth could not place. "You would not care would you, Ardeth?"

"No, I do not think I would." He shrugged. "I suppose I might, once it started to hurt of course, but I rather expect that it will."

"You are in shock my young Medjai. Here." The voice was suddenly gentle and a goblet of something was pressed into his hand. "Drink that."

He took a sip and smiled. "Wine? Rick gave me the worst tasting whiskey."

"Did he? Did it help?" Odd to hear that concern in that voice.
"No." He shook his head. "Do you want me drunk then?"

A sigh. "Ardeth, at this moment, I only want you sane."

He chuckled again despite knowing he should not. "Can you rebuild reason as you do a wall? Once the boards have broken?"

"I do not think they have snapped yet, only been knocked out of place perhaps. You are stronger than you think you are, Medjai. Even Ammun knows that."

He chuckled again. "He is beautiful is he not, priest?"

"He is indeed." Surprise to that voice now. Strange that he had never noticed how many different tones it could have. "Drink some more Ardeth."

"As you wish." And he did. What did it matter now? "Odd what we can find beautiful, is it not?"

"And what makes you say that?" Curiosity now to the thing’s voice. That tone at least he recognized.

"Your god is beautiful. This city is beautiful." He shrugged. "I suppose you must at least find me pleasing if not so beautiful as that or you would not look at me so."

A chuckle. "You are pleasing indeed, Medjai and you are beautiful in your own way, certainly, as is any weapon."

He nodded. "Do you know Priest, that at his moment you could have me and I would not care?"

"Yes. I doubt you would." Another sigh, which surprised him a bit by sounding sad. "Come now, Medjai, the day is almost done and I must see what we can do to right this. Your god we were told has plans for you and so does great AmmunRa. And I am not about to risk my salvation for your soul."

"I no longer have one foolish priest. You stole it without even taking out my tongue first." He chuckled again. "Lock me away if you please. Perhaps my torment will please Allah at least a little."

"If your god finds any pleasure in hearing one of his chosen sons eaten to death and screaming with no voice for days then he does not deserve your devotion Ardeth. Come now, we will see this righted."

He set the goblet down. "Am I drunk then?"

"I do not doubt it." Strong hands helped him to his feet.

"Last time it was pleasant to be drunk, until it wore off of course. This time it is not even pleasant. Only empty inside. I think it would have hurt less if you had cut out my tongue."

"It might have at that." His host agreed.

"Does it hurt very much?"

"I thought so. I was screaming the entire time. Even after it was gone. It is hard not to choke on your own blood, actually."

"Was she worth it?"

Another sad sigh. "I thought so at the time."
"You must have loved her very much."

"Enough to die for." The voice was as sad as the sigh now, more so. Odd to hear that too. Demons were not supposed to feel sad were they? He did not recall that the Koran ever said without equivocation. But the creature had been human once and loved and lost so perhaps he could remember being sad. "You are truly not well, Medjai."

"I have noticed that." He agreed. "Would you do me a favor then, priest?"

"A favor...? For you? Oh Ardeth, my young warrior, if you had any idea what you are saying. Certainly then, ask."

"I know what I am saying, priest It is only that I do not care. If I cared, I would not have offered to be your catamite a bit ago, now would have I?"

That brought the damned thing up short. Ha.

"You are going to hate yourself for this." The creature chuckled.

"More than I do? No, I do not think I could do that."

"Perhaps not. Can you unbuckle your boots now Medjai or do you want me to help you with the task?" Amusement he was used to in that voice but there was something else there as well.

"When did you become fond of me, Imhotep?" It seemed such a natural question to ask.

Silence and then a soft sigh. "When you threw young Alex through the wall I think." There was such disbelief to that voice.

"It is not a hard name to say at all." He decided.

"I am glad you notice. Here, I will get your boots silly warrior."

"Are you going to undress me then?" Something about that was vaguely unsettling but he could not grasp it. So many things for Allah to forgive already, too many, too much. Damned and damned and damned again like the man who's hands were easing the boots from his feet. "Does it become easier to bear?"

"Damnation? No, Ardeth, it does not. So let us see if we can insure the salvation of both our souls shall we?"

"Certainly. Rick said we would; but I do not really believe we can." He smiled at that. No matter what else happened he would treasure that friendship. He tried to focus on that but it was so hard to think. "Will you do me another favor, Imhotep?"

"Ammun give me a few more moments of strength and patience. What do wish now, Medjai?"

"Let them be? You can do as you please with me and I truly will not care. But let them be?"

A sigh. "Can one be a martyr without a soul, Medjai?"

"I would not know."

"Neither would I. Let us ask Allah. Shall we?"

"Allah is-- not going to want to answer me, Priest. And I am almost certain he is not going to talk to
you either."

"We shall see. Kneel here, hmm? And be quiet until I ask you to speak, please?"

"I will do a favor for you, if you will do mine for me." He chuckled.

"Ah gods. Fine. I will leave them be. Now do not embarrass me in front of my God."

"Swear it." He said firmly. "To Ammun."

"Medjai, if you cost me my salvation I will make you regret it for eternity, do not doubt that."

"Swear it." He repeated, it was good to have a tone to that voice he recognized.

"I swear it to AmmunRa he who is lord of all Egypt. I will leave the princess and her family be. Will that do?"

"Fine." He agreed and was silent. He did not really listen to what the priest was saying only the cadence of the words but it was soothing and it made something deep inside him ache a little less.

"Ardeth?" Another voice that was not really a voice at all said gently now.

He blinked and opened his eyes but it was so bright. "Yes great Ammun, He who is lord of all Egypt?" He looked into those fathomless gold eyes.

"You have caused yourself great harm Medjai and that is not what Allah wills."

"I-- have failed my God, lord of Egypt." He could hear the tears in his own voice but even that was distant.

"For seeing me? Silly child. Did your Ibrahim not see the messengers of Allah? Did he not wrestle with one until he could gain what he wanted? Did Jacob not see the ladder in the sky and the angels who held it? Did all of Egypt not see the Angel of Death as he walked amongst us? Did Mohammed, peace be upon him, not see those that carried him from Mecca to Jerusalem and Cairo and Medina and back?"

"All of this-- I believed, oh Ammun, but how can I believe when you are here?"

"Silly child. Allah is Allah. I am I. We are what we are." The warmth of the sun on his skin like the first day after the wet season. "Just because I am now, as I was, as I will always be. Does this mean that Allah is not as he is, and was, and will always be? Do you think I was not here when he moved your Moses upon this land? He is your god Medjai and he loves you well. Who are you to doubt him? You are only one man Medjai. He has delivered nations. Are you so important, Ardeth Bay, that your belief is greater than theirs?"

"No."

"No. So tell me silly child. Who is your god?"

"There is no god but Allah." He smiled as he spoke it. "But if it pleases him to show me your face instead of a bush that does not burn, I will be thankful."

And the light chuckled and he felt a strong embrace as if he was indeed a small boy and his father was still alive. And then the light faded and was gone. "Come now, Ardeth. You have put your body through a great deal and you need to rest."

He blinked and stared uncertainly up at the creature that offered him its hand once again. And he had
to laugh. "Thank you." And he took the outstretched hand shocking them both and pulled himself to his feet. "I am going to be sick soon, priest so it will be best if we get me outside, yes?"

"Are you well now, Ardeth?" There was still concern to that voice.

"I-- am sane, I think. That is something. But no, I certainly do not feel well." He managed to keep his feet with the creature's help until they were out in the courtyard and then he was back on his knees.

"Creature again am I?" So much laughter in that voice. "I rather liked hearing my name from you, Ardeth."

He found a chuckle. "Then you will have a fond memory of me after all." And then he was suddenly and violently ill. It did not stop when he was no longer in Thebes, but back on the roof in Aswan with Rick's arms strong around him much as Ammun's had been. It was somehow a bit more bearable that his friend was there. And then finally there was nothing else for his stomach to get rid of and he could only sit back onto his heels.

Rick muttered something and then pulled him away from the part of the roof they had been on. He managed the few steps it took to get to the chair Rick pushed him into and then his friend moved away and came back with a glass of water and a cloth. "Here you go."

He took a drink of the water and then wiped his face and set them both aside. "Thank you." He felt just a little foolish and not quite yet back in place in the world but it was easing some. "You did tell me it would make me sick."

Concern and sadness in his friend's blue eyes. "Yeah I did." Rick sat down beside him. "Can you tell me what happened?"

He blinked and then chuckled despite himself. "He said you would worry. That was foolish you know, brave as always my friend but foolish. He could have hurt you."

Rick's eyes were cold now. "I wasn't worried about me."

"No. I noticed that much." He sighed. "We should go find Evelyn, do you not think?"

"Yeah, I do." Concern and conflict as he glanced from Ardeth to the stairs behind him and then back. "Let's go see about her, huh?"

"I promise not to jump off the roof if you go." He smiled a bit more. "I will sit here and wait I promise." And he could not help it because it gave him such joy to say. "I swear it to Allah, my friend. Go see your wife."

A sigh. "You are going to drive me nuts. Then they can lock us away together and then where will the world be?"

"As you say." He reached out and squeezed his friend's shoulder. "Go."

"You promise you'll just sit here till I get back, right?"

"I promise." He agreed. It was easy enough. He really did not feel up to trying to move.

"Okay." And Rick's hand clasped over his with that same so odd gentleness he recalled from earlier and then let go and went downstairs.

He is never going to believe you when you tell him you are well. He sighed to himself. That was true enough. What surprised him most was that he could say it and mean it now. Well. Not only that no
harm had been done but that he was well. Whole. Thanks be to Allah. Most merciful who hears all prayers, forgive me for my confusion oh God for I am foolish and weak and do not deserve your love but it warms my soul. He took another sip of the water Rick had gotten him and then set it back down when his stomach objected to even that. He closed his eyes and leaned his head back and only concentrated on breathing for a while.

"Evie told me to come back and check on you." Rick said as he came back over and sat beside him. "Felling better?"

"A little. You would think that I would have learned my lesson with the wine, no?"

"Apparently not." Silence for a bit. "You sound better."

"Less like I am already dead you mean." He offered it baldly.

"Well, yeah." Surprise to his friend's voice. "Can you tell me-- what happened, yet?"

He sighed. "I-- lost myself for a while I think. It was not a very pleasant feeling. Thank you for being there my friend."

"You'd have done it for me." There was no doubt in his voice.

He smiled recalling suddenly how he had never doubted that friendship even in the midst of his despair and how it had made him glad when nothing else had even touched him. He sighed, not certain he wanted to examine what he had said to the damned creature too closely. He had a feeling it was going to be even more embarrassing than the wine. Come to that had the thing not given him wine this time too?

"How are you feeling?" Rick tried after what was apparently too long a silence. Still such gentleness to his voice. That was odd. Rick O'Connell was many things in his mind but gentle was not one he would have used. Then he recalled seeing him and Evelyn in the prow of Izzy's dirigible while they were searching for their son and he supposed it fit. "Ardeth?" Worry now.

"I am- feeling my way back to whole I think." He answered finally. "My head hurts, my stomach is worse, and I feel very foolish and a little embarrassed which I am certain will only get worse. But I think...I am well enough."

"Good." Rick did not sound particularly convinced but Ardeth had not expected him too.

"You will not believe me if I tell you I am fine will you?" He chuckled a little.

"Would you believe me?"

He pondered that for a moment. "No." He sighed. "Earlier, I was in Thebes right before dawn. The creature said you were not there when I asked and reminded me that my stay of execution was no long in effect that day." He sighed. "I did not really expect it to be."

"You could've told me that." There was surprisingly enough no anger in his friend's voice.

"As you say. I was not certain and there was little enough we could have done. But that is done. Then the creature invited me to go and see AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, and we would see what my fate would be." He smiled as he said it, recalling the wonder now of seeing what he had seen. Allah is indeed generous and his wonders were amazing to behold. "I had never met a god before."

One strong hand laid gently on his shoulder. "Don't-- hate yourself for that, okay?" A sigh. "Allah
will forgive you, Ardeth. It isn't like you went looking for someone else to worship for Christ's sake."

He smiled. "Or anyone else's either. That is an odd phrase Rick."

"What? Oh yeah, I'm no good with this kind of stuff, Ardeth."

"You are far more comfort than you know." He sighed. "It was the only thing I could grab hold of my friend that you trusted me, even then, as shattered as I was, when I no longer trusted myself."

"There aren't many guys...no there aren't many people at all I'd go to hell with Ardeth. You and Evie."

"Thank you." He reached up without opening his eyes and clasped his hand around his friend's wrist where the hand still rested on his shoulder. Rick pulled his hand back a bit and then clasped his wrist in return. "May Allah grant that we do not have to put that to the test."

"Sounds like you don't doubt he's still going to give a damn if you do or not." Rick said, the smile evident in the words.

"No, I was-- only lost for a bit there my friend. I am sorry I worried you."

"You scared the crap out of me Ardeth." A rough truth to the words. "When those guards dragged you away and there wasn't a damned thing I could do about it...hell..."

"I am sorry. I do not think, I understood it at the time. You took a great risk to try and help me Rick and I was too lost to even grasp it."

"You shot the damned thing, didn't you?" Rick pointed out.

He had to search a bit for that. "I did." He smiled. "How odd. It did not seem to be angry." He tried to recall what the creature had said.

"With you maybe. I thought it was going to take my head off..."

He opened his eyes and looked at his friend this time. "Are you well?"

Surprise and then a smile. "Yeah, just slammed me into the wall. It seems to enjoy that."

"That is very likely." He sighed and then swallowed a bit more water. His throat still hurt. "I think, and believe me I know how odd this sounds that I frightened it."

"You did? How? What the hell did you do?"

He chuckled. "I started laughing at first."

"What?"

"Hysteria." He shrugged. "Madness, both I suppose. I did not particularly care."

"And that scared it?" Confusion was so easy to read in his friend's eyes.

"It said something, I was not really listening to, but I recall it now. 'I will not risk my salvation for your soul Medjai.'"

"Want to explain that to me?"
He closed his eyes again leaning his head back and trying to capture the words. They had been speaking old Egyptian. "AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt has given it a task of some sort and it seems as long as it does this task that it is free of its curse and walks the world of Thebes."

"That's not a real comforting thought. How do we kill it if the gods are on its side?"

"I wondered that myself." He smiled. "But then Ammun said something about Allah having a task for me as well. And that I did not have to worry about my death at the moment."

"Well that's good. Its not likely to do something this god of its doesn't like, right?"

"No. I do not believe so. I think that is what frightened it you see. In the shape I was in I was certainly unable to carry out Allah's will and that might have angered AmmunRa and he fears that Rick. You should have seen its eyes when Ammun reminded it of the price of failure." He shuddered and recalled something the creature had said before. 'Compare it to three thousand years of undead horror as your body is eaten and rotting around you, Medjai, and you tell me if it is not paradise.' He could not argue with that. "So, oddly enough, it found a way to give me back my soul."

"You're serious?" Disbelief in his friend's eyes. "I would've thought it would've-- I don't know, gloated or something."

"And I." He agreed. "But it did not." He closed his eyes again and smiled a bit. "I do not think it knew what else to do with me."

"You're not making this up are you?"

He chuckled. "I told him you would not believe me that I was well. He seemed amused that you thought he was--tearing me to pieces, I think was the phrase."

"He did kind of give me that idea, yeah."

"And me as well." He agreed. "But the threats made little difference at that point since I did not care if he did or not." And he recalled suddenly that he truly had not. Had indeed said so in no uncertain terms. All but offering himself to the damned thing and it had only gave him wine and a way back to his god. Allah, I am a foolish man and I do not understand your glory or your plan. Forgive me, oh my God, and only grant me the wisdom to do as you wish of me. "I truly think it was too unnerved to do more than worry about its own salvation. Thanks be to Allah."

"It was still a hell of a risk, Ardeth."

He sighed. "I know. It was only that at the time I did not care." He met his friend's eyes again. "So Ammun has given me a pardon and I suppose that will be..." He stopped, recalling suddenly those few words he and the creature had exchanged at the shrine before AmmunRa had come and he and found his grasp on his soul again. "And I think, perhaps that I have found a way to keep you and Evelyn and Alex safe as well."

"What? How?" Rick gripped his shoulder again with not quite as much gentleness thanks be to Allah although it was still careful.

"It did not want me to upset AmmunRa. And so I told it that I would not, if it agreed to leave you be. And I think I made it swear to Ammun. But I was so far from thought, that I can not truly guarantee it."

"Damn it Ardeth, you really did scare it, huh?"
"Apparently." He smiled. "How odd." He leaned his head back again. "It will be morning soon."

"Yeah. Sallah was fixing breakfast. Gamal went to gather us a few more troops and Arebe is with Alex and Evie."

"I have-- not been much of a help this night, have I?"

His friend's grip gentled again. "Sometimes it's okay to be the one who needs a hand, Ardeth."

He smiled. "As you say. I will endeavor to keep my mind intact though so we do not have to do this again."

"Yeah. I'd like that. Besides I'm out of brandy."

"That is good. It was truly awful."

"I told you it's for emergencies not enjoying. Leave the drinking to me, okay Ardeth? I'm good at it."

"I am glad one of us is. Well, let me see if I can stand and keep my head attached."

Rick smiled but helped him to his feet without further comment. They stood there for another long moment of silence, while Ardeth decided whether or not moving was going to make him ill all over again. Finally, he managed a nod.

Rick's smile faded to something that matched the tone of his voice for most of the evening. "You would tell me if you weren't okay, wouldn't you Ardeth? And how could so soft a tone be so adamant? Ardeth had been leading men into battle for years, he knew an order even when it was couched in a question.

"I would." He agreed. "No harm done my friend."

"Okay." Rick nodded. "Then I won't pack more dynamite when we go back."

Ardeth had to laugh. "If it would keep him-- distracted. I certainly would not mind, my friend."

There was a definitely dark edge to his friend's smile now. "You wouldn't, huh? Okay. You want him too annoyed to bother you. I can do that. I'm very good at annoying."

"One would never guess." He clasped is friend's shoulder. "Come, I need to see if I can at least drink something. And then we have a long flight ahead of us."

"Ahm Shere." Rick sighed. "This trip just gets better and better. Ever wonder why Allah seems to think we'll save the world, Ardeth?"

He smiled. "Because we do?"

Rick gave a short chuckle much more like a snicker, really. "Okay. You've got me there. You sure you can walk? You drank a hell of a lot of brandy for someone who's only drunk once before and that wasn't even real."

"It certainly felt real enough." Ardeth argued. "But yes, I think I can walk." And Allah had more mercy on him after all because he managed it.

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Selim looked over the growing encampment of Medjai along the high plain above the remains of
Ahm Shere. There was a small herd of goats now, and some sheep, horses, camels all gathered in the shade of the shelters that had been set up for them. A caravan of water jugs was being unloaded from the Blue Nile only a few miles away and three dozen tents or more were spread in a widening circle. Women were grinding grain for bread under one tent flap that he could see. Children were playing with the dogs not far away from another group of young women and warriors who watched over them. He turned as the whistle of greeting preceded a man riding over the hill. Riad pulled his horse to a stop. "Gamal and the tenth tribe send greetings to you Selim, and word that they will arrive later today with the fourth tribe as well. Arebe travels by aeroplane with Ardeth, Sallah el Sallin and the O'Connells. They will be here by sunset."

Selim sighed. "So it comes again. Very well."

"And I am to give you this from Arebe." He handed him a letter.

"Thank you Riad, go and water your horse and yourself and rest. My tent is yours until your tribe arrives."

"Thank you, Selim." The young man slid to the ground and bowed before leading his horse over to the other animals.

He opened his fellow leader's letter and read it with growing concern. "I shall see that he lives to fight the fight he was meant to, oh God of my fathers. But could you not have given an old man an easier task? Moving the mount of Sinai perhaps?" He chuckled and then folded the letter away.

"Azza, Amal, Fatima, Kasha, we will have guests this evening. Daoud, Ibrahm, Jamal set up another tent. They will need a place to stay. It seems we are called to battle again."

The Medjai looked at each other and then almost as one out over the remains of Ahm Shere and then as they had always done they went about preparing to battle whatever enemy Allah saw fit to give them.

The plane arrived as the tenth and fourth tribes were setting up camp as well. He waited until the noisy thing finally stopped and then walked over. Sallah pushed open the door and let out the stairs with a smile. "Greetings Selim."

"And to you, Sallah. It has been too long since we have seen each other."

"Would that Allah had given us a better cause." His friend agreed. Then stepped off the plane followed by Arebe and Ardeth then the young O'Connell child and his parents and a man that Selim did not know at first, but finally recognized as the pilot, who had flown them here before. "Greetings Chieftain. We have sent for the seven tribes that are not yet here. We will be massed by two days from now if you wish it."

His young leader smiled. "I could not have asked for better news. You remember the O'Connells, do you not?"

"As always. Greetings O'Connell, Sitt O'Connell, young Iksa."

The youngest held out his hand. "How do you do?"

"As Allah wills." He replied with a smile and shook the boy's hand. His father offered his next.

"That does seem to be the best answer lately." The American replied with an odd look at Ardeth that Selim could not fathom. His nephew only rolled his eyes but smiled none the less.

"Behave boys we're guest after all." Evelyn O'Connell smiled at her husband.
"Oh like that's new mum. How come we have to be polite guests here if we don't have to be in Thebes?" Her son asked.

Selim looked at the boy in surprise. "I see you were right in your dreams, Ardeth."

"If you only knew Selim" There was exhaustion and something darker in his nephew's eyes.

"It's always good manners to be polite guests when your staying with people you like Alex." His mother answered her son's earlier question.

"Okay." The boy agreed.

"Izzy, once we get the stuff unloaded, you get back to Cairo." O'Connell pointed at the pilot as he spoke.

"Yeah, Rick I know, come back in three days with Evie's brother. I can do that."

"Good." He met his erstwhile friend's eyes with very little humor. "If you don't. I'll come back and blow this plane, the airfield and your butt all the way back to Tangiers understand?"

"Yeah. Okay. You've already gotten me shot in the arse once, O'Connell. learned my lesson."

"Good." He smiled and patted Izzy on the head. "And no making Jonathan pay for this trip over again 'cause I'll ask him when you get here and I'll make you pay it back before you leave."

"Yeah, yeah."

"Let us gather the weapons we have and see about a council of war my friends." Ardeth said after a moment. Then he glanced at the American again and then at Arebe. The other Medjai nodded and clasped his shoulder.

"Go. We will be ready when you return." He looked over at Selim who understood that look all too well given the letter he had received.

"Come walk with me, Ardeth. We shall go and see if the Nile can reveal a mystery or two to us." And he took his young leader's arm and walked toward the river.

"We do not have time Selim."

"We have all the time Allah grants us Ardeth and I am old enough to use what might remain of mine wisely. Do not make me embarrass you by pulling you behind me like a child."

His young leader chuckled after a moment but then nodded. "As you say uncle. It would perhaps, do me some good to speak to you."

"A wise man who knows when he is outsmarted before the fight even starts." He patted his nephew's arm.

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"I would wish that Allah would let me journey with you to face this creature Ardeth." Selim said quietly as they sat beside the small fire.

Ardeth smiled a little. "I could as well Selim. But it seems that only the four of us are invited at the moment." He was not at all certain he wanted anyone along on this particular evening. Allah alone knew what the creature would do considering the things he had said the night before. And while he
was incredibly glad that he was once again sane enough to care. He was also afraid of the consequences of what he had said when he was not. He had gone over what he could recall of the conversation he and the creature had, had the night before. But nothing was certain in his mind. Too much confusion and distance and he had cared nothing at all for keeping track at the time. 'I know what I am saying priest.' He had told it. It is only that I do not care. Now it was the other way around and he had a very real concern that he had pushed the thing too far.

"I will wake you in an hour Ardeth and I will pray to Allah that your sleep will let you rest." Selim poked the fire with a stick. "I am tempted to tell you not to sleep."

"I am tempted to do so." He found a smile. "But it is a battle that must be faced sooner or later Selim and the longer it goes on the more exhausted we all are. So we will do what we can and take the battle that Allah has given us."

"You will tell me again tomorrow of what he said to you, Ardeth?" Selim looked at him as if he was suddenly no older than Alex. He nodded.

"As you wish, Uncle. Do not stay up all night guarding my sleep, though. We all need what rest we can get if we are to face the remains of Ahm Shere tomorrow."

"We will be ready, Ardeth. Do not worry yourself about that at least." Arebe said firmly.

"Good. Then as little good as it may do I will bid you all goodnight. Ma Salaama my friends." He rose to his feet.

"Ma Salaama, Ardeth." Arebe replied.

"I will pray so." He agreed. Selim followed him to the tent his cousins had set up for him and his friends. He as uncertain whether he hoped they would be there when he woke in Thebes or not. The creature had sworn to leave Evelyn and her family alone. He did not even hope, that while Evelyn might consider him family, the creature would do the same.

"Here." Selim pulled a small wrapped bundle out of his robe and handed it to him. "If the creature wants you to explain the word of Allah to it, perhaps the words of the Prophet, peace be upon him, will serve you well."

He traced the worn embroidered cloth that held his uncle's copy of the Koran. "It is yours, Selim...I..."

"Do not argue a fight that is already lost, Ardeth. You have a hard enough one ahead." Selim smiled.

"As you say." He smiled back, and tucked the worn book into the pocket inside his robe. "Thank you, Uncle."

"Come back safe in the morning Ardeth and I will count it a well given gift."

He nodded and then laid his weapons down on the floor. "Shall we try this once more, my friends?"

"No heroics tonight alright Ardeth, Rick?" Evelyn asked in return.

"I will be satisfied to only sleep if the damned thing will let us." Ardeth agreed.

"Does that mean you don't want me blowing up the building?" Rick chuckled. "Only as a last resort, sweetheart."
"You can teach me Hounds and Jackals some more, okay uncle Ardeth." Alex yawned. "That's not too serious right, mom?"

"Sounds fine." Evelyn replied. "Sleep well luv."

"Ma Salaama, Ardeth." Rick said a little more seriously.

He smiled and laid down wrapping his hand around his sword. "In'sh'allah my friend."

"You'd know that better than I would." Rick replied but he sounded happy enough considering.

Once again it was so very easy to fall into sleep. And he was completely unprepared to have his uncle wake him in an hour and find he had not dreamed at all. The second was as uneventful as the first and while he dreamed during the third they were only dreams and not the city of the gods.

"You think maybe that promise you made it give really worked?" Rick asked after they had woken once again.

"I-- am leery of thinking it is so simple. But, then again, it truly seemed to fear that it would displease AmmunRa." He rolled over rearranging his sword as he did so.

"Let's risk an hour and a half then, the more sleep we can get the better."

"That sounds nice." Evelyn sighed, moving closer into her husband's arms. "I'm really very tired."

"So am I, Evie." Rick agreed.

Ardeth could understand that as well. He closed his eyes again and it seemed like a very long time before he rolled over again and found himself in the room he had been expecting most of the night. Sunlight was streaming in through the curtains this time at least. He rolled to his feet and sheathing his sword headed toward the door when the breeze shifted and the creature stepped in off the balcony. "Greetings Ardeth, Ammun has granted us another wondrous day."

He managed to control the smile that thought brought but it colored his voice none the less. "Are not all the days that AmmunRa grants to this place wondrous?"

There was a surprisingly genuine laugh. "Welcome back, Medjai. Are you feeling better then?"

He shrugged. "Considering I am here, I suppose it will have to do."

"And here I had hoped the manners might last once you were no longer drunk." Another chuckle. "There is coffee outside, if you would care to join me?"

He nodded. It was best, he supposed, to do this now, before the others arrived and it was even worse.

"I have let the Princess Nefertiri and her son alone, Ardeth, as I promised."

He relaxed just a little. "And her husband?" He pressed, not missing the distinction.

"You should have bargained better Medjai or in your own tongue. I said the princess and her family. Your brother does not count as a blood relation, and that is what the word means."

He found the patience for a deep breath and kept the anger where he could catch it. "It is something." He decided finally.
"As you say." And the creature poured two cups of coffee and handed him one. It took only slightly more courage than he expected to reach over and take the cup. The creature just smiled a bit more but nothing else."Join me, Medjai." It sat at the small table and picked up its own cup.

"Where is my brother then?" He asked, taking the other chair and sipping the bitter coffee.

"Unable to join us at the moment." The creature replied. "Really Ardeth, I rather liked hearing you say my name."

"No." He replied as calmly as he could. "Where is he?"

"Ask nicely." The damned thing smiled a bit more. "Since I know now you are capable of it."

He set his coffee aside and then took another deep breath. "Will you do me the courtesy of telling me where my brother is?" He asked finally.

"I did warn you both of the penalties for damaging this place did I not?" Was the reply.

"You did." He agreed. "But you were less than specific in what the punishment might be." It was so hard to be calm now.

"So I was." A shrug and it simply finished its coffee and poured itself some more.

He kept hold of his patience somehow. "And may I ask what that punishment will be?" He managed the words.

A chuckle. "You would truly like to wrap your hands around my neck and crack it in two would you not, Ardeth?"

"As you say."

Another chuckle. "And here last time you were my guest you were offering to how did you put it, be my catamite? Such language."

He found he could be calm after all. "You should have bartered better." He returned the thing's words back at it.

A laugh. "As you say. If all I cared was whether or not you were willing, Medjai I would have done as your brother suspects I have and given you the choice of my bed or proceeding with your execution." A smile. "You were willing enough, Ardeth, but what enjoyment would there have been?"

He forced down another breath. "I am no man's entertainment demon and I will slit my own throat before I will be yours."

"As you say." A smile with less warmth. "I rather thought if you were going to slit your own throat you would have done it yesterday, Ardeth."

He closed his eyes. "Yesterday I would not have cared. But that is then. So I will ask you once more. Where is my brother?"

"No." The demon smiled and set the cup down. "Perhaps later I will let you see him. For now you can enjoy your own company, Medjai. You came near to costing me my salvation Ardeth. I am not as inclined to be generous as I was."

He knew it was useless but he got to his feet with a growled curse and reached for the damned thing
none the less. The creature laughed, easily slamming him back into his chair and then moved over
and ran one strong hand with maddening familiarity through his hair and leaned over to whisper into
his ear.

"Just for that, I will let you listen to him scream." And then the creature was gone and he was alone
on the balcony. He closed his eyes with a groan and could only pray.
Imhotep checked the lock on the Medjai's door and smiled. Let him worry. First O'Connell had dared to threaten the sanctity of this temple with destruction. Then not only had Ardeth managed to shoot him when he had been distracted but the young man's madness had almost angered Ammun. And that had frightened him more than anything. He would let them both squirm on the hook for that. He walked over to the room he had given to the young American and nodded at the guard. It did not take much to reach beyond the door and find O'Connell awake and pacing. He opened the door and walked in with a smile, making certain to note all the man's movements. "O'Connell."

"Where's my family you son of a bitch?"

He smiled. "Your wife and son are sleeping peacefully, O'Connell as I promised to Ammun they would be. Your brother bargains well, if not quite as completely as he hoped."

"Where is he, bastard?"

He smiled. "Sit." He indicated one of the chairs. "And be civil."

Angry silence but his thoughts were racing in that language Imhotep did not now. But he sat finally. "Good. Now, why do you not try the question without insulting my parents?"

More anger and a few choice curses in Arabic. "Where is he?"

"I suppose that will do." He decided. "Are you certain you want to know?"

Cold hatred in those blue eyes. "Where is he?"

He could not help but smile. In such odd ways they were so alike. "Where I left him no doubt." He sat as well, pleased that the servants had left coffee here as well. He had left his other cup with Ardeth. He poured some and sipped it. "Do you know, O'Connell, what he bartered for your family's freedom?" He asked in return.

Silence for a long minute and more thoughts that he could not follow. "He said you didn't want him upsetting AmmunRa." The American answered finally.

"Did he?" He smiled a bit more and took another drink. "That was certainly a part. Odd what a man who does not care for his own survival will offer for the survival of others is it not, O'Connell?" He met those blue eyes with a smirk. "I rather like having him on his knees." A growl that did not even have words and the young man reached for him. "Sit down." He suggested stopping the hands from reaching his throat.

Silence but finally the young man sat. There was a sudden calmness to his thoughts and then a nod. "Last time you told me you cut out his tongue. You come up with some good lies, creature, I'll give you that."

He chuckled. "Lies are amusing when one is bored." He agreed. "But I swear it to AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt O'Connell. First he offered to let me have him, then he offered to let me do as I pleased as long as I left your family be." He smiled again. "Shall I go on?"

Silence, but so much anger he wondered how the man kept such a calm facade. "I don't get the idea what I want matters a hell of a lot."
He chuckled. "No." He finished the small cup of coffee he had poured. "And you are not certain whether you wish to know or are to afraid to ask." He chuckled. "It is odd, what will bring such a strong man to weakness is it not, O'Connell?"

"I'll see you in hell for that." Was the calm reply.

"So you say. Did you have any other questions or shall I return to my other-- entertainment?" He rose to his feet. "Your brother is no doubt wondering when I will be back."

Cold silence but it did nothing to hide the anger or the worry and despair.

"Next time you threaten this sacred place, Rick O'Connell I swear to Ammun that I will do as I did last night and begin to undress him, put him on his knees and bring him to tears. And this time I will make you watch. Do you understand me?"

The American nodded once.

"Good." He headed for the door. "I will send one of the servants with breakfast. Eat something for a change and I will be back later."

There was no reply, but O'Connell did not try for his throat or reach for any of his weapons either. He paused in the hall as Tahiri and Asher came with the breakfast he had ordered.

"This coming and going of our guests at all hours is most difficult to service, High Priest." The young woman said with a sigh.

"I imagine it is." He returned with a smile. "I hope the screams did not carry out to the courtyard and bother the children."

The women looked at each other. "Screams? No, we heard no screams." Asher replied finally.

"Good."

"Should we-- have the children play else where then, Imhotep?" Tahiri bit her bottom lip in worry.

"Perhaps today." He agreed. "Ask the Medjai if he heard them will you? If they did not carry to his room I doubt we will need to bother the children."

"As you say." She nodded and then went on down the hall.

"Tell him also that I will see him once midday has passed."

"He will not be happy with that message." She predicted.

"Ardeth is rarely happy with me, Tahiri so I have learned to simply expect his displeasure." He chuckled and then went to see that lunch was prepared for AmmunRa.

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Ardeth heard the door open and set down the copy of the Koran his uncle had given him. He had found little comfort in the words of the Prophet this morning however.

"Medjai?" Came Tahiri's voice. "The High Priest of AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, has sent us with breakfast."

He sighed. "I am here, Tahiri."
She came outside with another woman and they set up the simple meal beside the pot of coffee still warm on the brazier. "Will you bother to eat this time, Medjai?"

"I doubt it." He answered honestly. He was too concerned to eat.

She sighed. "The High Priest also says that he will join you after mid-day."

He nodded. "Was this recently?"

She seemed surprised but smiled a little. "Just now in the hall. I told him I did not think you would be pleased with the news that you would have to wait."

"I could do fine without seeing my-- host at all today, Tahiri if I did not worry more for where he was instead." He looked at her. "Have you seen the Princess Nefertiri or her family or husband?"

"No Medjai. The High Priest has said that he doubts the Princess will return soon." She shook her head. "Have you seen the Princesses' son or husband Ahsher?"

"No Tahiri." The other woman shook her head. "Shall we tell them you are expecting them if we see them Medjai?"

"Please. I would be thankful."

"It is little enough to do." Tahiri checked the brazier and then looked around the balcony. "Have you been out here long Medjai?"

"Since I arrived." He replied. "Why?"

"We were wondering if we should move the children from the courtyard so they would not be disturbed by whatever screams Imhotep was speaking of. But if you did not hear them out here I doubt they were heard below so I shall not have to try and gather them all someplace else." Ahsher smiled. "Thanks be to AmmunRa."

He forced down a deep breath at that. "As you say. No. I have heard no screams."

"That is good." Tahiri shivered. "Sometimes I do not understand the tasks the High Priest gives me, Medjai but I will hope I have served him well enough and you as well. Can I get you anything you would like?"

He shook his head. "No Tahiri I am afraid not. Unless you can find Nefertiri's husband for me and either bring him here or take me to him. I need to speak to him soon."

"I will try then." She smiled, bowed quickly and then the two women were gone.

Ardeth looked up at the bright sun in the sky and then bowed his head. "I am only one man oh great god of Egypt and I do not know or understand what it is you wish of me. But please, show mercy for my brother and let him be. I would gladly take his punishment for my own as he meant you no disrespect and was only trying to help me. He is a good man oh AmmunRa no matter what his manners may say. I would know he was safe." He was not sure how long he stood at the balcony railing before the wind changed again. He did not bother to turn.

"You have not eaten?" The creature asked.

"No." He replied calmly.

A sigh. "Why do I bother."
"If it annoys you so. You should not." He shrugged. "I will eat when I wake in the real world."

A chuckle. "You are angry with me Medjai."

"Angry? No." He disagreed. "I am only concerned for my brother." Anger was too calm a word for what he felt at this moment.

Another chuckle. "Come sit then and finish the tale you began the other day. I am hungry if you are not. Then, if I am pleased with the tale and your manners I will take you to your brother."

He took a deep breath and then turned to face the damned thing all over again. "Will you do me the courtesy of telling me if he will be well?"

A smile. "He will be fine. When he wakes." A chuckle. "He was more concerned with you actually." It glanced at the other chair. "Sit."

So he did. He picked up Selim's copy of the Koran and put it back in his robe. "That does not surprise me."

"No." A teasing smile now. "I am certain he thinks-- whatever punishment I have come up with for you is far more, personal."

"Go to hell." He repeated the phrase calmly.

A chuckle. "You can be rather fickle, Ardeth."

He took another deep breath. "Apparently madness can make a man care not in the least for what tortures he might face or invite. Such is its appeal." He shrugged again. "But that was then. And now I am not."

"So I noticed." A smile. "You are truly fortunate that I am willing to forgive you for the promises you made yesterday even while I am abiding by mine, Medjai. The least you could do is be a bit more polite."

"If you can truly pull my thoughts from the air then you know I am wishing to Allah that I could kill you but I am not. Is that not polite enough?"

The creature chuckled. "As you say." It poured itself some tea and began to eat. "Tell me your tale, Medjai."

"If it will allow me to see my brother. And I did not embarrass you in front of your god. Was that not the agreement a favor for a favor?"

A smile. "You asked me for several favors Ardeth, very nicely I might add. And while helping you get your boots off when you could not do it yourself was certainly amusing it was not nearly as intriguing as some of the others."

And damned if that did not make him flush.

"So, shall we let the favor stand Medjai? 'Let them be?' Do you recall asking me that?"

He nodded once. "And you said you wanted me only to kneel there and be quiet while you spoke to Ammun. Did I not do so?"

"No, oh no, Ardeth. That was later. We were still in my rooms the first time you asked me for the favor. Do you recall what you offered?"
He closed his eyes. "No."

"Oh yes you do. But let me remind you. You told me I could do as I pleased with you and you would not care if only I would let them be." The damned thing smiled again, and his gaze wandered over Ardeth with a familiarity that made his skin crawl. "Shall I let your brother go?"

Oh Allah, no, please...? He closed his eyes and simply worked at breathing. Then he opened them and smiled. "Do so. And he will find a way to put you back into hell. And then I will have no bargain to keep will I?"

"You place a great deal of faith in one man."

"I do." He agreed.

"Do you think I could not make you regret it, long before he managed it, if he does at all?"

"No. No doubt you could make me beg to die. But if that is what it takes to see you back in hell..."

He recalled what the creature had said once before. "If there is room for two then we shall share it. And I will slit my own throat to keep you from your god. And we will go to hell together."

Silence and then the damned thing laughed. "You are pleasing enough Ardeth, but nothing is worth losing my soul again." A smile. "Pity." Then it rose to its feet. "Since I will obviously not get my tale today you can walk with me and tell me of that book you are so fond of instead."

He forced down a deep breath. "It is the word of Allah, creature not a book."

"Really?" Surprise and something like curiosity. "Then perhaps you can read me some. Let us walk, hmm?" It headed for the door. "Come now, Medjai, if I am walking with you I am not torturing your brother, am I?"

And there was little enough that he could say to that, so he followed the damned thing out the door. And before he could even take a dozen steps he woke to his uncle's voice.

"Oh Allah, thank you Selim." He gripped the older man's hands where they rested on his shoulders. "Rick...?" He turned to see that his friend was already awake and holding Evelyn tightly. He blinked against his own tears and rose to his feet. "Come Selim. Let us leave them be." He led his uncle out into the night.

"Will you tell me what is wrong? The young woman woke a bit ago in panic and then we woke her husband and he was almost ready to take Sallah's head off before she hugged him. And no one has ever ordered me so. I was already waking you.."

He sighed. "He was worried for my sanity, uncle. Let it be. He is-- well within his rights to worry. Allah but I hope he is well." He shuddered and sat down by the remains of the fire.

"Are you?" Selim asked.

"I am fine. I was only going to explain Islam to it again when you woke me. I do not think Rick was so fortunate. It was very angry, and I only saw it for a little while of the time we were there."

"He seems well enough, if angry." Selim offered.

"Angry isn't half of it. You," Rick pointed at him as he stormed over. "Owe me one hell of an explanation."
"What?" He rose to his feet only to have his friend grab the front of his robes and shake him. "Stop it." He broke the grip easily enough. But the punch that caught him across the jaw was a complete surprise. He stumbled a little with it. "Rick."

"You idiot! What the hell did you think you were doing, huh? My family is my responsibility, you ass. Mine. And I don't need your martyr bit,okay? I ought to beat the shit out of you. What the hell did you think you were doing?!" Rick grabbed the front of his robes again and then shook him, hard.

"Let go." He gripped his friend's wrists. "And do not hit me again when you do." They stood there for a long moment only glaring and then Rick's hands loosened.

"Fine." His friend nodded. Ardeth let go of the man's wrists and really was not expecting the next blow across his jaw. He stumbled back again. "That's for lying to me. Now we're even."

"Lying?" He rubbed his jaw. "When have I lied to you?" He watched his friend warily. "Please, I do not want to fight." He was not sure his friend should even be trying, no matter if whatever the creature had done to him transferred to the waking world or not he had to be hurting. "Are Evelyn and Alex all right?"

It was apparently the wrong thing to ask because Rick's eyes got even colder. "Want to make sure it was worth it, huh?"

"Worth what? You are not making sense. And we are making a scene and waking the whole camp. Shall we try and do this like men and not boys?" He let go of the anger, none of it was really directed at his friend anyway. "Please my friend? I am too tired to fight."

And the look changed all over again. "Oh hell, shit, I'm sorry. Yeah okay. We'll sit, huh? Maybe we shouldn't do this here?" He looked around. "I didn't say anything did I?"

"If I had the slightest idea what you meant Rick, I would answer you. Are you well..." He paused himself. "Perhaps you are right and we should not make the whole tribes listen to this." He could understand his friend wanting to preserve some dignity and it was certainly nothing he wished to discuss where Alex might overhear, or Evelyn. He offered Rick his hand. "Friends?"

"Yeah." A sad smile, but Rick shook his hand none the less. "Idiot."

"Kettle and pot, my friend." He smiled back. "Selim, I am sorry for my rudeness. I will tell you what the creature said when I get back. This is something we need to do alone."

A weary sigh from his uncle. "As you say Ardeth. Shall I tell your wife where you have gone O'Connell?"

"Yeah. Thanks."

They walked outside the ring of tents and away from Ahm Shere. It did not take then long to find an outcrop of rock to sit on. "You okay?" Rick asked finally, the words sounding oddly hesitant.

"As you see." He agreed and then sighed. "And you?"

"Me?" That seemed to surprise his friend. "I'm fine. Why?"

He blinked. "The creature said, that while the oath it had given included Evelyn and Alex it did not include you." He recalled that last offer all to well. Shall I let your brother go? Allah alone knew what Rick had suffered before that. He could at least count himself thankful that no more harm had come to his friend afterward because he had not made the bargain.
"Guess not." Rick's voice was cold again. "I ought to slug you again."

"Let us not." He shook his head. "And what have I done this time, to anger you, my friend?"

"I told you. Evelyn and Alex are my responsibility. So, you just tell him the deals off. Hell, I'll tell him. You think I'm letting you buy them out of there with...no...uh uh. No way."

"I do not... Oh Allah." He felt himself flush and then had to chuckle. "Is that what it told you?"

Silence for a long moment. "Don't try to tell me it lied, Ardeth. I'm not buying it. It swore to AmmunRa and it wouldn't lie about that."

He blinked, confused now. "Then-- perhaps whatever it is you think I have done is not as embarrassing as I feared. So what did...no let me ask mine first and hope that it lies as well to me as it did to you. It caused you no harm today? I was told to listen for your screams."

Surprise and then a sigh. "It really got us both, huh?"

"Apparently. No harm done, my friend?"

"No harm done. Damned thing didn't lay a hand on me." Rick growled something else Ardeth couldn't make out. "I thought you said it wouldn't lie to Ammun, huh?"

"I doubt that it would." He shook his head. "Then again, that might depend on what it said exactly. I take it from your-- anger earlier it told you I had made some sort of bargain for Evelyn and Alex that included more than keeping silent while it talked to Ammun?"

"Yeah." And there was a definite flush to Rick's face this time. "It said a lot of things."

"Of that I have no doubt." He rolled his eyes heavenward. "I swear to Allah Rick, it drives me mad with looks and teasing but that is all it has done."

"Then it can lie to its god." Rick sighed. "Damn."

"Yet it kept the bargain I did make. And I made it swear that to AmmunRa. So, tell me what it said and we shall see what it can and can not lie to its god about."

A muttered oath that Ardeth could only agree with. "You sure you want to know?"

He managed a chuckle. "It can not be worse than what I will assume if you do not tell me." He was rather sure of that.

"There is that. Okay, so we figure out what it lied about so we know what exactly we have to work with?"

"As you say. It did tell me I should have bartered better. That the way I let it word its oath included only Evelyn and Alex and not you. So perhaps we would do well to listen to how it says what it says."

"Great. Half the time you guys are speaking languages I don't even know."

He chuckled. "Then we will stay with Arabic. That might do more good, because I am more likely to catch it at tricks."

"Good. Okay, so, let me think. It came in a while after I'd woken up and seemed really pissed about the dynamite."
"Yes. I imagine it was." Ardeth chuckled. "That was well planned actually."

"Thanks." A smile. "I was really worried since Evie and Alex and you weren't there. But it said that Evie and Alex were sleeping real sleep since you'd made it make that promise."

"Good." Ardeth agreed.

"Yeah. Evie wasn't real happy about being left behind though."

"I imagine not." He smiled. "Then what?"

Rick closed his eyes and obviously worked at getting the words right. "I was really angry. So, I'm not certain about the beginning. But it asked me something about did I know what you'd bargained for their safety?"

Ardeth sighed. "As I told you. I was to not embarrass it in front of Ammun. Only that."

"Okay, I'll believe you for now. In fact that's what I told it."

"And what did it say?"

Another bit of silence. "That it was only a part of the deal I think. Yeah, that was it. It was only a part." His friend flushed again. "Then it said something about you that I don't think I should repeat."

He sighed. "Just say it, Rick. I do not doubt I will survive the embarrassment."

"It said it liked having you on your knees." Rick muttered finally. "So I just about took its head off with my bear hands. But it didn't let me get too close."

Ardeth sighed. "Not as bad as I was afraid of." He managed a smile. "Then what?"

"I told it that it was a really good liar."

He chuckled. "Thank you for the confidence."

Rick shrugged. "The first time we went back and you weren't there it told me it took out your tongue so I figured it lies pretty well."

Ardeth nodded. "Then what?"

"It told me it enjoyed lying but that in this case it wasn't. That's what worries me. I was calm by then, angry as hell, but calm, because it told me to sit down and behave or it would do something worse to you."

"An easy enough threat since it has not done anything to me yet."

"Well I didn't know that, did I?"

"No, I am sorry my friend. It made much the same threats about hurting you if I did not behave and they were no less effective. So what did it say to worry you?"

"Lies are amusing., but I swear it to AmmunRa..." He paused. "This is really embarrassing."

"I noticed." Ardeth sighed. "What did it tell you I offered then?"

"To let-- it have you and to do as it pleased. If it left Evie and Alex alone."
He blinked and then chuckled despite himself. "Then it did not lie at all."

"What?!"

He held up one hand. "I did. If not exactly in the way it inferred. I was a bit too lost to care at the time. I am fortunate that it was too worried about its own salvation to take the time to test my offer am I not?"

"I'm going to knock you into next week." Rick growled.

"Later please. So was that all it said? Perhaps it can not lie to its god after all. I can understand your assumption Rick, but think. Did it actually say it had done me any harm or only that I had offered to let it?"

Silence and then roughly. "Yeah, that was right before it left. It swore something else to Ammun..."

"That is important Rick. Allah, I hope it can not lie when it swears an oath. If the gods do not have the power to stop it we are doomed. What did it swear. Please?"

Rick nodded. "It said. 'Next time you threaten this sacred place, Rick O'Connell I swear to Ammun that I will do as I did last night and begin to undress him, put him on his knees and bring him to tears, and this time I will make you watch.' So either it can lie to Ammun or you're lying now. Which one?"

Ardeth blinked and then closed his eyes. "Is that exactly what it said?"

"Yeah. Just like that in Arabic."

He ran the words over in his mind, and then despite himself, he chuckled. "It does manage to make it sound rather-- damning, does it not?"

"Make what sound damning? What the hell happened Ardeth?"

"I was too drunk to take off my boots. So, I suppose, it could say it started to undress me. But I resent the implication. And I was kneeling to Ammun, not to it. And looking at AmmunRa is like looking at the sun, so I have no doubt there were tears. Besides those I shed for my failure to Allah." He sighed. "It lies with nothing more than how it tells the truth."

Silence and then Rick's hands were on both his shoulders. "Then you tell me in no way that I can doubt."

He nodded. "I swear to Allah Rick, that it has not harmed me, nor made me serve it, nor taken me against my will. I can not say it has never touched me, because it has, but they were only meant to annoy nothing more."

His friend smiled and then sat down with a sigh. "Okay. I was really pissed off you know."

"I noticed." He smiled back. "And we have undoubtedly worried Selim. We should get back."

"Yeah, I'm sorry I slugged you."

He chuckled. "Only because you were wrong. Otherwise I have no doubt you would beat sense into my skull. Or try at the least."

His friend laughed. "Yeah. So I won't buy what it tells me and you don't buy what it tells you until we check with each other okay?"
"That is a bargain I do not mind making."

His friend chuckled. "Hey I've already managed to get you to sleep in my arms, buddy and I didn't even have to try."

He rolled his eyes but then laughed. "Perhaps you should not put it quite that way to Evelyn, hmm?"

"Oh she saw it." He grinned. "She thought you were cute."

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." He shook his head.

"We can hope so." Rick agreed. "How long is it until dawn?"

"Four hours or so I would guess."

"Think we should risk going back to sleep? I'm probably going to fall over tomorrow at this rate."

"I am in no rush to face the damned thing again. But if we let it keep us from finding it and the book of the dead, then it will have what it wants. And at least I think I rest here while I am dreaming there."

"Yeah, me too. Okay then but all joking aside lets try it together, huh? It worked in Aswan and it'll be harder for it to lie to either of us if were both there."

"What worked in Aswan?" He asked.

"When we were on the roof and you fell asleep beside me, that's how I woke up in Thebes."

"Really?" He thought for a moment. "Then we shall try it. I will guard your back if you will guard mine."

"That's a plan."

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"I don't like not being there." Evie sighed as they all gathered back in the tent. Alex was already half asleep but smiled at his dad and Ardeth.

"I know, but we have to sleep Evie. And I can't say I'm sorry you'll be safe."

"You're not going to do anything foolish while I'm not there?"

"Cross my heart."

"And you either." She pointed at Ardeth.

Rick smiled at their friend's slight surprised confusion. "She means you." He pointed out.

"I gathered. As you say, Evelyn. I will endeavor to do nothing foolish."

"Keep him and yourself safe, Ardeth." She smiled but kept the ancient Egyptian firm. "Or I will show up in full dress for dinner."

A nod but he smiled back. "Yes Princess."

"Now don't you two start." Rick muttered.
"Sorry love." She kissed him soundly, not really caring what the other Medjai thought.

"Can we go to sleep now?" Alex asked.

"Yes, Alex." She moved over to her son's pallet and tucked him in. "Goodnight luv."

"Night again mum." He yawned. "Night dad, Ma Salaama, uncle Ardeth."

"And to you." Ardeth returned. "I hope this works." He laid his sword down on the bedding beside him and then rolled onto his side and took hold of the hilt. Rick chuckled but did the same, putting them back to back literally. Evie sighed and then snuggled up to her husband.

Rick chuckled again but there was as much exhaustion as humor to the sound. "There's probably a rule against this somewhere right?"

"Please-- do not remind me." Ardeth muttered. "I have enough of that to face already."

"Right. Sorry."

She sighed wishing there was more she could do for her friend's crisis of faith. She offered a silent prayer to God and to Mut and to AmmunRa all the same though to keep them both safe as they walked the city of gods.

Rick woke slowly, not really ready to give up on sleep. The bed was soft and he was comfortable. He reached sleepily for Evie and came up empty-handed. There was warmth along his back though so he rolled that way and then recalled suddenly that he hadn't gone to sleep in a bed. Well, well, back in Thebes. He blinked against the light. Ardeth lay beside him, apparently still sleeping. Rick couldn't really blame him, no real sleep on top of a narcotic and a first attempt at whiskey and far too much stress. He was pretty amazed that Ardeth could keep on his feet. He sighed. Poor kid. He smiled to himself at the odd thought and then realized suddenly that they weren't alone.

The creature sat at the table, watching them from time to time as it read. Maybe not watching him much since it didn't seem to know he was awake. That made him angry because it meant the damn thing was watching Ardeth. And he had the craziest idea to just roll Ardeth over and tuck his friend's head against his shoulder as Ardeth had done last night and then pull the sheets up over both of them and tell the damned thing to find some other entertainment. Then he noticed those dark eyes on him and smiled. Well, well Jealous are you? He smiled a bit more and then did just what his crazy idea suggested. Ardeth, bless him, rolled into the move without waking. His friend would probably slug him when he woke up. But that was okay, Rick owed him one anyway. He looked over Ardeth's shoulder at the damned thing and smiled, sending the thought clearly in Arabic. "Over my dead body, bastard."

Surprise then annoyance and a flash of anger before the creature covered them all with calmness. "I will expect you both for dinner." It said calmly.

"Maybe." He said softly. "Maybe not."

"Mmm?" Ardeth stirred at the voices. "Allah, are we there already?"

"Shush. Go back to sleep." Rick smiled and then smoothed his friend's hair much as he would have done for Alex. "Just ignore it." He whispered in English.

Ardeth started to pull away in obvious confusion.
"Trust me."

Another moment of stillness and then the other man nodded and laid back down. "You can explain it to Evelyn."

"Deal." he restrained from smoothing his hair again but not by much. "Did you want something?" He asked in Arabic. And Ardeth tensed against him, realizing that they weren't alone.

"As I said." The creature replied rising to its feet and then heading out the door.

Ardeth sighed. "Do I even want to ask?" He rolled out of bed with a mutter and gathered up his weapons.

Rick shrugged and did the same. "I didn't like the idea of him watching you sleep."

"I am not fond of the idea of it watching us sleep either but..." He stopped and then turned to stare at him. "Oh Allah. Damn you Rick, this is not funny."

He grinned unrepentant. "I think it's jealous." Then he laughed. "Come on, Ardeth, think bout it. It lies to us, right? With what did you say only how it tells the truth? So I thought I'd give it a little bit back.

A sigh. "So now it will think I am already-- familiar with such things."

Rick shrugged. "Didn't seem to me that it cared much whether you were or not."

His friend was quiet for a bit. "As you say."

"I wish you could have seen its face. You might think it was worth it too."

"Really?" There was a smile now. "If you think so. I doubt anything will make this worse so I suppose there is not harm done."

"I figured we could annoy it and not threaten to blow anything up. So, it can't really get too annoyed at us, right?"

A chuckle. "You may be correct after all my friend." Ardeth headed for the door. "Since we have been invited for dinner shall we go and see what we can find until then?"

"You want to go snoop?" Rick grinned. "Sounds like a plan."

"Snoop? I-- suppose so yes." A nod and he opened the door. Rick was almost as surprised as Ardeth looked that it actually opened. His friend glanced into the hall and then shrugged. "We are apparently old enough to go outside without supervision."

"Does that make you as nervous as it makes me?" He asked. Ardeth only looked at him and then drew the sword at his belt. Rick pulled one pistol himself and kept the other hand on his knife. "Didn't we promise Evie we'd weren't going to go looking for trouble?"

"I am only looking for a way home, not trouble. The creature is not the only one who can word his promises carefully."

Rick chuckled. "You might get around it like that Ardeth. I've got to live with her."

A nod. "Then we shall endeavor to get home so that you can." His friend agreed. "I could wish my knowledge of the temple of Karnak that remains was better than it is."
"We'll have Sallah draw us a map for next time."

"As you say." They headed down the hall. There were some twists and turns that Rick followed pretty well and finally they came out into a huge room full of columns. "The courtyard is this way." Ardeth indicated the left.

"Good." Rick couldn't help but stare up around him. "This place is huge."

"It is." Ardeth's voice was a little off. "The city of the gods, my friend. May they grant us what we seek."

"I'll leave talking to the gods to you okay?"

"As you say." Another chuckle. They paused, noticing that the large cedar doors were open this time and then Ardeth sighed and put away his sword. "If we look like we are supposed to be doing this, perhaps no one will think to question why we are."

He considered that for a moment. "Okay." He holstered his pistol but kept his hand on his knife. He noticed Ardeth didn't let go of his sword hilt either. The courtyard was bright and noisy after the temple itself, full of women and children gathered about several wells and fountains or sitting beneath the palm trees. He was glad he'd put the pistol away then. No sense in getting the kids shot.

Someone called out to Ardeth and his friend turned. But he didn't draw his sword so Rick only stood there as he spoke to the man.

Finally, the larger Egyptian nodded and Ardeth turned to his friend with a smile. "Atnutamun, chief steward of the piers, has said he can find us a boat to take us back to Aswan and your lady wife."

"Really. I'm sure-- Nefertiri would appreciate it, if I can get home." He shrugged, keeping the Arabic as calm as he could.

"Shall we?" And it seemed they might just manage it because they followed the steward out the main gates and into the city of Thebes.

"Are you taking a journey?" The creature asked calmly as it walked up beside them.

Rick didn't say anything for a moment.

"We thought to go to Philae," Ardeth answered with as much calmness. "Did you want to join us?"

"Alas, while I would be honored to walk the temple of the mother of the gods, I have my duties here. I am certain that Atnutamun can find someone to take your brother to Aswan, Ardeth."

"Really?" Rick looked over at the thing. "Just like that?"

"Certainly." A smile. "But you have a promise to fulfill here, Medjai. So I am afraid your brother must journey alone."

Rick could see Ardeth tense even more and then shrug. "And what promise is that?"

A chuckle that really made Rick want to rip the thing's head off again. "You swore that you would not embarrass me in front of Ammun did you not? He expects to see you this evening. So, I can hardly let you leave now. Unless of course you want the promise broken?" A colder smile. "I am certain he would be almost as pleased to see the Princess."

Ardeth took a deep breath and then glanced at him and then back at the creature. "But you would not
prevent my brother from leaving for Philae?"

And this time the smile was nothing but teasing. "Certainly not. Shall I let your brother go then, Ardeth?"

Whatever the hell that meant to his friend he could see the hatred that flared into Ardeth's eyes.

"Thanks all the same." He smiled himself, with the same insincerity he used on Evie's snobby relatives in London. "But it just wouldn't be as enjoyable a trip without him. I'm sure Nefertiri can wait a few hours to see me." He looked over at Ardeth. "Okay?"

"As you say. It is good of you to postpone seeing your wife to keep me company though."

"You can make it up to me." He returned with a grin. Ardeth rolled his eyes but he chuckled none the less.

"Allah forgive me, but you may have a point after all."

"Allah's a merciful god, Ardeth. I'm sure he can forgive us all sorts of things if we ask nicely."

Another chuckle and then he turned back to the creature. "It appears you will have two guests for dinner after all."

"As you say." The thing seemed almost confused. "I was hoping we would get to discuss the word of your God, Medjai. And you still owe me my tale from the other morning."

"As you say." Ardeth nodded. "Do you know the 1001 nights, Rick?"

"Aladdin and Ali Baba and all that?" He asked.

"Indeed. Remind me to thank your wife for the idea will you?"

"Sure." He shrugged a little confused himself now. But it was worth it just to see the creature turn and gesture them back toward the temple with obvious annoyance. "See?" He asked in English. "Told you it annoyed him."

"So you did." A smile. "Thank you."

"What are friends for?" He gripped Ardeth's shoulder. "So what's with the 1001 nights?"

Ardeth rolled his eyes. "I find myself with Schereazade's unenviable role. I try to explain Islam to it and tell it stories and it postpones my execution."

"Didn't Ammun already do that?"

Ardeth shrugged. "I am-- not certain I want yet to risk that what happens here will not keep me from fulfilling my task for Allah when I wake."

He nodded. "Right. So are we going to be good guests?"

"We did promise Evelyn."

"Right." A chuckle. "But I won't promise not to yank its chain every now again if I can."

Ardeth smiled back. "Allah is, as you say, most merciful, my friend. I am certain he will forgive us both."
"Really, Ardeth, it would do you good to keep to a language I understand or I shall keep from
extending your brother the same courtesy." The creature said with a smile.

"As you say. I had not realized you were finished talking with Atnutamun. We shall keep to Arabic
then, as you wanted to hear more of Allah."

"Far be it from me to make you explain Allah to anyone in the language of AmmunRa. We would
not want to anger our gods would we Medjai? We might find ourselves in hell after all."

Ardeth nodded once. And Rick didn't have to read minds to get the threat that was implied in that
one. Over my dead body you son of a bitch.

"That can be arranged O'Connell. You, my god has no plans for at all." The creature smiled coldly.
"You would do well to recall our discussion yesterday, O'Connell. It is odd, is it not? What can bring
a strong man to weakness?"

Rick couldn't help but tense at that. "You'd know more about hell than anyone else I suppose." He
agreed calmly. But he didn't argue the point.

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Imhotep sat under the shade tree, sipping the wine Ahsher had brought a bit ago. His uncertain
guests were sitting not far away and Ardeth had pulled out the copy of the Koran that Imhotep had
seen earlier and was looking for a quotation to make a point. Imhotep smiled a little. "Your god
should be thankful for your devotion Medjai."

Ardeth looked up, but there was mostly surprise in his eyes. "It is little enough for Allah to notice."

"No. I think it is more than that. How many men, Medjai, when confronted with a truth that unmakes
their entire lives would be so concerned with what their god might think?"

"I could have had more faith." The young Medjai disagreed. O'Connell sighed.

"Allah is merciful, Ardeth, he'll understand."

"As you say."

"Please O'Connell. Even I shudder to think what will happen to the worlds if you and I start to find
things on which we agree."

There was a moment's pause and then unwilling amusement from them both. "That might be pushing
even my luck a little too far." O'Connell agreed.

He smiled and then picked up the ongoing game of words with amusement. "I was beginning to
think we had too much in common already."

"Really?" O'Connell smiled and there was no mistaking the mischief in that grin. "We were talking
about miracles weren't we, Ardeth?"

The Medjai sighed but smiled none the less and then smiled even more as his friend looked over his
shoulder at the book he was searching. "Are you going to help me find where the Prophet, peace be
upon him, is talking about the great miracles such as the parting of the sea?"

"Maybe." His friend replied with another smile and the ease with which they bantered was both
amusing and annoying.
So you want to play do you children? An amusing pastime I admit. "Do you read Arabic "

"Reasonably." The blond man shrugged but stopped looking over his brother's shoulder. "Do you?"

"No." He shook his head. "Language, like water seeps through the sands of Egypt and I have absorbed it over time with the coming and goings of men. Your language is still too new to Egypt to have become part of the sands. Perhaps we could learn something from each other then? You can teach me this English of yours and I will teach you Egyptian. It will be hard for you to come to Thebes so often if Ardeth must always be there to translate for you. Who is to say that you will always be here at the same time after all? Pleasant as he can be when he is trying to be charming I would be taking lessons in manners form my guests if I did not offer you the same hospitality whether or not your brother is able to join us would I not?"

Silence for a long time. Ardeth was reciting part of the Koran with studied calmness and O'Connell's thoughts were spinning in that language he had just offered to learn. "You want me to teach you English?" The man asked finally.

"Come now O'Connell, even your brother here is not too afraid of bartering with me. Most of the time." He smiled again.

Annoyance and anger but also amusement were easy to read in Ardeth's thoughts. The American was harder to grasp with no words to guide him. "I teach you English you teach me pharaonic Egyptian is that the bargain?" O'Connell asked.

"As you say." He agreed.

"I'd hate for there to be any misunderstandings later."

He had to chuckle. "Entertaining though they may be, alas this one is not nearly so-- intriguing. But it might help pass the time you are here."

"If you're that bored with my company I could leave."

And he arched one eyebrow and sipped his wine. "And leave your brother all alone?" He let his gaze touch the young Medjai's boots and then travel as slowly as he pleased upwards until he met those bright brown eyes. "I would be getting the better end of that barter I think. Not that I would not appreciate the gift."

Anger now and Ardeth simply smiled back with no humor at all. "When it rains in Aswan."

He chuckled. "As you say. Do we have a barter then O'Connell or must I tell my cooks once again that they are short guests for dinner?"

"We would not want to offend the cooks again." Ardeth answered with s small smile. "Would we Rick?"

"No of course not." The blond shrugged. "Fine. Like you said, it'll pass the time."

"Good." He set his glass aside. "I will send Tahiri with more karkaday or wine if you wish O'Connell. But now I must see to the my god's meal before he returns to his battle with Set. Do you wish to pray to Allah now Ardeth or afterward?" There was a moment of fear and then an uncertain joy. No matter how much he might wish otherwise he had been awed and warmed by the presence of AmmunRa. Imhotep smiled. "My god would see you Medjai. Will you come?"
"I am only a man, creature. If it is once more Allah's will to give me such a gift, who am I to refuse? There are few treasures so rare, are they not?"

"There are indeed, Medjai. There are indeed. Leave your brother the word of Allah then, so as not to be too rude to my god."

"I would never be rude to AmmunRa, creature, and I take the word of Allah with me whether I carry it in my heart or on these pages." He re-wrapped the book in its embroidered cloth. "You will keep my uncle's gift for me until I return, my friend?"

"Of course. Are you sure about this Ardeth?"

"I am. It is good of you to worry so, but I think my faith, poor though it may be, has been resolved."

"I'm still out of brandy." The American smiled a little. "Okay?"

"That is good. It was truly awful." He handed the book to his friend and got to his feet. "Shall we go?"

Imhotep looked up at the sky noting the position of the sun. "Indeed." He smiled. "We shall return in time for dinner." He looked from one to the other. "If you wake before that, O'Connell, you would do well to make sure Ardeth does not. Ammun is expecting him. And while it is possible he will forgive being interrupted, I would hate for so pleasant a day to end on so permanent a sentence of damnation. You agree no doubt?"

"Yours, I'd throw a party. His, not in this lifetime or any other."

He chuckled. "As you say. Come now, Medjai, it would do us both ill to keep Ammun from his dinner."

"Allah forbid." The young Medjai chuckled just a bit. "Odd as that may sound." He rose to his feet, clasping his brother's shoulder for a moment. "I will see you for dinner or in the morning Rick, which ever comes first. Allah watch over you."

"I'd go with you if I could."

Another warm smile that made Imhotep recall once again how pleasing his young guest could be. "To hell if necessary. I have not forgotten." He straightened. "Shall we go?"

"Certainly." He headed toward the temple knowing that the young Medjai followed. They walked back through the forest of columns and then into the first temple door. Several acolytes appeared and he stopped and then slipped off the loose robe and pants he'd been wearing for the day. Ardeth's shock and then disbelief and anger were exactly what he'd been expecting. "I will not meet my god covered in dust, Medjai. Turn away if you are so childish. And be thankful I do not expect you do the same." He almost kept the amusement from his voice.

Studied silence and then a sigh. "AmmunRa has seen fit to be kind to me undeserving and uncertain though I was. Do you expect me to meet him unclothed or might I ask for something to wear."

"There are robes for you there." He indicated the basket one of the acolytes set down. "Tempted though I am to say yes to such a charming idea. It is not, I expect, the sort of gift AmmunRa would appreciate nearly as much as I might." He took the cloth and water and washed the dust of the day away.

Ardeth caught himself in the middle of a prayer to Allah for strength and then finished it anyway.
adding one to Ammun for understanding when he had no such understanding himself and then much to Imhotep's amusement he carefully set his weapons aside and taking hold of both his temper and his courage undid the black robes he had worn from the waking world and let them fall to the floor. He smiled a bit more and then chuckled at the glare that got him. "You are so fun to tease, Medjai. Really, why so shy with the wonderful gift Allah has given you? You should be proud of such beauty, Ardeth. It is an uncommon gift."

Silence but he took the cloth the acolyte held out with a nod. "I am glad for all of Allah's gifts. Your amusement and-- attention I would pay dearly to do without."

He chuckled again. "Foolish Medjai, all you had to do was ask." And he turned his back and took the clean clothes the others had ready for him and dressed calmly.

So much anger and annoyance and then disbelief and finally a weary sort of acceptance that made him smile. When he turned back the young man was dressed in the robes Imhotep associated with the Medjai of his own time. They fit his young guest well and he smiled a bit more. "Now you look fit to meet my god, Ardeth."

"As you say." He bent down to gather his weapons and put them away without further comment.

Imhotep took the jeweled collar and headdress the last acolyte held out for him and slipped them on. Then he turned to his young guest and gestured forward. "Thank you for your honor and courtesy to AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, Medjai. Your courage as always does you credit."

Silence and then more wearied acceptance. "You are mad."

"So we have established." He chuckled. "Then we have something else in common do we not?"

A sigh and then quietly. "Praise be to Allah and AmmunRa that I have come through mine whole."

"As you say." He paused to check the large banquet table covered in food and drink, protective oils, incense and amulets. He picked up one of the amulets and turned it over in his hands for a moment before holding it out to his guest. "Here. Ammun knows you will need any help you can get for the task ahead."

"I do not need your gifts, creature." He shook his head firmly. "I will do without them."

"Gifts such as you have been given and offered here are not to be taken lightly, Ardeth."

"I have been given many great gifts, creature, but I will take none from you."

He set the amulet back down with a smile. "I am certain I could find something you would enjoy."

"There is no thing you could give to me, creature that I would not give back."

"Hmm," He shrugged. "Shall we wager on that, Medjai?"

"What?"

"Wager on it. A bet? I am certain I can find you a gift you will want to keep. You are certain I can not. So are you certain enough to wager that I might be right and you wrong?" He thought for a moment. "If I find this gift, whatever it may be, and I give it to you and say 'shall I take it back?' and you say yes then I lose. And I shall leave your sleep and your brother's untroubled for a week. If however you wish to keep it then you lose."
There was silence and then an uncertain prayer of thanks. Undirected this time he noted with a smile. Then distrust. "And if I lose?"

He chuckled. "It is a wager Ardeth I am not going to ask for you to give up your-- honor so easily." He teased. "No, all I ask is that you spend the evening here uninterrupted, come to the banquet I have prepared and eat some of it and enjoy yourself and be as courteous and polite a guest to me as you would be to your fellow Medjai. Is that a wager?"

"If I lose all I have to do is come to one banquet you have prepared for me, and be as good a guest to you for that one banquet as I would be to my fellow Medjai? And if you lose you will let Rick and I both sleep undisturbed for a week, the same week."

He chuckled at the last. So you do not want to leave me way out of it do you? "Very well, Medjai it is a wager then. I will keep my part if you will keep yours. I swear it to AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt.

"And I will keep my part if you will keep yours. I swear it to Allah."

"As you say. Come, the day is ending and we shall see Ammun onto his journey into darkness with as much honor as so epic a battle deserves."

"You god is very brave, to face this battle each night." Ardeth agreed.

He looked at the young man in surprise but could find nothing but honest appreciation for the courage it took. Ardeth was a warrior used to facing his own battles with an undying foe and he could well appreciate the involved. "We agree again then, Medjai. Woe be to the world should he ever lose."

"Allah forbid."

"We can always hope." He chuckled at the phrase but the sentiment behind it was appreciated. "Come now warrior. We will face the end of the day."

And they walked to the shrine doors and Imhotep bowed and then they were swung wide and he stepped inside the shrine. The boat that was to carry AmmunRa on his journey through the underworld sat waiting on the altar. He lit the braziers on either side of the door and then the two in back and then knelt facing the door. To his pleased surprise Ardeth hesitated for a moment and then knelt as well, on one knee, his hand on his sword hilt. So some things change little after all Medjai, a warrior of god and Pharaoh have you always been wether you recall it or not. He bowed his head, touching it to the floor and then the priests out on the walls saw the sun touch the ground on the far bank of the Nile and the gongs began to sound. "Oh AmmunRa, You who are lord of all Egypt accept our humble thanks for this glorious day you have granted us. Come oh great god of both kingdoms I beseech you, there is food and drink for you to partake of before you journey once again to do battle with your constant foe. Please Oh great god of Egypt grant us your blessing and take with you all our prayers and hopes for your triumph once more."

There was that breathless moment of waiting when he recalled that here oh blessed were the faithful that this was true and not only a mater of faith. And then there was a sound like wings on air but no wind stirred and there was a rush of warmth and light against his closed lids that swept along the table and then settled before him. He opened his eyes and looked up at the face of his god. "You have served me well for another day, Imhotep I am well pleased with thee. Enjoy then this night in the dreams of the faithful priest of the Thebes that was and that is and that will be."

"I thank you for your blessing AmmunRa, You who is lord of all Egypt, little though I deserve it."
"You have earned it, and you will be called upon to earn it again, Priest, never doubt. I see that you have done as I asked and brought him here."

"As you commanded oh AmmunRa, so has it been done."

"Greetings to thee Ardeth Bay, child of Allah."

"I thank you for the blessing of your presence AmmunRa, You who is lord of all Egypt, even though I do not deserve or understand."

And his god chuckled. "He is pleasing, Priest, on that we agree. Look at me Ardeth Bay I have a geas for thee Medjai."

Ardeth raised his head his eyes wide and something close to panic clamored in his thoughts but he kept it down with all the courage Imhotep expected him to show. "What can I, only one warrior, do for thee oh great god of Egypt?"

And his god smiled. "One man may lead an army, Ardeth Bay. You are that man. Allah has need of his children. Egypt has need of your tribes. You have brought to the site Allah had decreed many of those things you will need but others remain to be brought out of the earth. You must work hard Medjai and do yourself no more harm so that you may succeed. Do you understand?"

"No great AmmunRa, I do not. But I will do as you command and my God wills me. We are Medjai oh great god of the Egypt that was. We will protect her as we have always done, such is the oath we swear and our love of this most wonderful gift Allah and you and Neb give us each day. What, forgive my ignorance, oh great god of Egypt are these objects we must find?"

"You will find or not find what you need without being told, Ardeth Bay. You have done well without knowing before now. You will do well enough from this moment forward. My journey to battle begins warrior and I have no more time for your task this day. Come again to Thebes when I do not sail the sky in your world and we may speak again."

"As you wish oh Great AmmunRa."

Imhotep bowed again and then rose to his feet and held out his arms, bent at the elbow, palms up and bowed again and faced his God. "Egypt is thankful, undeserving though we are, for your presence and your love for us oh Great AmmunRa. We shall send word to bright Horus at Edfu so that he may aid you in your battle to come."

"As it has always been, Imhotep, as it will always be. We know too well what the darkness holds oh priest of Thebes that was."

And he shuddered at the thought. "As you will, AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt. May Osiris grant you his most glorious father passage through the underworld untroubled by the minions of Set."

"Such shall never be, but I am pleased with the thought. Rest well, Imhotep, I will have need of thee soon."

"I am yours."

"See that you remember that." But his god smiled and he felt the warmth of that regard and then the light seemed to fold in upon itself and the gold boat glowed for one glorious moment and then there was only the torch light and darkness pooled at the edges of the room.
"Move." He hissed the word in Arabic and reached down and yanked Ardeth unceremoniously too his feet. The young Medjai glared at him and then heard the scuttling hissing sounds that came from the darkness and oddly enough it was compassion and not fear that filled the Medjai's thoughts as he moved with Imhotep out of the shrine and into the temple and the doors closed.

There was silence for a long moment. "They-- can not leave the shadows?"

"No." He agreed with a deep breath. "Next time make certain to stay within the light, Medjai. It is...unpleasant if you do not."

Horror and then disgust and he took a firm grip on the fear and pushed it back. "As you say."

"Come. I will walk you to your brother. Once AmmunRa has left the sky it is best to keep from this place until morning. It fills with the dreams of the faithful Ardeth, and you may find that it leads you to a time that is not yours and the mind of someone who does not know you."

His young guest shivered but nodded. And for once there was only agreement to his thoughts as the left the temple and went out into the courtyard. O'Connell was surprised at both their changes of clothes and Ardeth only shrugged in reply to the unspoken question.

"It would be rude to go to see a god covered in dust."

"Right."

He chuckled and brushed too close to Ardeth as he passed for the young man's comfort. "You could have worn nothing else, Medjai and I would not have minded."

"I swore not to embarrass you in front of your god, did I not?" Ardeth replied, struggling a bit with his own anger.

"You did." He agreed. "I am certain we can find you something suitable as well, O'Connell, if you would like to change before dinner."

"Should I?" O'Connell directed the question to Ardeth, the insult not lost on Imhotep at all.

"It is no matter." Ardeth shook his head.

"I was going to be a polite host and even offer your brother a bath." He returned the insult of speaking more or less as if the American was not there. "Not nearly as amusing as watching you undress certainly. But it might have, its moments."

Ardeth growled a low curse in Medja but then reigned in his temper and smiled just a little. "You might not. I on the other hand am certain to enjoy it more. One should, as you say, be thankful for all of Allah's gifts should one not? Shall we go find something for you to wear, my friend?"

O'Connell only chuckled himself at that. Enjoying the game a bit, and the annoyance he thought it caused him.

Ardeth walked over and took the copy of the Koran from O'Connell. "We shall join you for dinner, creature. If we are not fortunate enough to have woken by then."

He smiled a bit. "Well played, Ardeth. Well played. I will teach you the game yet."

"We shall see."

"Going to guard my back for me while I change?" O'Connell asked, surprising his brother with the
Ardeth found a smile in reply. "There are worse duties, I am certain. Come, I will show you where the baths are. Would you be so courteous a host as to send Tahiri with something for my brother to wear?"

"I suppose." He agreed. "I look forward to seeing you both at dinner." It paused. "But be careful which way you journey through the halls of Thebes, Medjai. I meant what I said. I would hate to lose you now when you have made a promise to my god. So for your soul's sake and your promise to Ammun, stay to the paths you know, and out of the shadows."

Ardeth closed his eyes and shuddered, but he nodded. "As you say."
With the large number of Medjai that were now gathered at Ahm Shere it wasn't that difficult to unearth part of the pyramid. Evie and Sallah were discussing possible layouts and sketching on a tablet of paper, laid out on one large block. Rick wasn't sure what directions he remembered were much help, since he hadn't even been paying attention when he'd gone into the place. Most of that block of time was lost in a very black rage and despair he didn't care to recall.

"Uncle Jonathan and I went this way." Alex traced part of the map, looking over Evie's shoulder with a smile. Rick sighed, wondering not for the first time, why he ever bothered to tell his son to stay behind. "There were some directions on the wall." He smiled at Evie but Rick could see the pain in his son's eyes. "Guess you don't remember that part, huh, mum?"

Evie just hugged him tightly. "No luv. Remind me again to thank Jonathan when he gets here. I can't have been...easy to carry."

"Okay mum."

Rick moved over to sit beside Alex and put his hand on his son's shoulder. "That was the bravest thing in the world, Alex. You know that right?"

His son ducked his head but smiled. "I'm just really really glad it worked."

"Me too son, me too." He smiled at his wife.

"Please? What is this story you keep hinting at?" Sallah asked.

"Last time we were here, with the curator and the creepy guy uncle Ardeth killed..." Alex began.

"Lak-nah," Ardeth provided coming over to join them. "Leader of the Asanusi."

Sallah blinked and then whispered something in Arabic.

"Yeah and the guy who's name we aren't supposed to say and the creep lady." Alex agreed looking back at his mom. "She didn't like you, huh?"

"No," Evie sighed. "But that's another story."

"Right so anyway I had on the bracelet of Anubis."

"Allah forbid..." Sallah looked around at the three of them. Rick just chuckled.

"We kind of felt the same way." He agreed.

"Me too." Alex put in. "So we came here and there were these thing in the jungle."

"Things?"


Sallah paled a bit. "Go on."

Yeah, get used to it, the story of my life gets kind of strange after a bit. Rick smiled to himself.
"So dad got me away from the bad guys and uncle Ardeth killed the really mean one and then dad got me to the pyramid just before the sun rose. It was really great!" Alex smiled at him.

"Thanks." He grinned back. Sometimes Alex could still make him feel ten feet tall. "You helped."

"And this was important, obviously." Ardeth glanced at them both. "Why?"

"Well, the not really dead guy he said, if I didn't reach the pyramid before sunrise on the seventh day I'd die. And that was it."

Rick could see the horror on his friend's face. "Didn't know that part, huh?" He asked.

"Allah forbid. Do you think, I would have not told you, if I did?"

"No. Actually, I just assumed you didn't. I certainly didn't until about five minutes to sunrise."

"But we got there so it was okay." Alex shrugged and Rick was a little amazed all over again that his son could cope with things so well. He was definitely his mother's son. "Then we went back out to meet mum and Uncle Jonathan..." Alex faltered a bit. Rick just put his arm around his son's shoulders.

"He who shall not be named came up behind us and threw Jonathan out of the way." Evie explained. "And then Anck-su-namun just-- stabbed me." She paused. "Here." One hand went over her stomach.

"Allah have mercy." Sallah whispered.

"You did not tell me that. How, in the name of Allah, did you survive, my friend?" Ardeth's voice was as concerned as Rick had ever heard it, enough for him to forget apparently that Evie wasn't really his sister because he reached over to touch her shoulder in concern. Rick smiled a little. Family was a really wonderful thing.

"Well, you see, that's the interesting part of the story." Evie smiled but reached over to take hold of Rick's hand. "I didn't."

He tightened the arm he had around Alex and his fingers with Evie's.

"Most merciful Allah." Ardeth whispered. "I am so sorry my friends, that I was not there."

"You had your own fight to get too." Rick reminded him.

"I do not understand. Please, Sitt O'Connell, are you saying that you died?" Sallah looked from one of them to the other.

"Yes." Evie shrugged a bit. "It was, well unpleasant at first..."

"Let's not do this part, okay?" Rick squeezed her hand. He had spent a long few months carefully not thinking about that part before it finally stopped scaring him to death.

"Of course not. I am sorry my friends." Sallah looked from him to Evie and back. Ardeth's hand squeezed his shoulder for a bit and then he smiled.

"I shall give thanks to Allah, Evelyn, for whatever brought you back."

She smiled. "My son, my brother, and the book of the Dead."
"Allah have mercy, you read that?" He looked at Rick in concern.

"I did." Alex put in. "Uncle Jonathan distracted the crazy lady and I read the important part." He grinned. "I'm glad I studied hieroglyphics."

"So am I luv." Evie smiled.

"Me too son. Me too."

"So then mum managed to beat the creepy lady and sent me and Uncle Jonathan to find dad. Who was fighting the not really dead guy and that-- thing."

"Not at the same time actually." Rick pointed out. "And I had the scepter of Osiris so it worked out okay. I'm just really-- really glad your uncle figured it out when he did." Rick smiled.

"As am I. Three seconds later my friend and there would be no Medjai left I am afraid." Ardeth smiled sadly. "It was-- a difficult fight."

Rick blinked and then shook his head. "You didn't tell me that part, either."

A shrug. "So it seems once again we are even."

"Right. And then mum pulled dad out of that crack in the floor. And the creepy woman ran away and the not really dead guy fell and we all ran like hell-- Sorry, ran really hard and climbed up to the top of the pyramid and Izzy came just in time and we got off. It was great!" Alex grinned.

"Watch your language sport. But yeah, it was really. Even Jonathan's crazy stunt with grabbing the diamond off the top." Rick ruffled his son's hair. "So that's mostly what happened."

"I still wonder what happened to Anck-su-namum." Evie looked back at her map. "I still owe her one."

Ardeth blinked in surprise. "Do you suppose she escaped? She has not been at Thebes at all."

"Oh, that's a pleasant thought." Rick grumbled. Evie shivered a bit.

"I might just take you up on that bodyguard bit after all, Ardeth. I don't mind facing her in a fight but damn if she'll sneak up on me again."

"Mum. Language."

"As you wish Evelyn. I would be honored of course." Ardeth agreed. "I wonder if perhaps I can get it to tell me next time we are at Thebes."

Rick almost said something about if she was Ardeth had better watch out for daggers in the back as well as everything else but he caught himself. He'd gotten his friend to find some humor in the whole damned mess which was good because the annoyance had to be about to drive him nuts. The damned thing was driving Rick nuts with all the innuendo and familiarity it took with his friend and he was only having to deal with it second hand. So any time he could make Ardeth smile about it a little bit was a point for their side. Mentioning that the thing just might have a jealous girlfriend in the wings someplace was probably pushing things right now.

"I did mention my lack of fencing partners that once and it didn't say anything." Evie sighed.

"Sure it did. It offered to let uncle Ardeth fight the crocodile." Alex pointed out.
Sallah let out a large sigh. "You live a most adventurous life my friends. What do you say we simply try to unearth a lost pyramid and retrieve untold lost treasures? Certainly that will be a lull for you. Allah, what have I done to find myself with such friends?" The man got to his feet with a smile. "We shall endeavor to follow your directions, Alex. Thank you."

"You're welcome. I can show you, if you like?"

"No." Rick and Evie said in unison.

"But."

"Alex. No." Evie shook her head.

"But mum, dad."

"No."

"Haven't you noticed yet that I always get in more trouble when I'm not with you guys?" Alex put in desperately. "Please?"

They looked at each other and then Rick had to chuckle. "He get's more like you every day."

"Please. He's your son too." Evie smiled back. "Will you promise to do everything that your father, I, your uncle Ardeth, or Sallah tell you to do while were there. Instantly and without question?"

"Yes mum."

"Okay then." She smiled. "Let's go see what we can find, shall we?" She folded the map back up and walked toward the pyramid. Alex walked beside her already explaining which way they should go.

"You are a fortunate man my friend." Ardeth smiled.

"Yeah, I am." He agreed. "Come on, someone has to keep them out of trouble."

Ardeth chuckled. "I do not think we can fit all twelve tribes in the pyramid at the same time my friend."

"I heard that." He grinned back but they caught up with Evie and Alex quickly enough. It soon became apparent however that the collapse was more extensive than they'd expected and it was hard going through the half fallen entrance and the stairs that led down into the large complex of passages under the pyramid. Ardeth went first, torch in one hand and sword in the other. Rick was right behind him when he had to be and beside him when the passages were free of debris enough to allow it. Evie and Alex walked behind them and Sallah was at the rear, joined after a bit by Selim. It seemed a reasonably safe way to proceed and they made some headway into the passages.

"Okay, direction time. Evie? Alex? Sallah? Someone want to tell me what that says?" Rick pointed at the hieroglyphics on the wall.

"Hmm," Evie looked at them for a bit. "Oh my, don't read that part, Alex."

"Okay mum, did they really?"

"Alex!" His mother's voice was sharp.

"Must be interesting." Rick commented to his friend.
"As you say. I am afraid I am not able to read it that well."

"It's about sacrificing virgins." Alex muttered as he left his mother to read it and walked back over to Rick and Ardeth.

"Ah, yeah your mom's touchy about you reading things like that." He smiled. "It's a mom's job, sport."

"Yeah I know." He smiled. "Besides, it's really kind of a horrible thing. They'd feed them to those zombie things. Except their hearts, they gave those to the scorpions. Yuck."

"Yeah." Rick swallowed hard. "Your mom's right, you shouldn't have read that."

"I think there was more to it but Sallah put his hand over a lot of it."

Rick looked over at the other man and smiled in thanks. Evie had given up on the text herself and was instead prying with a chisel at a carving on the wall. "Oh God." He moved over and took the chisel away from her. "What's behind that?"

"I'm not certain. It might be a papyrus. It says here that there are many secrets long ago written and forgotten behind this wall." She traced the carving as she spoke. "So I was thinking..."

"Let's get it on the way out, okay? I think we should find the book first, then the spear if we can and then we'll work our way back out. That way it's less to carry with us, right?"

"I suppose that makes sense. Don't forget where this is Sallah."

"Of course not Sitt O'Connell." He agreed. But he smiled and winked at Rick as they headed back down the passageway.

"So, what else but the black book and the scepter of Osiris are we hoping to find?" Selim asked after a bit more cautious progress had been made.

"If the legends are right we might find the Scorpion King's armor. It was supposed to make the wearer as invincible as the army of Anubis." Evie smiled. "And that just might even the odds a bit with our old friend who won't stay dead."

"That would be helpful." Rick agreed.

"When AmmunRa told me that there were things we should find here, I tried to ask what they were, but he would not say." Ardeth sighed. "But the word he used, tath-shey, that does mean something more than two does it not?"

"Many." Evie agreed. "It's definitely more than two, usually it's more than four."

"A handful." Sallah agreed.

"So we have the book, the scepter, the armor, which might be considered more than one but maybe not, and what else?" Evie asked.

"I found a lot of weapons last time." Rick offered. "But they seemed pretty standard to me."

"We shall have to see what we can find then, my friends, and hope Allah grants us good hunting." Ardeth paused. "Which way now?" He indicated the open area ahead which led to two different passages.
"Left." Alex said firmly.

"Left it is." Rick took a step forward only then realizing it was a step down and then grimaced as his foot went into muck and crunched something else underneath that. "Yuck."

"Here." Ardeth pulled him back to the solid ground and they held both torches out in front of them. "Allah..." The room was full of rotting vegetation and not a few bones and worse. "This will be unpleasant."

"Yeah."

"Selim would you go and get us ropes, and a few more men, to be safe? I am not certain how far the pit goes." Ardeth knelt down and then stuck his sword into the mess. "But it is further than it appears." He pulled the sword back up. "Because I certainly did not touch stone."

"Wonderful." Rick sighed. "This is going to be fun."

Selim returned a bit later with Daoud and three other Medjai. Ardeth tied the rope securely around his waist and then looked back across the swath of debris. "I suppose it was too much to hope that this would go easily."

"I'll invite you on our next excavation, Ardeth. This isn't anything compared to some of them." Rick smiled. "You sure you want to go first?"

"No. But I am the lighter of us, and it will be easier for you to pull me back than the other way around." He sighed. "Allah give me strength." And then he stepped carefully down into the muck. There was a muffled crunching noise but after a moment something in the mess held and he could work his way across to a large tree trunk, that gave him enough purchase to work a bit further across. Rick just held the rope tightly, Sallah braced behind him and Selim and Daoud on the other side with a second rope just in case. Ardeth paused about ten feet out and then probed ahead again with his sword. "Anything so much as sounds like it's moving in there, Ardeth and you tell us." Rick said suddenly, recalling all too well how those damned zombie things had-- devoured the followers of Imhotep and that crazy curator.

"I have not come this far, to be anything's lunch." Ardeth agreed.

"Bis'mil'allah rakhman el rahim." Sallah whispered. Rick couldn't help but agree.

"Maybe we should try another way..." Evie came over to stand beside him and looked out at the shadowy mess.

"Shhh." He held up one finger to her lips. She nodded and there was silence as Ardeth worked his way carefully through the muck.

"I would think, that the remains of Lak-nah's soldiers, are good indication that the things are not--active at the moment." Ardeth called back after a moment. "Allah grant these men peace."

"Just be careful." Evie suggested. "I sent Alex back up to camp. I don't like this." She whispered.

"Me either." He whispered back. Ardeth had managed to make it half way across when he paused again, obviously searching for something that looked like it might hold his weight. He probed a bit further with his sword and then sheathed it to reach with both hands for another grip. Rick could almost hear the beat of his own heart as he and the others waited. And then it wasn't his heart he heard but a shuddery sort of groan from the pit in front of them and the mess shifted. Ardeth let out a startled yell and Rick just pulled hard on the rope as his friend disappeared into the mess. One hand
reached out and gripped the rope Rick could see and he pulled harder, Sallah and Selim and Daoud doing the same. Ardeth surfaced for a moment and then vanished again.

All he could do was pull and pull on the rope, and then the rope simply came up out of the mess, unattached to anything at all.

Evie cried out something but he wasn't listening. He wasn't even thinking he just took the frayed end and wrapped it around his waist a few times tying it off. "Hold that." He growled at Sallah and then pulled one pistol and stepped off into the mess.

"Rick!" Evie's cry carried easily enough. "Don't."

He didn't waste breath on replying just struggled through the mess of rotting trees and remains of too many dead things and people, pulling himself along the rope that was still attached to his friend. And then Ardeth's hand gripped his on the rope and he pulled hard, sliding deeper into what he didn't even want to think about but it got him to his friend.

"Rick..." Ardeth sounded both astonished and appalled. "You idiot."

"Later. What's stuck?"

"I am. Allah have mercy... My leg mostly I think, and the rope is tangled."

"Right, okay. Stop pulling guys!" He found the rope and the part that had broken from the one he was now using was snagged on something. He didn't let himself look too closely at what, only shoved his pistol into his belt and drew a knife but it was impossible to get enough leverage in the muck to do any good. "Okay, can you draw your sword?"

"Yes, I think so." Ardeth moved a bit and then managed it. "Now what?"

Rick took hold of part of the tangled rope and pulled it taut. "Pray?"

"Allah have mercy." Ardeth obliged and then swung. The release of tension sent Rick flailing into the muck but it got the rope free. Rick let go of that and then gripped Ardeth's free hand.

"Okay, now either put it away or drop it, okay?"

"I would rather keep it. If I can." Ardeth shifted a bit but he didn't say anything else until he got the sword sheathed. But it was obvious the move hurt because his breathing grew even more labored than it already was.

"Okay." He pulled himself a bit closer to his friend and then took as deep a breath as he could stomach. "Left leg or right?"

"Left, and it is mostly of my left side, actually."

"Great." He couldn't see much but he felt where the tree trunk was pinning most of Ardeth's left side to whatever was behind him. He could get his hand between his friend's shoulder and the tree but not much further down. "Anything broken?"

"I do not believe so." Ardeth answered. "But it is hard to tell."

"Right, okay, when I say so, you push that way." He pointed to Ardeth's right and his left. "Sallah you pull first, give us five seconds and then Selim you pull like hell understand?" He called over his shoulder.
"As you say." Came Selim's voice.

"Rick, are you sure this will work?" Evie called out.

"Sure." He smiled at his friend despite the situation. "No harm in trying, right? On three?"

"Three." Ardeth agreed.

"One," he wrapped his hand around the tree and pulled it as much away from Ardeth as he could. "Two." He dug his foot through the mess beneath him and got one leg around the trunk as well. "This is going to hurt..." He warned.

"In'shallah my friend."

"Right, okay, pull!" And the rope around his waist pulled tight and the tree slid with the pressure. Ardeth let out a startled cry that was smothered quickly and then he was scrambling backward and reaching for Sallah's hands while Selim and Daoud came real close to falling into the mess themselves and pulling Ardeth out. Rick just lay on the stone for a long moment trying to breathe. "Ardeth?"

"Yes." His friend agreed. "In one piece I think."

"That's good. Let's not do that again."

"God forbid."

Evie knelt beside him and wiped the hair and mess from his face. "That was the bravest most foolish thing I've ever seen you do. And that says a great deal you know."

"I know. Don't get to close, huh? It's-- messy."

"I noticed. I can deal with a little mess, if you're all right."


"Thank you, my friend, I think." The man smiled looking worried and happy and exhausted himself.

"Are you really all right, Ardeth?" Evie asked.

"I think so." Their friend agreed. "But I shall think more kindly of bus rides from now on."

It took Rick a moment to place the joke and then he laughed. "That was an adventure, wasn't it?"

"As always when traveling with you my friend. As always. Selim I am sorry to ask you this, but could you help me up?"

"Of course, Allah-- do I want to know what any of this is?"

"No." Ardeth and Rick answered in unison.

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Ardeth ran the soap through his hair once more and then rinsed it again. There was a stestream of water now being hauled from the Blue Nile to the growing encampment of Medjai as more and more of the tribes arrived. He was certainly thankful his tribesmates had seen fit to set up the bathing tent he was now using. He glanced over at his friend and once again thanked Allah for the man's bravery
and both their lives.

"That was with out a doubt one of the most disgusting things I have ever done in my life." Rick said, shaking the water from his hair and then reaching for one of the towels.

"I can certainly say it was mine." Ardeth replied and dried off as well. "We shall have to find some other way across that pit, or another entrance."

"Evie said Sallah and Arebe were working on something. So maybe they'll figure it out."

"We can hope. That was-- unpleasant."

"Unpleasant doesn't come close." Rick sighed. "I think I'll just burn my clothes."

"As you say, I did not know anything could smell worse than camel spit, but now I do." He shook his head. "Shall we go see what they have come up with?"

"I'm as presentable as I'm getting." Rick agreed. "You're going to be bruised all over, you know."

"Yes, I afraid I am already aware of that. You will have a few yourself. Thank you again, my friend, that was very brave."

"But foolish." Rick smiled. "I figure Evie'll read me the riot act for it. But as long as were both here and alive she can yell if it makes her feel better."

"She loves you a great deal."

"Yeah." His friend's smile changed and his eyes lightened some. "Luckiest thing that ever happened to me in my whole life, Ardeth."

"Then there is at least some good in the world that has come from Hamanaptura." Ardeth smiled as well.

"Guess there is at that." Rick grinned. "I got one hell of a family out of the deal." And he griped Ardeth's right shoulder. "Can't say much for most of Evie's side of the family, but mine turned out to be a hell of a lot better than I expected."

Ardeth laughed and then gripped his friend's wrist, hand over the tattoo that marked him as Medjai. "You did not want to believe that at first."

"Yeah well, I never thought of myself as the warrior for God type, Ardeth."

He chuckled. "We are all Allah's soldiers when we must be, Rick. And as you say, who else is going to guard my back?"

"What are brothers for, huh?" They walked out toward where the others were sitting in the shade of a tent. "Does that make Selim my uncle too?"

"Certainly, you have a dozen cousins and two aunts here as well." He smiled a bit more. "See that Ahmer does not try to find you another wife or two while you are here."

"I'll let Evie deal with that one." He chuckled. "Besides he should be finding you one."

"Allah forbid." He rolled his eyes. "He will undoubtedly try again soon. My cousin has no understanding of women and less of the life I must lead."
"Too bad Evie doesn't have a sister." Rick chuckled.

"That might be worse than Ahmer's choices." Ardeth smiled. "But I thank you for the thought."

"What thought?" Evie smiled as they came over to sit down. "You two look much better."

"Feel like it too." Rick agreed. "And Ardeth was warning me about Ahmer's matchmaking."

"Allah forbid, is he at that again?" Selim sighed. "I will make him stop, Ardeth."

"It was only a joke uncle, nothing more." Ardeth smiled. "So, what is this idea you have?"

"A very old one." Sallah replied. "We have all that rubble in the corridors and much of what we cleared to find the entrance in the first place. So, we use it as fill. It worked for the pharaohs."

"Sometimes the ancient ways are best." Arebe agreed with a smile. "And we certainly have the man power to do it. So Ardeth, do we see if the Medjai can still build?"

He smiled a little. "As you say. First we have been called to defend Egypt from He who shall not be named, then to battle the armies of Anubis, now we find ourselves with the task of bodyguards for the first time in more than two thousand years and once again called to move mountains in the desert. And here all we have had to do for centuries was keep Hamanaptura undiscovered." He glanced up at the sky and then chuckled. "Perhaps the ancient ways are not so lost as I had thought. Is, was, shall be, indeed. Come Arebe, Sallah, let us see to this solution of yours."

So with nothing more monumental than as many strong men as they could fit into the corridors they began to move the rock and sand, basket by basket full into the huge pit that was between them and the two passageways. At first it seemed to go nowhere but then slowly, ever so slowly, rubble rose to meet their side of the passage. It was packed down cautiously by first heavier stones and then by one man's feet while another held his arms in case. It was slow and time consuming but by the end of the day they were satisfied that they could reach the other side tomorrow. And the rubble had the added benefit of helping to smother some of the stench.

Ardeth moved back along the passage having left the hauling of rubble to his tribes men. His left shoulder was throbbing and his leg threatened to give way if he put too much pressure on it now. He found Sallah, Rick and Evelyn back at the wall they'd examined earlier. "Are we truly going to try and see what is back there?"

Rick smiled a bit. "You want to try and talk her out of it?"

He smiled back. "No, but I would prefer if we had a few more weapons on hand, just in case of course that whatever is there does not wish to be disturbed."

"Oh dear, I hadn't thought of that. But it doesn't say that it's cursed." Evelyn traced the hieroglyphics again.

"That's new." Rick chuckled. "No promises of being eaten alive or drowned or anything else nasty?"

"Not even a general you shall be cursed for eternity." She replied. "So, let's see what we have shall we?"

"Why do I get a really bad feeling about this?" Rick looked over at him.

"Experience?" Ardeth returned.
"Well we did find the book of the Dead, and that did wake up our old friend, and we did find the bracelet of Anubis and that did flood the catacombs and raise the army of Anubis. But we also found the book of Ammun and the spear of Osiris. So, all things considered we evened it up didn't we?" Evelyn smiled.

"Allah grant that this time we find the means to destroy the thing before we wake it." Ardeth sighed.

"In'sh'allah." Sallah agreed. "This is not what I had learned archeology for."

"I don't think this is really what the Bembridge scholars had in mind, no." Evelyn agreed.

"Ready?" She placed the chisel against the wall.

"Here, I'll do it. Why don't you step back that way, okay?" Rick took the chisel from her hand.

Ardeth moved over to put himself between Evelyn and whatever it was his friend was about to unearth. "You did ask for a bodyguard did you not?" He smiled down at her.

"Bully." She teased but she did not make him move either. Rick put the chisel into place and then pried it hard to the side. There was a slight crack of stone and then the grinding of more stone on stone and the carving moved forward just a bit and fell to the floor. Rick jumped back and Ardeth did the same, pushing Evelyn with him. But nothing sprang from the hole at all.

"Well that's different." Rick grinned. "Not even a booby trap. Let's wait a moment to make sure the whole place doesn't fall down on us of course."

"Allah forbid." Sallah muttered.

Silence for another moment and then Rick shrugged. 'That's good."

"As I recall the book of Ammun was not booby-trapped either." Ardeth reminded him.

"That's true, or the scepter, unless of course that's what Bennie took that started the whole place falling in." Rick picked up his torch and held it cautiously toward the hole in the wall.

"Be careful. If it is papyrus we don't want to burn it." Evelyn pointed out. Then she tapped Ardeth on the shoulder. "Might I go and see now, oh faithful Medjai?" She asked in ancient Egyptian with a smile.

He could not help himself he smiled back and bowed, gesturing her forwards. "Of course Princess."

"Bully." She teased again and slapped his arm. "Brothers. What is a girl to do?" And walked over to her husband. "Anything?"

"Dust." Rick replied and then handed her the torch. "I hate this part." He reached into the wall and Ardeth reached over and gripped his arm pulling it back.

"Here." He drew his sword and handed it to his friend. "Make certain you do not break it, will you?"

Rick chuckled but he probed the opening with the blade and then drew it back. "Nothing. Okay, let's see what we can see." He handed Ardeth the blade back took the torch from Evelyn and then leaned into the darkness.

"Rick!" Evelyn scolded. Ardeth wanted to agree with the comment. Her husband said nothing and then leaned deeper in.
"Found your records, sweetheart." He said after a moment. "Here." He began to pass back the papyruses slowly. Sallah took some and Evie some and Ardeth the rest. "What's the common ancient prayer for the dead again?"

"May Ma'at walk with you through all the halls of death and see you safely to Osiris side?" Sallah provided.

"That's it." Rick agreed. "How's it said?"

Ardeth looked at Evelyn and then shrugged and offered it in Egyptian. "Why?"

His friend smiled sadly. "All the pretty maids, all in a row." He indicated the wall. "They left their skulls to make the bookshelf."

"Oh." Evelyn sighed and then repeated the phrase herself. "Rest in peace." She glanced down at the carving. "Why don't we put that back, then?"

Ardeth and Sallah put down their papyruses and helped him lift the stone back into place. Then with the writings they'd uncovered they went back to the camp and began to study.

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Night came to Ahm Shere finally and Ardeth found himself debating once more the benefits of sleep over avoiding dealing with their erstwhile host in Thebes. Finally, he looked up at the night sky and sighed. "I suppose it is foolish, is it not, to keep from sleeping only to want to sleep more later?"

"Yeah." Rick agreed. "But I can't say I blame you." A yawn. "Can't say I'm in a hurry to go visit again."

"No." Ardeth agreed. "At least we can let Evelyn and Alex rest undisturbed. Shall we try for two hour blocks then?"

"God, I hate that." Rick muttered. "But yeah lets try it. I guess if we can get it to promise us both that we're guests and not under any sort of threat of death we can try for longer once we go back."

'There is that. And I do want to ask it about Anck-su-namun if I can."

Rick's eyes were hard. "I'd like to get my hands on her myself."

"No doubt." He squeezed his brother's shoulder. "I am truly sorry I was not there for you, my friend."

A sigh. "Yeah. Well it worked out okay. I just work really hard at not remembering that while there when it wasn't."

"No doubt. Come, we shall check on your son and drag Evelyn away from those papyruses and get some sleep. Tomorrow, Allah willing, we will be able to get further into the pyramid."

"Right." Rick got to his feet and then held out his hand. "You going to be able to sleep?"

He took the offered help and got to his feet carefully. Both legs held at least. "I will hope so. Although I doubt I will have to rely on being woken much. Every time I move I am likely to awaken myself." He shrugged. "If such is the price of survival, I can pay it an be content."

"You are too stoic for your own good." Rick smiled but he walked a bit slower than normal as they went over to the tent were Sallah and Evelyn were studying the papyrus. He was only a little
surprised to see Alex with them. "Any luck?"

"Quite a bit actually." Evelyn smiled. "We found a nice description of the complex itself and a partial record of the treasures kept there. Seems it was a funerary complex, a temple to Anubis, and the resting place of the Scorpion King. There was a pretty good sized group of priests at one point, and as long as they stayed within the complex at night those horrible things left them alone. And you could apparently travel during the day."

"Great, wish we'd known that." Rick shrugged. "Anything about the armor?"

"Yes, it should be in the..." She searched through several pieces of parchment.

"Here mum," Alex handed her one.

"Right, thank you. In the-- coffin of the one who shall not be buried." She sighed. "Sometimes I think there must have been too much time to think up these things in the old days. We should have kept busier."

"Better than embroidery, I guess." Rick chuckled.

"Right. Horribly boring pastime." Evelyn agreed. "So we have to find the burial chamber for the Scorpion King, even if he wasn't going to bother to use it. And then we should be in better shape to go down into the temple area where we lost the book."

"Good. But for now, I'm going to sleep. If I can and that damned thing will let me." His friend smiled. "And you too, sport."

"But dad."

"But nothing. Come on Alex. It's way late and we have another big day tomorrow."

"Can I come along?" The boy asked.

"Maybe." Rick said. "We'll see what happens in the morning."

"Okay." Alex sighed.

"You two must both be in pain." Evelyn got to her feet. "Will you finish this Sallah?"

"Of course, Sitt O'Connell. Although I doubt I will find much more this evening. Perhaps we can all do with some sleep."

"As you say." Ardeth agreed. "Ma Salaama, Sallah."

"And to you Ardeth, my friends." Sallah began to re-roll the papyruses.

"Are we sleeping like last night?" Evelyn asked.

"It makes sense I guess. I'll guard your back if you guard mine?"

"Allah grant it is not necessary but it seems wise to take the precaution."

His friend smiled just a little. "Besides pissing it off."

He rolled his eyes. "As you say. It is harder for it to lie to us when we are both there."
"That too."

"Is there something going on that I should know about, Rick?" Evelyn asked looking from one of them to another. He managed somehow not to flush.

"The creature seems to delight in telling one or the other of us that the other is-- less than well." He looked over at where Alex walked beside his father and left it at that.

"Ah." Evelyn nodded and then patted his arm. "Like that bit when we were there while sleeping on the train. I rather thought we might have lost you, you know."

"So I realize." He agreed.

"Dad was going to rip its head off, I thought." Alex put in. "But I knew you were okay."

'I thank you for your confidence, Alex." He replied with as much gravity as he could.

"Do we really get to sleep tonight dad?"

"Sure do, tiger. All the way through, unless of course I see you in Thebes and then we'll wake you up when we do."

"Okay." The boy yawned. "I'd like to just sleep without someone waking me every while."

"You and me both, son. You and me both." Rick agreed. It didn't take long for them to get settled despite having to rearrange things some since Ardeth couldn't lie on his left side. "Good night love, Alex, Ma Salaama Ardeth."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed. "Goodnight Evelyn, Alex."

"May Horus walk between you and all the dark places you must travel." Evelyn said softly in English and then Egyptian. "I just recalled that."

"It is a good blessing." He agreed. Half-wondering why he bothered he wrapped his hand around his sword hilt and checked his other weapons and the copy of the Koran Selim had given him. Then he closed his eyes and tried to sleep.

It was oddly easy to tell when he was no longer in Ahm Shere. The bed was much softer and he allowed himself to relax and enjoy it for a moment. Then he moved and found that his shoulder and side hurt almost as much as they had in the real world.

"Allah..." He muttered to himself, trying to roll to his feet without waking his friend.

"Guess that's a yes, you're awake." Rick sat up as well. "No visitor this morning."

"Thanks be to Allah for whatever favors he grants." Ardeth sighed. "I had half-hoped that I would not feel this so much here." He touched his sore shoulder with his good hand.

"No luck, huh? Yeah, I've got a few bruises where Sallah pulled a little too hard but nothing like what I bet you're feeling. Lay back down, huh? Might as well take advantage of the bed while you've got it."

He debated that for a moment and then did just that, lying on his back and setting his sword on the floor beside him. Rick got up and went over to the small table where there was predictably a pot of coffee and fruit and bread. "Breakfast?"
"No, thank you." He sighed. "Coffee though."

A chuckle. "I'll drink to that." He agreed and poured them both a cup. Ardeth took his with a sigh, trying to ease up and then regretting putting the weight on his left arm and shoulder. He bit back the cry that started and just laid back down. "Damn it, Ardeth, here." Rick took the coffee from him. "How bad are you hurt?"

"Bruised, sore, and a bit uncertain of my strength. Nothing too serious I do not think." He closed his eyes. "As long as I do not move too quickly or put too much weight on my left leg or apparently my left arm."

"Okay, here." His friend put the coffee aside and helped him sit up. "Drink that." He handed him the cup back and then went over to the door and looked out. "Good. You. Come here." He told someone out in the hall in Arabic.

"Could you come in, please?" He translated it into old Egyptian sitting up a bit more.

One of the guards stepped in, uncertainly. "Tell him to send Tahiri here with some cold water, a larger brazier, and some towels." Rick went over to the chest beside the wall and dug though it without bothering to see if Ardeth was going to do so or not. He sighed and then translated the request.

"As you wish, Medjai. Are you injured?"

"Only a bit. My brother worries."

"Brothers often do." The man returned with a smile. "I have three." And he headed back outside.

"What are you looking for?" He asked with a bit more exasperation than he meant to.

"This." Rick replied coming back over and sitting on the edge of the bed placing a jar beside him. Then he grinned. "Too bad the thing isn't here to be pissed about this. Take that off."

"What?" He blinked.

"Your robe idiot. It's a trick I picked up in the Legion, and if it can get Alex through the scrapes and tumbles he's been in it can help with yours."

He blinked and then sighed and sat up the rest of the way, handing Rick his coffee and undoing his robes. It took a bit of maneuvering to get out of them with out it hurting more but he managed. Rick grumbled something and then turned as the door opened, pistol in hand.

"Medjai?" Tahiri asked uncertainly but since Ardeth doubted she knew that a gun was she didn't seem too frightened.

"Rick, either it is what you asked for or our host. Either way, what good is the gun?"

"Probably not much, but I really don't feel like dealing with it right now. So I wasn't in the mood to be polite. Thanks." He put the gun away and then helped Tahiri and the other servants set up the second folding table they'd brought beside the bed.

"Ah, Isis' mercy, Medjai, what did you do?" The woman asked, indicating his shoulder.

"An accident." He shrugged. "Do not let my brother's concern make you believe it is worse than it is."
She pursed her lips. "Medjai are not known for their sense of self-preservation but I will try to believe you." She smiled at Rick. "I will send for some ointment for that."

Rick looked back at him.

"My brother speaks only the language of Allah and English." He offered with a smile.

"I know a bit of your language will that do?" She tried again. "Is there anything else?" She asked in the language of the tribes.

To his surprise Rick just shook his head. "Thank you."

She smiled. "It is little enough service, Medjai." And she left the room.

"Where did you learn that?" Ardeth had to ask.

"I didn't much, but I've heard it around camp and it's similar to Farsi so I could kind of guess what she said."

He laid back down not really sure what to make of Rick's preparations. Then his friend came back over and laid a cool cloth against his shoulder. "Bet that bruise only gets worse along your hip, doesn't it?"

He sighed. "It does. I would ask as a friend however that you leave me some dignity please?"

A chuckle. "Well you don't need your boots..." A pause and then another deeper laugh. "Want me to undress you?"

"I will throw coffee in your face and you will not be able to catch it in mid air if you keep that up." He grumbled. "Allah have mercy. Fine. Please, I am certain we can find some way to explain it to your wife."

Rick chuckled. "Don't tempt me. You're right Arabic leaves a lot open for interpretation." But he helped Ardeth get the boots off none the less. "Okay, I'll leave you to do the pants, cause I don't want to get my butt kicked when you feel better."

"Bis'mil'allah, as if I do not have enough to deal with."

"Trust me, Ardeth, there's no need to be in pain if you don't have to be, okay?"

There was a seriousness behind the light words. And he nodded, it took a bit to finish undressing and then he laid back under the light sheet and just rested. He heard the door open again and then close but since Rick said nothing he assumed it was Tahiri again. Rick came back a bit later with a warm cloth this time. "Roll onto your right arm, huh?"

He did, and then sighed as the warm towel was draped from shoulder to hip.

"There, Christ Ardeth you're bruises all over." He grumbled but then opened whatever jar he had found and began to work the ointment into the very sore muscles along his shoulder. And after a while he did not bother to care if there was a slight lack of propriety to it or not. More ointment and a change of hot and cold compresses helped even more. Finally, he was lying on his back mostly asleep in this dreaming and Rick shook out his hands with a sigh. "Better, huh?"

"Much. Thank you."

"No problem. And I'm sorry about teasing you. I know you don't need me adding to the crap that
thing keeps piling on you."

He sighed. "With you it is a joke, and a way to make me feel less concerned about its interest. When he says things I am never certain what if anything it really means."

"Or means to do?" Rick asked gently.

He nodded. "Foolish I know. If it truly wanted to-- force me, I doubt there is anything I could do to stop it, try though I might. For all I truly know it only does this to bother me and for no other reason. It did get cursed for eternity for committing adultery with Pharaoh's mistress after all. And then killing the Pharaoh because of her."

"There is that, so you think maybe it isn't really interested in doing more than jerking your chain?"

"As you say. You have the-- oddest phrases for things my friend."

"Glad you noticed. Well then, we'll just play the game as best we can until we can get it to stop."

"Mmm, there are worse plans I suppose." He sighed. "You are a good friend, Rick O'Connell."

"I guess." A pause. "Pot and Kettle Ardeth, I don't doubt for a minute that if the parts were reversed you'd be just as much help to me."

He smiled. "Less accomplished perhaps, I have neither a son I have taken care of, or your wealth of expertise at-- pretense."

Silence then a chuckle. "If it weren't for the other situation you know I could tell you it wasn't pretense at all just to watch you have a cow."

"Have a...as you say." He chuckled himself. "And I have, as you reminded me already, spent the night in your arms have I not? And although it is only mine to borrow, we have shared my bed. It seems that there is very little left to worry about, does it not?"

Rick chuckled. "See, you're getting the hang of this yet." Then the hand Rick had on his shoulder tightened. "Just in time it looks like. Damned thing. Don't try and move, okay?"

"I am not dressed remember?" He asked quietly keeping his thoughts to English until he could control them better. "I take it from your voice we have-- company?"

"We do." Rick agreed in Arabic. "Since you're here you can be useful. Hand me that." Rick's tone was cold.

"What have you done to yourself now, Medjai? Did AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt not warn you against this?"

"What control have I over the will of Allah, creature?" He did not open his eyes, saving himself that embarrassment at least. Oddly enough the thing sounded only concerned.

The bed shifted a bit and Rick replaced the cold cloth on his shoulder for a warm one, tucking the sheet in around him carefully he noted with a smile. And then he did open his eyes and met his friend's blue ones with a grin. "You are too good to me, my friend."

An answering smile. "So I think you could use to be spoiled a little. Sue me."

"What have you done to yourself foolish warrior?" The creature sighed. "Do be calm, O'Connell. I mean neither of you harm at the moment. Little though it seems, you need me to do you injury
Ardeth you do fine without my help in that at all." It shook its head with another sigh. "You will be too sore when you wake to your own time to even move, Medjai."

"No doubt." He agreed. "I am as you see, less likely to be company today than most days creature and we both know how little that is. Why do you not save us all the annoyance, and send us home?"

"Right now, Ardeth, I think that would make you feel worse. Your brother seems to have-- taken good care of you."

He smiled a bit. "He has." He agreed. Rick just gave him a quick grin. "Is there something that you wished to discuss, creature?"

"Yes. AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt has asked me to tell you that the Princess' Nefertiri's brother will arrive in Ahm Shere the day after tomorrow. You are to ask him about..." It paused. "The news from Marakesh." It said all but the last word in Egyptian so Ardeth did not doubt it was quoting. "Then, says AmmunRa will you know some of the task that the gods have set."

Ardeth sighed. "The news from Marakesh. Very well. What happens in Morocco these days that would worry the gods?"

"That, I can not answer any more than you. Who are we after all to know the will of Allah or AmmunRa?"

He chuckled despite himself. "There is oddly enough some truth to what you say at times, creature."

"I find very little need to lie, Ardeth. Despite what you and your brother might believe. Amusing though it can be at times. I will have Metheret make up another potion for the pain and see that it is sent here." The thing shook its head. "Why do I bother to threaten you with intricate tortures, Medjai, when it looks to me as if you do it all to yourself?"

"If you find you no longer feel the need to bother, I will not be disappointed." He returned.

Rick just chuckled at that but Ardeth noticed that he did not move from his side and that his friend's hand was still on his shoulder. He could not help but smile. Pretense or not, there was very little to doubt that for this moment at least Rick wanted to make sure the creature knew to keep its hands off.

The thing chuckled. "Really, O'Connell, you will be wanting him branded next. I had thought Allah had decreed that there was to be no more enslavement in Egypt has he not, Medjai?"

Ardeth opened his eyes to meet the creature's. "There is a great difference creature between affection and coercion of ownership."

An odd smile crossed the creature's face. "How very odd a thing to agree on. How very odd indeed." There was something like sadness to its eyes suddenly. "Be careful with that one warriors. When you would find affection for what another man owns, who knows what sort of hell you may find as a result?" It smiled a bit. "I will send that potion. Rest, Medjai, get well. I would speak to you again of your god, and you still owe me a tale." And then it walked over to the door and left.

"Okay, that was just weird."

He nodded. "Sometimes I truly think it is simply mad. How can a thing, that can threaten one moment to tear someone to pieces, turn around a moment later and seem concerned?"

Rick sighed. "Beats me, Ardeth. I don't even think that last bit was a threat, though I guess it could have been. Sounded to me like it meant him and Anck-su-namun."
"And to me." He agreed. "Although I suppose it could have been meant as a warning of sorts to you."

"What? Hands off or I'll damn you to hell? It can try. It doesn't own you."

"No." He agreed with a sigh. "Thanks be to Allah." He closed his eyes. Then he chuckled. "You can stop claiming territory now, Rick. I think my honor, such as it is, is safe enough."

His friend's hand squeezed his shoulder gently for a second and then let go. "Guess that wasn't very subtle was it?"

"Subtle is not a word I would use to describe you, no." Ardeth chuckled again. "Since it seems we have a pardon for the moment I think I will sleep. You will wake me if something changes?"

"Of course. You could use the rest."

"Hmm, how can I be tired here, if I am sleeping at Ahm Shere?"

"I think we just have to give up on that one, Ardeth."

"As you say."
Rick didn't think he'd really dozed off as well but he woke when Ardeth stirred a bit later. "Feeling better?"

"Hmm?" Ardeth started to roll over and then smothered a groan. "How long did I sleep?"

"An hour or so." Rick replied. "Tahiri came by with that painkiller stuff. Smells horrible. You sure you want to drink it?"

"It did help with the hangover." Ardeth sighed. "And at this point I think I could use it."

"Here." He handed his friend the goblet. "It's gotta be close to time for someone to wake us up back at Ahm Shere. Want to take a chance and sleep for about four hours this time?"

"We might as well enjoy our pardon while we can. But that will put us six hours or more here. I doubt the creature will leave us be for that long."

"It can go hang." Rick replied firmly. "You aren't in any shape to deal with it right now."

"Sometimes we must deal with things whether we are in shape or ready to or not, my friend. You can not keep me safe, Rick, nor I you. Not if it really sets its mind to harming us. I know you put a great deal in your ability to protect your family. And I am honored to be a part of that. But no matter how much you try, my friend, I must bear my share of the danger. All right?"

He sighed. "I know that. And believe me, Ardeth, trying to keep any member of my family out of danger seems like a very long ago lost cause. But I'd really like to keep you all around for a bit, you know? In one piece?"

"No doubt as much as we would like to continue to be around in one piece." Ardeth said quietly. "And to have you there as well."

Rick had to think for a minute on what to say to that. "I guess we're both used to doing whatever it takes to get the job done, huh?"

"Yes." Ardeth smiled as well. "I will endeavor to remember that there is someone who would like to be beside me for the fight, if you will do the same, agreed?"

"Okay. So you want to try getting out of bed or you want to take it easy?"

"I think I can afford a bit more rest right now." His friend raised himself up on his good arm and drank whatever was in the goblet. "That tastes almost as awful as the brandy."

Rick chuckled. "Don't tempt me. I'll slip you scotch sometime."

"Please no?" Ardeth set the goblet down beside the bed and laid back. "I will get spoiled sleeping here."

"Why be in pain when we don't have to Ardeth. There's enough of it in life without hoarding it."

Ardeth was silent for a bit. "Sometimes you say the most-- unusual things."

"Do I?" He smiled. "And you thought Evie only married me because I was cute?"
A chuckle. "I would not even presume to answer that. I have never understood how women think."

"Welcome to the rest of the world, Ardeth. I don't think any man really does." He stirred some of the cold water into the coffee that had been sitting for a while and then poured himself some. "I do have to say I like the service here."

"I also." Ardeth sighed. "She is very pretty."

"Tahiri? Yeah I noticed that."

"If we stay for the banquet, you might get to see some of the dancers." Ardeth chuckled. "Allah will forgive us both I think for enjoying that."

"Allah might. Don't tell my wife." He smiled.

"As you say." A sleepy sigh. "MaSalaama."

"You too, Ardeth." He set the coffee aside and let himself doze a bit. One moment he was sitting in Thebes and then Daoud was shaking him awake. "Let him sleep." He caught the other Medjai's hand. "We're fine. And he needs the rest."

"As you say. Does he who shall not be named not trouble you this night?" Daoud whispered.

"Not much anyway." He smiled and held Evie closer. "Just wake us for prayers, huh?"

"As you say O'Connell. It will be good for us all to rest."

"In'sh'allah." He answered and then laid his head back down and let himself doze back off.

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Imhotep looked in on his two uncertain guests amused to see them both asleep. O'Connell was curled on his left side, Ardeth asleep on his back beside him. Almost touching but not quite. You would almost convince me there is indeed more than friendship between you two. He smiled. Well played indeed. Do you think that will keep me from admiring you, Ardeth? Jealous perhaps if there was indeed something there. Your brother would like that no doubt. He worries for you. He did not keep from admiring the young Medjai, who despite the bruises, was still more than a little pleasing to look at. He smiled a bit more and then sent just a breath of breeze to stir the linen sheet that he was certain was all that covered the young man. He chuckled to himself to be proven right and then let the sheet settle before it woke either of his guests. Do you know how tempting it is to have you wake without it, Ardeth? But you are in too much pain to allow me to enjoy the game. Which is why your brother there can wake again beside you. I could have kept him to the real world once he woke but you would worry, and probably cause yourself more harm trying to get out of bed and find him. Ammun knows it is like having to watch out for small children sometimes.

He made certain they were both still sound asleep and then moved over to stroke his fingers just lightly down the young man's injured side. "You are the damndest guest Ardeth Bay. But I would have you well."

"Hmm?" The young Medjai stirred a bit but did not wake.

Imhotep stepped silently back outside and waited until he knew they had both woken. He smiled at Ardeth's embarrassment at forgetting he was unclothed until after he had rolled half out of bed. Then the pain came back with a harsh vengeance and it was all the young Medjai could do to sit on the bedside.
O'Connell was beside his friend in a few seconds.

Sighing to himself he opened the door and then forestalled O'Connell's outburst with a gesture that kept the young American where he was. The sheet draped itself over Ardeth before he moved to where the young men were. "Truce O'Connell, odd as it seems to consider. We have common concerns at the moment. I swear to Ammun I mean neither of you harm today. I have too much need of you whole, Ardeth."

The Medjai met his eyes with a surprised confusion. "I-- do not understand."

He let go of O'Connell with a sigh. "So I gathered. For now, accept that you have my complete hospitality for as long as you are chosen for the task Ammun would set you. And while Ammun has told me of no plans for you O'Connell, I shall extend you the courtesy of assuming he means you to be at your brother's side for this. How badly are you injured, Medjai, in the world of waking, that it causes you so much pain even in Thebes?"

That got O'Connell's attention and he sat beside his friend in concern. "Ardeth?"

"It is only stiffness and ache. Nothing is broken or bleeding inside, I do not think."

"Hmm." He thought for a moment. "If the ointment and the compresses your brother used helped as much as they did I will agree with that. Good. Then perhaps there is something I can do." He smiled. "Little though I know you will enjoy it, Ardeth, I have no doubt you have courage enough to bear it." He looked over at the American. "Not a word, O'Connell or I will push you back against that wall and hold you there," He promised. "Give me your hand Medjai. Let me see what can be done."

Those bright brown eyes filled with distrust and uncertainty and then a flash of fear and disgust. "Why?"

He smiled. "Stubborn to the end. Because there is a chance I can help. I swear to AmmunRa, he who is lord of all Egypt that I will do you no harm today. I will even let your brother stay and chaperone. Satisfied?"

Still the distrust but then the young man offered a silent prayer to Allah and nodded.

"Your bravery does you credit." He smiled and took the offered hand by the wrist, his other hand setting on the shoulder that was now mottled by bruises. "Isis have mercy, Medjai, it is amazing you have any use in it at all." He closed his eyes and then reached for a clear memory of what the young man's shoulder should look like and pushed. It was like trying to use the same power that raised a mountain to make a sand castle but the image held finally and he pulled back and let go of his very startled guest. "There. Now perhaps you will accomplish what Allah and Ammun will."

"I do not understand?" Ardeth blinked looking down at his left side which was now mostly free of bruises.

"That is as it should be." He laughed. "You may thank me later, Ardeth, when the world stops spinning. Here." He lifted the young man's robe from the floor and handed it to him. "Pity though it is to cover such a gift you will feel better I am certain. I leave you to your brother's care once more, but I will see you both after I have seen to my god's midday." And he left them there in as much confusion as possible and only chuckled. That had been almost as much fun as making threats.

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"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." Ardeth muttered as the door closed behind the creature that called itself their host. "I do not understand."
"Me either." Rick agreed. "You okay?"

"Yes." He nodded. "Almost fine I would say." He ran his right hand along his left shoulder and arm. "The pain is gone at least."

"I don't think nuts really covers it." Rick shook his head. "Yesterday it's threatening us both with torture and today it's letting you rest and get well, and then getting rid of the bruises when that doesn't work."

Ardeth nodded. "It has gone back and forth between the two since this began. I have almost given up on trying to guess whether I will be a guest or a prisoner each time I find myself here. Now at least it seems to have given us a standing pardon, for as long as AmmunRa thinks there is a task I must perform. What was it again, the news from Marakesh?"

"That's what it said." Rick agreed sitting down with a sigh. "Jonathan should have some sort of news that will give us a clue as to what it is AmmunRa and Allah have planned for you."

"I would never wish to disappoint Allah, but I could wish that he had not so much faith in me as to mention my name to Ammun."

His friend chuckled. "Comes with the job I would think. You do lead the Medjai after all."

"As you say." He tested his arm again, pleased that it did not hurt to move and then wrapped his robe around him and went over the low chest against the wall. And just as Tahiri had told him there were the clothes he had first worn to Thebes. He smiled a bit and drew them out. "I was hoping I remembered that correctly."

Rick shook his head. "If I stay long enough one of these trips will I get to leave luggage behind too?"

"Very likely." Ardeth smiled, dressing quickly, and then placing his weapons where they belonged. "Let us see if Tahiri can find something else for you to wear to dinner, then when you come back what you are wearing now should be cleaned and waiting for you."

"Really? So what'll I be wearing when I wake up then?"

"What you went to sleep wearing. That is one of those things I try not to think about to closely. Last time you were bathing a moment before we woke were you not?"

"Right. Okay, you see if you can find me something to wear to dinner and I'll even try to be a good guest. Wonder what it'll do if we're both perfect gentlemen for dinner?"

Ardeth chuckled. "Probably wonder what we are planning."

Rick just grinned. "Fair is fair."

"As you say." He agreed. "At the moment it does seem to be the best option." He went over to the door and opened it. Once again the hallway was empty. "Why is it that when I want them here, they are not?"

"That's the way it always works." Rick shrugged. "Suppose I'll have to do with what I've got on."

"As you say." Ardeth agreed. "Let us see what time it is here." He walked out to the balcony. "It seems we have slept away the day my friend, it is going to be dark soon."

"Maybe that's why there's no guard. I don't think I want to risk either trying to leave or trying to
snoop if we're going to stumble into some one else's dreams."

"No, neither do I." He looked at the temple and courtyard below. "We will have to be guests for dinner after all."

"That thing better not expect either of us to fight anything first." Rick grumbled but he sat on the railing and looked out at the view as well. "Sometimes, when all the women and kids are out there, and the damned thing isn't around, I can almost forget this isn't real."

"I also." He agreed. "I wonder, what will happen to this place when He who shall not be named is bound again?"

"It's Ammun's world isn't it? As long as it's their god too, they should be all right. Don't you think?"

"I can not claim to even begin to understand the way of AmmunRa my friend. Perhaps I will ask Sallah when I wake, what the realm of Osiris was said to be."

"Is that what you think this is? The ancient Egyptian land of the dead? We aren't dead, Ardeth."

"No, thanks be to Allah. I do not know. It has said as much but again what should we pick to believe of what it says?"

"Whatever we can get it to swear to AmmunRa I guess."

He smiled. "That I will agree on." He heard the door open and he and Rick both turned to the curtained entrance. "Yes?"

"Medjai? Are you feeling better?" Tahiri came out onto the balcony. "Ah, I see that you are." She smiled.

"I am." He agreed. "Do you know how long it will be until the banquet our host has invited us to begins?"

"Once AmmunRa has gone to battle Set again we will begin to set up the banquet, Medjai. Is there anything I can do for you before then?"

"See if you can find my brother something to wear if it would not be too much trouble?" He requested.

She looked at Rick for a long moment. "I will try, . But he is very tall." She smiled a bit more. "The Princess is a lucky woman."

He chuckled. "I will tell Nefertiri you find her husband pleasing."

Outright terror filled the woman's eyes. "No. Oh please? Have I angered you ...? I..." She blinked back tears. "Please. I am sorry...."

"Shh, easy little one. I meant no harm" He reached over, concerned now. "Calm yourself Tahiri, it was meant only as a joke. Nothing more."

She blinked back tears. "You would-- find humor in having me put to death?" Anger now and disbelief in her eyes. "You are Medjai."

"Yes." He agreed. "Forgive me, Tahiri. I forget that the ways of my world are not the ways of yours. In this new time that I and the Princess and my brother live it would be-- a joke only for me to say to her that you find her husband a well chosen one. Nothing more."
She looked at him and then at Rick and then back. "Truly?"

"I swear it." He promised.

"Here it would mean my death if she wished. I would not have spoken if she had been here. I mean only to tease, because she is not. One does not covet what Pharaoh or his family claims, Medjai. They kill you for it."

He sighed. "As you say. I am sorry Tahiri. You have my apologies and my word that any teasing you might wish for me or my brother I will not repeat to Nefertiri. You have been too kind for my to wish you harm."

She nodded and then smiled a little. "I have done nothing but bring you refreshment and clothes, Medjai. What kindness is that? You would not even let me bathe you."

He flushed. "Now you see in the world where I live that would give your family the right to kill me."

She blinked, startled. "Really?"

"Indeed."

She shook her head. "I do not understand your world or you mine. It is very strange, I will go find your brother clothing. It is very strange." She shook her head again and then bowed and left.

"Do I want to know?" Rick asked. "Seemed like a problem there for a bit."

He sighed. "I-- forgot the structure of the world she lives in. She made a joke, about how tall you were and that Nefertiri had made a good choice in husbands."

"Caught the name at least." Rick agreed. "And then what?"

"I told her I would tell Evelyn she said so." He shook his head. "Did you know Nefertiri could have her killed for that alone?"

"Thinking I'm a good catch?" Rick looked at him in amazement. "You're joking right?"

"No." He shook his head. "One does not covet what Pharaoh or his family claims, she said. They kill you for it."

"Nice. I wonder if Evie realizes just how much power she really had here."

"I doubt it." Ardeth sighed. "She went to find you something to wear, the banquet will begin after sunset." He looked out over the temple again. "We are strangers in a strange land my friend. I should do well to remember that no matter how much it looks like home it is farther away than even your London."

"Yeah. And you have a better grasp of it than I do."

"Not as much as I would like. But it will have to do us both."

"In'sh'allah, huh?"

He found a small smile. "As always, my friend, can it be otherwise?"

Rick nodded. "Let's hope not."
Imhotep sat the headress of the High Priest aside and then went to see the banquet that was being prepared once more. He had to chuckle at the number of bets accumulating in the kitchens as to whether or not the Medjai would be there, if they would eat, and if anyone would vanish in the middle of the evening. Unless he was very mistaken his guests would at least be there, as to whether or not they would eat or stay he could not guarantee either, but likely they would eat. They had been present in Thebes for hours now and had to be hungry. He was hungry himself, and actually looking forwards to the evening's entertainment, what he had planned and the added enjoyment of sparing verbally with his guests. Besides there were questions he would truly like answered before whatever task Ammun was going to give him arrived. And no doubt the two warriors had questions of their own. And all of them not certain of how to ask or what to believe of the answers. It was at least going to be an interesting evening. Finding the banquet mostly ready he headed to the room his guests were occupying. He probed beyond the door pleased to find them both on the balcony. He opened the door silently and then stirred the curtains with a thought. It worked as well as knocking and Ardeth had come to expect it as announcement of his presence.

He heard the young Medjai sigh. "Our host is here." He told his brother in Arabic.

Whatever O'Connell's reply was it was in English and therefore nothing he could understand. The tone however, was evidence enough of the American's annoyance. He walked out onto the balcony with a smile.

"Ardeth, O'Connell, AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt has left the sky once more and gifted us with another night in paradise. There is a meal prepared for your honor, Medjai. Would you care to attend for a change?"

Something like amusement and resignation to Ardeth's thoughts as he answered. "We would not like to anger your cooks again. They shall stop sending us coffee."

He chuckled. "As you say. That may well be true. You might try to eat something for an even larger change of habit. It will probably cause a minor celebration in the kitchen."

His guest sighed. "There are worse reasons to eat. Very well then, creature, do we go or is the entertainment going to be brought here?"

He chuckled a bit. "Not if you are eating." He waited for that to register with his guest, there was a slight flush but he kept hold of his temper. "I was wondering if you would remember that. Nefshen will undoubtedly be disappointed. She was looking forwards to it no doubt." Silence and then a sigh, but there was some amusement to it. "If it were only her I might be tempted to not go to dinner myself."

He chuckled. "As you say. Come, you will have to be content with her dancing, Medjai, since I have not scheduled a lion for you to fight."

"I believe I told you, no lions."

"So you did. And you O'Connell? Do you feel up to such a challenge?"

"Me? No thanks. I thought I'd try resting while I was asleep for a change."

"As you say. Besides, Medjai, while it is a finely made bed, it might be a bit small for three do you not think?"

Studied silence and then O'Connell chuckled. "We could use the one Evie and I woke up in. That's
large enough for three."

Amused disbelief from his brother’s thoughts before he smiled. "Do I dare to ask?"

Unforced and honest affection to the young American's thoughts and a wicked humor that Imhotep could almost admire. "Evelyn's not nearly as selfish as that, Ardeth, how many nights have we shared a bed now, remember?"

"As you say."

He had to chuckle. "Well played, O'Connell, well played. It is-- encouraging to see your horizons are broader than I had hoped for Ardeth."

A sigh and then a bit of anger to underlay the words. "And when, may I ask, did my opinions in this begin to matter?"

"If they did not, it would be something we would no longer be discussing except in the past tense do you not think?" He smiled at the young man. "Do you recall what I told you about hunting when we were first attempting to catch the ducks Medjai, before you tried to drown me that is?"

"No. I do not think I do."

He nodded. "Pity. You might understand a bit more then. Your banquet gentlemen." He gestured at the doors in front of him which opened with a sigh of wind and he walked over the dais leaving his guests to ponder that one. "Do help yourselves Medjai There is even tea for you Ardeth."

"As you say."

O'Connell asked him something in English but Ardeth only shook his head with a shrug and then took a plate and handed his brother one. Ardeth was still trying to recall what he had said that day on the Nile. 'If I simply slam them to the deck, where is the sport in that?' He recalled it himself. You truly do not understand the game at all, do you Medjai? He smiled and took his seat. Ardeth and O'Connell both found something amongst the dishes to choose, quickly enough. He gestured to the two chairs one on either side of his. "Please, sit."

A moment's pause and then they did so, O'Connell on his left and Ardeth on his right. He smiled a bit more. "It would be rude of me to give one warrior more prestige than the other, would it not?"

Studied silence and then a sigh. "Your hospitality is as unusual as ever." Ardeth finally replied. "Be careful, Ardeth, or I will take more lessons in manners from my guests."

Neither of them replied to that. He was both amused and a bit surprised himself when they both actually ate some of what they had taken from the table. He took his own plate and then gestured for the dancers to begin. He had to chuckle at O'Connell's surprise at the entertainment. Ardeth was less surprised, but even more embarrassed at first. "As I have said before, Medjai, your world is a very dull place."

"Modest perhaps. But no, it is not dull." Ardeth disagreed.

"As you say." He sipped the wine Shusha poured him. "Why is it again that your god does not allow you wine, Ardeth?"

"Wine makes men foolish, and some become too fond of it and then they lose themselves to the temptation to do nothing else."
"So, it is better to remove temptation than to trust to his children's strength? That seems odd for a god who can keep such warriors as the Medjai as his children."

Surprise and confusion and that same distrust he had come to expect. "We are all Allah's children, and like any parent he gives us rules so that we may know what is right and what is not."

"All the same I do not understand the appeal. And you O'Connell, does your god not forbid you wine?"

"Not last time I checked." The man replied. "We aren't supposed to get falling down drunk but that's a forgivable sin if it happens."

"We shall hope it is forgivable for Allah as well, shall we not, Medjai?"

A smile. "Allah is always merciful, creature, he will understand."

"It is good to see you certain of that once more, Ardeth." He smiled himself. "I was not certain I would hear you say that and mean it."

"We would not want to anger AmmunRa or Allah with my foolishness would we?"

"Certainly not." He agreed. "I am curious to see what the gods have planned for you Ardeth. Truly."

"As Allah wills." Ardeth shrugged. "I can do nothing else."

"As you say." He shook his head. "You would do well to take better care of yourself then so that you can do his will more easily."

"Should I be honored to have my continued existence be the focus of your life then?" The young man asked. He chuckled, placing his own words from Ardeth's first visit to Thebes.

"That would be a switch from threatening to kill you every other visit." O'Connell put in.

He smiled. "Ah, but as you said yourself where is the challenge in that?" He took another drink of wine. "Are you tired of the game already warriors? It is only beginning and I have all the time in the worlds to play after all."

"One can never know what the gods have in store for us, can we?" Ardeth asked.

He nodded. "There is truth to that, Medjai But I shall endeavor, as should you, to make certain I do not disappoint my god."

"For now." Ardeth agreed. "Does AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt tell you more of what your task is than I know of mine?"

He sighed. "AmmunRa, who hears the prayers of all, says only that I must do as he commands when and if he commands it. I am his High Priest and it has always been so. No, Ardeth, I have no more idea of the news from Marakesh than you."

"I always hated the waiting to know why you were ordered someplace bit." O'Connell said. "Hardest part about being a soldier."

"Please, O'Connell, we are going to frighten the gods themselves, if we find too much more we agree on." He chuckled.

Surprise and then amusement. "Right."
He watched the dancing for a bit, not even surprised when Nefshen came up to the dias and then arched backward almost placing her head in Ardeth's lap. She had found the young Medjai as intriguing as he thought she did. O'Connell was trying not to laugh and Ardeth was trying not to stare too badly. The dancer straightened again and then whirled so she was right in front of him and ran one hand down his chest, a breath away from actually touching the skin, and then another twirl of jingles and fabric and she was standing in front of O'Connell. She smiled then, glanced around quickly and the ran her fingers down the back if his head and along his jaw and then sighed and whirled away again to continue the dance.

Imhotep chuckled again. "I had not thought of that, O'Connell. You are undoubtedly the first person with blond hair they have seen."

"I'm just glad Evie wasn't here for that." The man replied with a smile. "You didn't mention her, Ardeth."

"My oversight." The Medjai agreed. "And if Evelyn were here my friend she would not have done so. It was rather brave of her to do it anyway."

"Right."

He looked from one guest to the other. O'Connell was thinking of his family but Ardeth was almost pensive. "What about Nefshen and Tahiri of all people makes you not enjoy the entertainment, Ardeth?"

"A misunderstanding of the ways of this place." The young man replied. "Tahiri reminded me that Nefertiri is after all the daughter of Pharaoh."

This time he could read the thoughts well enough. "Ah," he sighed, and then took a swallow of his wine. "No, one should definitely not covet that which Pharaoh has claimed. The price can be-- worse than she even imagines."

"Did you think so at the time?" The young Medjai asked.

"No." He smiled a little, remembering for a moment when it had been worth courting death. "Eternity is a hard teacher, Ardeth, and allows for no escape."

"As you say." A sudden flash of something that was both concern and sadness. "Does Pharaoh or she know you are here?"

He blinked himself, having trouble following that for a moment. "Do you suppose they are in Memphis then? Or that this place would be so peaceful if he knew? No, Medjai, I know not of Pharaoh, praise be to AmmunRa. And Anck-su-namun is-- lost to us both."

"I was wondering if I was going to have to watch your back to make sure she didn't stick a dagger in it, Ardeth." O'Connell said quietly, and while there was some humor to the thought there was also real concern, and a very strong hatred.

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim," The young Medjai sighed. "That is not a pleasant thought, you know."

"Indeed." Imhotep found a smile. "Do you think, if she were here-- pleasing as you are Medjai, I would not be otherwise occupied?"

"As you say." Ardeth agreed. "Perhaps we would both do better to watch our backs when we wake then, my friend."
"If it were so simple." He took another drink of his wine. "She is lost to us all, Ardeth. Not even AmmunRa can help her now."

Distrust and only a slight lessening of anger from O'Connell. But a surprising amount of compassion from Ardeth. "When one is lost to even one's gods, creature, it is indeed a fate worse than death."

"On that we do agree, Medjai, on that we do agree." He nodded. "Enough of curses and eternity for one night, warriors or we will all be too morbid for even Nefshen's dancing to lighten our hearts. It is a pity you can not join me in a drink, Medjai, but a toast will have to do. To eternity, warriors, may it grant us all what we desire."

Silence and then a sigh from Ardeth. "That may well be even beyond Allah, but I will drink to it none the less. Sahedek."

"Cheers." O'Connell agreed. "Though I'd like to know how even the gods are going to manage that one."

"It will provide them with a challenge then." He chuckled. Neither of his guests replied to that, and he was content to watch the dancers himself. As entertaining as the on going game of interest with his young guest was he would have gladly traded it all to have the woman he had loved for eternity beside him. But she had chosen her own path and was now lost. He wondered if the young American beside him had any idea how truly blessed he was. Chosen of the Gods indeed.

Nefshen came back to the floor and took the opportunity to flirt outrageously with Ardeth who seemed both amused and flattered by the attention if more than a bit embarrassed as well. You are so easy to tease, Medjai it is hardly something we have to work at. Finally, she sauntered her way back to the young man and all but draped herself over his lap again, sliding one of the gold bracelets off her arm and slipping it just inside his robe. He could just make out the soft whisper, "A gift?" She smiled and then danced away.

"You okay, Ardeth?" O'Connell asked with a grin.

"Yes." The young Medjai answered obviously trying not to flush. "A gift?" He repeated the phrase to himself and took out the bracelet to look at it.

Imhotep chuckled. "She desires you, Medjai you should be flattered." He let his gaze wander over the young man with a more teasing smile. "Not that anyone could blame her, of course."

A flash of annoyance and then resigned acceptance that it would change nothing to be angry.

"Are you going to keep it?" O'Connell asked with a smile.

"Would it be rude to return it?"

It took him a moment to realize Ardeth was asking him. "That depends. Do you return the desire? She will undoubtedly be in your bed, if you keep it."

His guest flushed suddenly. "Truly?"

"Truly." He replied. "My word to Ammun. So, O'Connell, shall I find you another room for the night?" He raised one eyebrow.

Amusement but uncertainty and concern as well. Then he asked Ardeth something in English.

"I am flattered certainly but..." Whatever else he would have said was interrupted as she danced back
over. He raised one hand and beckoned. Her surprise was obvious but she smiled and moved to in front of him with a teasing swipe of one scarf. He leaned over and whispered into her ear, chuckling as her eyes grew wide. Then she glanced first at Ardeth then at O'Connell and then met his eyes. He nodded. She paused holding the pose for a long moment of thought and then sighed and took the bracelet from Ardeth's hand with a sad smile. But she leaned over and whispered something in his ear and then kissed him fleetingly before twirling over to O'Connell and whispering something else to him. He blinked obviously not understanding the word but then she was gone. "What did you tell her?" Ardeth asked after a moment, more of that distrust Imhotep had grown used to coloring his voice.

"That since the Princess was not here, you were keeping your brother company. And if she wanted to be in your bed there would have to be room for three. She finds you pleasing, Ardeth, but not enough to risk Nefertiri's displeasure." He chuckled.

Ardeth closed his eyes and asked Allah once more for patience.

He laughed. "Is it not truth after all? She thought it tempting herself. She is a brave girl."

That just made his young guest flush.

"Really?" O'Connell smiled, but there was a bit of anger to his words. "I could wish others might get the same clue."

He chuckled again. "You are only Nefertiri's husband O'Connell, and I have defied Pharaoh himself. Why in the name of Ammun would I stop now?" He rose to his feet and then smiled coldly at the young American. "She was right you know, you are. Be aware warrior and be thankful to all the gods that are that you have been given such treasures. Nothing, as you say, lasts forever." And he turned to Ardeth letting go of the coldness. "You are an intriguing guest, to more than only I, it would appear. Rest. We shall see what Ammun wills for us all come the morning." And he left the two to make of his words what they would.

"What did she say to you?" Ardeth asked before he was gone.

"Just a word, se-bu?"

The embarrassment was swift and then he chuckled, a soft laugh that Imhotep found he enjoyed. "She was right then." He agreed.

"What does it mean?"

"Lucky." Another chuckle.

"Why...? Oh, yeah. I guess I am at that." He could feel the look O'Connell gave him and then that same wicked humor. "Are we going to bed then, Ardeth?"

Silence and then a sigh. "I would be honored. as always, my friend."

Well played.. Well played to you both. He smiled. "Do not cause yourself more injury Ardeth, you are not as well as you would like to be." He chuckled. "Enjoy your evening, warriors. Nefshen may have had the right of it after all. How very-- intriguing." And he let the door close.

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"Bastard." Rick muttered to himself. "Sorry, Ardeth?"
"About what?" His friend shook his head. "So, it may believe us after all. If it leave me be while I sleep, I will count it a small price to pay that it thinks we are doing more than sleeping."

He smiled. "Well we did kind of give it that idea. Honored, huh?"

A chuckle. "Certainly." He got to his feet.

"That's good. Considering who you turned down to let me guard your back I think I'm flattered."

Ardeth smiled a little. "She is pretty is she not?"

"Very." He grinned. "I won't tell Evie, if you won't."

"Far be it from me my friend to remind your wife that you are fond of dancing girls."

He felt himself flush a little at that. "Yeah well, that was a long time ago. Sorry you had to miss out though."

Ardeth rolled his eyes. "She is pretty enough, but I think I will do well to keep my wits about me while I am here. And while I am as devout a Medjai as the next, keeping even part of my mind on the task of seeing the creature back in its grave while she was there...no. That may be a task even Mohamed, peace be upon him, could not accomplish."

"You have that right." Rick chuckled. "Hate to admit it, buddy, but I kinda enjoyed the dinner tonight."

"And I. Even our host it seems was in that humor it has. And we did find out that we do not need to fear that Anck-su-namun is still about."

"Yeah. Too bad, I was looking forward to paying her back." He couldn't keep the anger from his voice. As much as he hated the damned thing they were facing it was nothing compared to the rage he still felt toward the bitch that had hurt Evie.

"Evelyn is well enough and sleeping in your arms my friend. As odd as that sounds. Let it go."

Ardeth reached over and squeezed his shoulder.

He nodded, forcing down a deep breath. "I know it. But you don't know what it was like, Ardeth. To hold her in my arms, and not be able to damn thing while she tried to..." He stopped and pushed that horrible memory down as deep as he could, but it was so hard not to feel it.

"No. I do not. Allah grant that I never do." Ardeth's hand tightened and then he sighed. "I would pray I could have half your courage to face it."

"I wasn't brave. I begged her not to go. I begged God to let her stay. And there wasn't a damned thing I could do. Take care of Alex she said. And God help me, I didn't even do that. I left him... Damn it." He whirled away from the hand on his shoulder and didn't even think about doing anything but getting away. He'd made it maybe a dozen steps, out onto the balcony behind the dais when Ardeth caught him.

"Allah have mercy, Rick. I did not know it still pained you so. Please, it is dangerous in the shadows now. Come." Strong hands on his shoulders. "Come now, my brother, I will see you safe to your wife's arms, and her safe to yours."

"She died..." He whispered the words. "In my arms, Ardeth. And-- I know she's okay now. I know it But, sometimes..."
"Hush." The word was a soft sigh and he was turned and held close. It reminded him suddenly of how Jonathan had held Alex that horrible morning and that just made him angry.

"Let go. I'm not a kid, damn it."

"Sometimes it is all right to be the one who needs a hand, my friend. Let me help."

"Nothing helps."

"Shhh. She is safe, Alex is safe, there is nothing to fight right now, brother. Let yourself mourn and I will bear your burden with you."

"I'm not mourning. She didn't die." He growled.

"Yes," Ardeth said in that same gentle tone. "She did. In your arms when you could not stop it. No matter your strength or hers. That she is by a miracle of the old gods and your son's bravery alive now does not make that horror less. It lives still. Here."

One strong hand against his heart. "Let it go now, Rick. Please, brother of mine, I promise to Allah, I will not go nor think you weak because of it."

"I love her so damned much, Ardeth." He heard himself say, and damn it all if there weren't tears in his voice.

"I know." A gentle sigh. "I have not your experience my friend with comforting, but I will try."

And then a hesitant hand moved to the center of his back and pressed him against Ardeth before his friend wrapped both arms around him. "Salaama, akee." A tone he had never heard in Ardeth's voice.

"Allah's peace to you, brother." In English that time as if he couldn't follow the Arabic.

"I..." And he gave up, because all he could remember was the feel of her blood on his hands and her body going limp in his arms. The first sob caught him completely off guard. "Shit...I..."

"I will not melt." Ardeth told him in that same tone. And he had to wonder a little if that's what he'd sounded like on the roof in Aswan. And then all he could do was ride the wave of loss and horror and thank God that there was someone there to catch him. He had a good few inches and thirty pounds or so on Ardeth but his friend didn't seem troubled by either as he held Rick close and let him cry. It had been four years and a bit since that day and he'd managed not to shed a tear. But Evie wasn't there, so she wouldn't have to know. And Alex was sound asleep, so he wouldn't think anything was wrong, and there was someone to keep him from shaking himself apart. It was a long time before he could raise his head from his friend's shoulder. Ardeth had at some point began stroking his hair as if he wasn't any older than Alex and whispering bits of the Koran that offered comfort and hope.

"Christ, I'm sorry." He muttered finally.

"For what?" Ardeth sighed. "Tears? Do not make me revise my opinion on your intelligence now, my friend. Even the strongest of men have need of tears when they are mourning the loss of a loved one. You let me cry against your shoulder, did you not?"

"That was different." He wiped his eyes irritably.

"Why?"

"Because, you weren't yourself and..." He sighed. "I don't cry."

"All people cry," Ardeth replied gently. "Do not be foolish. You have been trying not to mourn for years, my friend. That you have managed it at all says more for your strength than I can imagine. I
would have, I think, been howling my grief and rage to Allah long before this. Mourning the loss does not mean that you are not utterly thankful for the fact that it was put to rights."

"I feel stupid."

A soft chuckle. "Do not. It was good of you to trust me so and let me be the one to help you for a moment."

"We keep this up and I'm gonna wonder if maybe it's got reason to be jealous."

Silence and then the arms around him only tightened for a moment and then let go. "Evelyn would kill me and how was it you said...? Yes, you could not get so lucky."

"Your dancing girl disagreed."

Ardeth chuckled and then to Rick's astonishment ruffled his hair like he did for Alex so often. "She is not mine. More is the pity. She is beautiful. Do you feel better now?"

He wiped his face again with his sleeve. "Yeah, I think so."

"Good. Then let us not risk the shadows any longer and find our way to our room."

"I really could find some place else to sleep." He offered as they walked back into the now deserted hall.

Ardeth chuckled. "Appreciated, but not necessary."

"If you say so." He didn't really feel much like talking and they got back to the room they were sharing without running into anyone in the halls. Which was good because he'd probably pick a fight just because he felt so bad. He sat down with a sigh and then poured himself a glass of the wine that had been left on the table. "What time do you figure it is back and Ahm Shere?"

"On towards morning I would think. A bit before prayers perhaps. I doubt we will be here much longer."

"That's good. I'd probably try to do something stupid if I woke up and found the damned thing watching you sleep again."

A sigh. "No doubt. It does enjoy bating me when it can."

"Yeah. Which reminds me, I meant to ask you did you remember what it was talking about with the duck hunting?"

"No." Ardeth shook his head. "And I wish I could, because it seemed serious enough about it helping me understand. Which makes no sense. The creature has not once cared whether I disliked its attention or not, in fact the more I object the more it seems to enjoy bating me."

Rick nodded. "So, what was it that it said. Something about your opinions mattering or there wouldn't be anything to talk about? Maybe that's what it meant? If you didn't care it wouldn't play the game?"

"Hmm, no. It did not say that there would be nothing to discuss, only that we would be discussing it only in the past tense..." Ardeth paused. "Past tense?"

Rick thought for a bit and then cursed. "As in already done?"
A bitter sigh. "I would rather slit my own throat."

Rick set the wine down, worried now, because Ardeth was serious about being willing to slit his own throat first. And there really was no guarantee that they could keep him safe no matter what they tried. There had to be someway of convincing his friend that survival was better than suicide, just because the odds were against them. "I can't say I blame you, but like you said earlier, what could either of us really do if it..."

"Please, Allah forbid." Ardeth interrupted with a shudder.

"Yeah." He let the rest go unsaid. They were both silent for a bit, and Rick fell back, for now, on trying to convince him it was at least safe for the moment. "But it did say that if Anck-su-namun had been here it wouldn't bother you right? So, maybe it is just yanking our chain."

"I would be happy to think so." Ardeth agreed. Then he blinked. "We will have to discuss this later, hmm?"

"What...?" And then he wasn't sitting in Thebes he was lying on a pallet of blankets with Evie wrapped tightly in his arms. And damn if her shoulder wasn't soaking wet under his cheek. Sallah nudged him again and he opened his eyes. "Yeah., okay. Ardeth?"

"Fine." A strong hand on his shoulder in the predawn darkness. "I will go to prayers brother, why do you not let Evelyn sleep, hmm?" There was an unspoken, and stay with her, that Rick could agree to without giving a damn.

"Let me know when breakfast is...Shit, you okay?" He stopped, recalling that Ardeth had been anything but when they went to sleep.

Surprise and then an odd chuckle. "I had wondered if what would happen there would affect us here. It seems we were good to worry. No bruises."

"Damn..." He muttered. "Don't take this wrong but that really doesn't make me happy."

"Oddly enough, I agree with that. We will cope as we can. Stay with your wife, my friend. I will come get you all for breakfast."

"Okay." Rick laid back down and held Evie as close as he dared without waking her. Her hair as always smelled of rosemary and lavender. He shifted a bit and then pulled the light blanket up over the both and rested one hand over her heart. And it was just enough to hold her close and feel her breathe and the steady thump of her heart under his hand. "I love you so damned much, Evie." He whispered. She sighed a bit, snuggling closer and he laid his head back against hers and just listened to her breathe.

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"Well I can't say I'll mind not seeing her again." Evie said with a smile. "Although I do wonder what she did that even AmmunRa can't find her."

"He did not say." Ardeth shrugged, taking another long swallow of coffee.

"He did not say." Ardeth shrugged, taking another long swallow of coffee.

"Hmm." She sipped her own, and did her best to appear as if all the missing parts of the story, and there were so obviously missing parts, weren't there at all. Something was going on at Thebes that worried her friend immensely, so much so that Rick was obviously unwilling to leave him alone for long. She couldn't be certain of course of what the damned thing had done or threatened to do to Ardeth but whatever it was it truly frightened two men who were as far from cowards as it was
possible to be. She had a sinking suspicion of what it was because there was as much embarrassment as anger to whatever they weren't saying and there was very little that embarrassed her husband. Even Izzy's tales of their less than sterling adventures with theft and dancing girls had only been met with concern for her reaction to them and then a oddly endearing smile, and the comment of 'see what real love will do to a man? I don't even care that it was fun at the time.' And blast if she hadn't loved him for the honesty as much as the flattery involved. So, whatever had happened in Thebes was far more unnerving than that. And to a man like Ardeth who could face down horrible deaths with a calm acceptance she envied it had to be a fate worse than death. And since they had determined that whatever happened in Thebes did indeed affect them in the real world it had to be something that wouldn't be readily obvious like days of torture while they were sailing to Egypt. Evelyn wasn't nearly as naive as her husband enjoyed believing. Especially about ancient Egypt or modern Egypt for that matter. She was a scholar and a librarian and she had read several texts that were more than slightly explicit on things that would make most "proper" English girls swoon and most English men lose their lunches. She sipped her coffee again. And then smiled at Rick, loving him all the more that he would stand by his friend through all this, and no doubt do everything to either keep their very honorable friend from such a horrible fate or...and she prayed devoutly to all the gods that might listen that she was wrong about this...keep it from happening again. She'd happily let Nefertiri out to dance on the thing's grave once they got it back in its box.

"I was looking forward to knocking her about some more though." She picked up the conversation with a smile. "Pity. So, Sallah, Arebe when do you both think this bridge will be done?"

"I would say by noon, no later." Arebe shrugged. "Then we may have the noon meal and continue the attempts to find those objects you two have determined we will find."

"Wonderful, I would like to study those papyruses a bit more now that I've actually gotten some sleep."

"It was good to sleep for a change." Ardeth agreed. "Even having to be in Thebes was not completely unpleasant this time."

"That's because it's stark raving nuts." Rick shrugged. "And AmmunRa scared it more than anything."

"I can not say I blame it can you? It is free...after a fashion...for the first time in three thousand years and Ammun holds the threat of tossing it back into damnation over its head. Allah knows I do not think I could remain sane for five minutes once that lid was shut."

"We would all like to forget that it threatened you with nothing less, Ardeth. I'm sorry we reminded you." She smiled and then touched his hand lightly. "No princess or Pharaoh could ever ask for a better guard."

He flushed just a bit but smiled. "It is kind of you to say so, Evelyn, unworthy though I am."

"My son and I slept just fine last night Ardeth Bay. I don't think that's unworthy of praise." She offered it in ancient Egyptian just to make her point. "Shall we go tackle those papyrus Sallah?"

"Of course Sitt O'Connell." He chuckled. "It is good to see someone argue with him for a change."

"I've had a big brother all my life, Sallah. I can argue with the best of them." She smiled.

"Bis’mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." Ardeth rolled his eyes but he smiled as he did it.

"Can I help, mom?"
"Of course you can, Alex." She smiled at her son. "Want to help me categorize all these things?"
"Okay, then we can go find the armor and stuff after lunch right?"
"In'sh'alla." Sallah answered. "The rest of the Medjai are working hard toward that goal young Alex."
"Perhaps I will lend them a hand today as I no longer feel like I will fall over if I do." Ardeth rose to his feet. "I will see you all for lunch then."
"Don't do too much, buddy, we have news tomorrow right? And I think two days in a row of both of us nearly killing ourselves is a bit much."
"As you say. I will endeavor to restrain myself from any foolish acts of bravery, if you will do the same my friend."
"Deal."
"Is that all it takes?" She teased her husband with a smile. "I could have started that years ago."
"Yeah, but you'd never manage a day without stirring up some sort of trouble." Rick smiled back.
"Well, I can think of at least one way, but we'll have to discuss that later." She smiled a bit more.
"Oh please, not again." Alex muttered.
She just laughed and then slipped her arm through her husband's. "Why don't you go help Ardeth with the pyramid love. You'll be bored to death with our sitting around muttering in Egyptian and trying to agree on translations."
"You sure?" He hugged her tightly, something she'd noticed him doing rather a lot today. It made her even more certain there was so much of the story they'd left out.
"That you'd be bored to death yes. That I wouldn't love your company, no. But duty calls and all that." She raised herself up on her toes and kissed him, rather more thoroughly than she usually did in public. "I'm surrounded by Medjai, love. What could be safer? Go on. Something tells me Ardeth will want to do more than he should no matter what magic our undead host managed."
"All right. I love you, Evelyn O'Connell you know that?"
"Well I certainly hope so." She grinned and kissed him again. "Shoo."
"As my lady commands." He bowed with that damned endearing grin and then stepped out of the way as she swatted at him. "Come on Ardeth, let's go see what trouble we can find."
"Please, I would truly enjoy a day without trouble at all." Their friend sighed.
"In'sh'alla, right?"
"As if it could be otherwise."
She watched them go. "May Horus walk between you and all the dark places you must travel." She whispered the words to herself.
"What makes you say that mom?" Alex asked, and even Sallah looked at her oddly.
"When your father goes poking around in tombs, temples, or pyramids, Alex it's always best to invoke any deity possible." She smiled.

"Right." He chuckled. "Bet he'd say the same about us, huh?"

"Undoubtedly." And she tried to set her mind on the translating to be done and not the two men behind her.
Ardeth looked over the bridge his people had built and smiled. How long had it been? How many ages since they had joined together like this for a task? Not only the warriors who had ridden to face the army of Anubis but the women and children who cared for everything while the men moved half a mountain to fill in this chasm? Sometimes in the press of simply dealing with the various tasks he had to keep Hamanaptura undisturbed and the remains of Ahm Shere safe, and the creature bound he forgot that there was so much pride to be had in simply thinking; ‘we are Medjai And I, Allah be praised, have been honored to lead them.’ He smiled a bit more. I know I should not court your wrath oh my God with such pride, but it is hard not to marvel and my people. I am yours to will, oh Allah, and await the task you would set me. But if it would please you, look down upon your children with my eyes so you may know the things they would do in your name.

"It is a good thing to have done." Selim said moving over to stand beside him.

He looked at his uncle in surprise for a moment and then chuckled. "I was thinking the same thing." He agreed. "Shall we see what lies ahead, Selim?"

"I would hope nothing so horrible as yesterday." His uncle replied. "Are you truly well, nephew?"

The fact that he asked the question without couching it in politeness was unusual enough, but Ardeth could easily count on the fingers of one hand the number of times his uncle had referred to him as nephew since he took up the leadership of the Medjai. He looked at the older man in concern. "I am well, surprising as that is." He assured.

Selim nodded. "When this is over, and the creature is bound again to the earth, and we take up once more only the task of seeing that it stays so, will you tell me, son of my sister, what it is that truly haunts your dreams?"

He looked back over the bridge and sighed. "It has threatened much Selim, my sanity, my soul, my friends, and my people. I am only one man, uncle. And while Allah has been merciful to me and so far it has done nothing to carry out its threats it is mad. And I sleep each night not knowing if I will awake as a guest or in chains, or worse still that I will be unable to prevent it from harming the others."

A strong hand squeezed his shoulder. "You tell me what I already know. We are warriors of Allah, Ardeth, and while the deaths it may bring us all are indeed horrible, have faith that it is only the dying we must suffer. Our souls, and yours, belong to God."

He nodded.

"I will ask again, when this if done. And then we will recall this moment of pride and you can tell me again what you will."

"You do not believe me do you, Selim?" He smiled just a little. "I believe you. But I am not foolish enough to believe that there is not more you do not say. You are too worried about us to let us worry about you."

He chuckled a bit. "That, is very likely. I am well, Selim, I swear it to Allah. No harm done, but that which you saw yesterday and my own foolishness with the liquor I told you of."

"Allah is merciful, Ardeth he will forgive you that." The strong hand still resting on his shoulder
tightened again. "Whatever it has threatened that haunts your eyes and your brother's know that while you are the leader of the Medjai and I will follow you to death and beyond, I have never stopped being your uncle, Ardeth."

He sighed and then gave the only part of the truth he could face giving. "I am afraid."

"Fear does not make one a coward, Ardeth. It only shows that one is brave enough to continue despite it." His uncle gave a sigh. "Allah grant that it is only fear you face then, nephew, and not the actions behind it."

He swallowed once. "In'sh'allah." He put his hand over his uncle's. "It is--worth more than this pyramid of gold, Selim, to know that I do not face it alone, in my dreams, or here when I must live with the consequences."

"I will thank God again for your brother then." Selim said; then gave an odd chuckle. "Would that your mother were here to see you, Ardeth. She would be proud."

He squeezed his uncle's hand. "It is good to think so. Come, we will find this armor Evelyn and Sallah think we should have and then we will do as Allah commands us and make sure the thing is bound again."

"In'sh'allah." His uncle agreed. "Hello, O'Connell, it is good you are here." The strong fingers tightened on his shoulder once more and then let go. "I would think the more of us who can face this hunt together the better."

"If the dead things start moving, just chop them into pieces." Rick suggested. "It seems like the best solution. Short of blowing them to bits and that might bring down a wall."

"How much dynamite do you have with you?" Ardeth smiled.

"Only three sticks at the moment. Think I should have brought more?"

"We will hope not." And he took the torch from his friend's hand. "Let us go see what awaits us."

"Once more into the breech, huh? And here you used to worry about what I was going to unearth next."

"If I still had nightmares that you were not a part of, my friend, undoubtedly I still would."

"Last night wasn't all bad." Rick smiled a bit.

"No," He agreed. "I shall hope for another such visit since I doubt very much we will spend the night only sleeping."

"There is that."

"According to the map we go right." Evelyn looked at the sketch she'd made. "Much more pleasant a trip this time I think. I wasn't even looking forwards to crossing that on ropes."

"It was unpleasant." He agreed. The bridge his tribesmen had made was wide enough at the top for one person to walk easily, sloping down into a rough pyramid of its own on both sides. He crossed easily enough finally coming to the other side and nodding at Arebe and Daoud who waited for them. "Right first. Then we shall take the book of AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, and try to find the creature where it may yet lie."
"That is a very old phrase." Sallah put in. "I do not think I have heard it in Arabic before."

"What?"

"He who is lord of all Egypt." Evelyn repeated. "Although I would certainly think you're the one here most entitled to say that."

He flushed a bit. "I will hope Allah knows I meant no offense." But oddly it did not worry him. His god had gifted him with the glory of beholding the ancient one and he was still thankful for the honor. "We may have more ruble to move." He warned as they headed into the passage. "Did any of you go this way before?"

"No." Rick drew one pistol, torch in his other hand. "I hate this part."

"It is un-nerving to worry what is ahead but I think the mess behind us is proof that the creatures we faced before at least will not bother us this time."

"That's something, we haven't even had any of those damned mummy guards this trip so far."

"Al'hamdil'Allah." He smiled. "I hate those."

"Thanks be to God is right. Nasty things." Evelyn agreed.

"Did I ever thank you for shooting that one to bits before it tore my throat out?" He asked her.

"No, we were distracted." She ruffled her son's hair.

"My thanks then. It seems sometimes it is the Princess who rescues her bodyguard."

She smiled. "I'd hate to be predictable."

"Of that, I think, we have little fear." Selim mumbled in Medja.

Ardeth only chuckled. "Ah, another choice, left or right?" He indicate the two directions of the hall in front of them.

"Right." Alex put in from his mother's side.

"As you say." The hall was empty of rubble at least and easily wide enough for them to walk two abreast. He and Rick went first, Sallah, Evelyn and Alex next and then Selim, Daoud, and Arebe. The came to the end of the hall and the sealed door. Statues of Anubis stood on either side, their jackal heads carved with open mouths this time instead of closed as he was used to seeing. He could recall facing the warriors out in the sands who had looked so much like these statues. "Inside I take it?" He indicated the carved stone that filled the door, depicting the standard of the Scorpion King, the round disk held in place by two jackal warriors one on either side. But there were no hieroglyphics around the carving just that and nothing more. "No curses?" He asked.

"None." Sallah agreed. "No words at all. I have never heard of that for a burial chamber, not even for one that was never intended to be used."

"That does make it less of a risk to open." Evelyn put in.

"Yeah." Rick agreed. "Any magic key or combination this time, Evie?"

"Not that we found." She answered.
"Okay then." He handed Ardeth his torch and holstered the gun to pull a crowbar out of his rucksack. "We do it the old fashioned way."

"Is that wise?" He had to ask, as his friend put the bar into place.

"Probably not. But it's only a door, right? No harm ever came from opening a door."

"I heard that." Evelyn put in.

"Figured that." He grinned at her. "Want to step back just in case I unleash something really nasty?"

"Allah have mercy." He stuck the torch into the space between the wall and one statue and the other into the ground and drew his sword and then reconsidered and took one of the pistols from the back of Rick's belt in his left hand as well. "I would prefer a Thompson."

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." Selim whispered but it sounded a little amused. "Cut them to pieces you suggested O'Connell?"

"It does seem to work best." Rick agreed. "Here, love, just in case." He handed his wife yet another pistol.

"Thanks. Okay, Alex, if anything does jump out of there you run and get help, no arguing all right? I don't want to have to worry about you and you know the map by heart by now."

"Right mom."

"On three?" Rick asked.

"Three." Ardeth agreed and took a step back and leveled the pistol over his friend's shoulder just in case, so it might give Rick time to get out of the way.

"One, two, three." He could see Rick strain against the bar and there was a low groan of stone, another pull, with his full weight behind him and the block shifted. "Come on you damned thing... give..."

And then it did. The large carved portal falling into the room beyond with a crash.

An once again nothing at all came at them from the darkness. They stood there for a long moment and then looked at each other. "Too easy." Rick said finally. "Way too easy."

"My thought exactly." He agreed, but he handed Rick back his pistol slowly and then picked up the torch he had jammed between the statue and the wall. "Evelyn? Sallah? What now?"

"Thank you oh God of the Dead, who guards the way to the kingdom of Osiris." Evelyn spoke the ancient words softly. "Since Anubis was so kind to invite us gentlemen, shall we go?" She smiled a bit.

"We came this far." Rick agreed and then picked up the other torch and walked into the darkness. Ardeth followed a step behind. His boots crunching down hard on something that crackled. For a moment all he could picture was the scarabs that devoured the disturbers of Hamanaptura and he had to truly fight not to back up. But he held the torch down and found the floor covered by the bodies of scorpions instead. None of which appeared to move. "Don't come in here yet Evie, Alex." Rick called out. "Yuck."

"As you say." He agreed, but he held the torch down lower and swung the flames over the remains
on the floor. Nothing so much as skittered. "Dead." He determined.

"For now. That doesn't always seem to be a permanent thing, you know."

"As you say." He agreed. "How high are your boots?" He asked the others. "We have scorpions all over the floor. And while they appear to be dead..."

"I think we'll be all right." Evelyn answered. He nodded and joined Rick in kicking as many of the things to the side as he could while he walked, clearing a sort of path to the next set of doors. These were covered in gold if not made of the stuff and each had a warrior of Anubis in battle with slain and dismembered foes lying about their feet. He stuck his torch into the ground and took back the pistol Rick handed him. Rick handed his torch to Alex and then put the crowbar into the seal the doors made.

"Three?"

"Agreed." He moved just to the side noticing that Alex, Evie, and Sallah had backed out of the antechamber. Selim stood to his left and Daoud and Arebe to Rick's right weapons ready. He leveled the pistol over Rick's shoulder again and then waited.

"One, two, three." Rick pulled hard on the crowbar again. And the golden doors gave with a clang. And yet again, there was nothing. "Okay, this is really starting to bother me. No one goes through all this trouble without cursing something."

"I wish I did not agree so easily with that." He shrugged.

Rick put the crowbar up and took his pistol back. "Well, well, there's our sarcophagus. Minus the guy that's supposed to be in it." He stopped and then looked back at Ardeth. "Or maybe not?"

"That is not a pleasant thought."

"No." Rick agreed, but he holstered the gun once more and drew the scepter of Horus from his pack. "Might do more good."

"It might." He agreed. So this time he sheathed his sword and took the crowbar and set it to the coffin rim. "Bis'nil'Allah rakhman el rahim. We do only what you will oh most merciful Allah."

"May Horus walk between us and all the dark places we must travel." Evelyn repeated the phrase she had used the night before.

He gripped the crowbar tightly and then took a deep breath. "One, two, three." He pushed down with all his weight and the seal cracked and then he pushed up and the lid slid sideways off the lower part of the coffin and onto the ground. Silence after the crashing of the stone lid onto the floor. Rick leaned over the rim of the stone sarcophagus spear in hand and then shrugged.

"Armor." Rick said in some surprise. "Shield, breast-plate, grieves, sword the whole works." He carefully retracted the spear and put it away. "Hand me that back, huh?"

Ardeth gave him the crowbar and then drew his sword once more. Rick carefully slid the bar into one piece of the armor and then lifted it slowly. "Okay, so maybe it isn't cursed? Doesn't that seem kind of odd? It was the Scorpion King's right?"

"That is what worried me." Ardeth agreed. "But at the moment I can not think of anything to do but take it and see what it is that we can do with it."
"Okay, so let's take it and get out of here and then worry about what we might have woken up, or angered, huh?"

He nodded and took the bag Selim handed him. Daoud and Arebe moved in to help them load the armor into the bags. Rick had just dropped the first piece into the bag when Daoud picked up the shield and placed it in the bag Ardeth was holding. His cousin paused in the move an odd look on his face. "Daoud?"

"I...Allah...I..." He dropped the gold shield with a strangled cry, his whole arm suddenly swollen red and then blackening to something like rot.

"Oh God..." Rick grabbed Arebe and pulled him away from the armor and Ardeth dropped the bag and caught his cousin as he fell forwards.

"Daoud." He gripped the young man trying to get his robe off to see what was wrong. Selim was there as well then, cutting the cloth and revealing the spread of whatever was happening. His cousin's entire chest was the color of blood and blackening quickly.

"Ardeth, father I...Allah...have...mercy...on..." And then he shuddered once, a choked sort of scream as his throat and face were swallowed by the same mass and was still in Ardeth's arms.

"Allah. Bis'mil'Allah, rahman el rahim...." Selim's voice broke on the prayer and he took his son from Ardeth's arms and held him close.

"Most merciful Allah have pity on your child. See him, oh God we pray, onto Paradise that was promised by your prophet Mohamed, Peace be upon him, and upon Daoud bin Selim, and upon his family oh Allah we pray." Sallah whispered the prayer softly.

Ardeth pulled off his outer robe and laid it carefully over his cousin's face. Then he moved over to wrap his arms around his uncle and let the man mourn. How long they sat there surrounded by images of a god of the dead and his followers Ardeth couldn't have said but then there were more and more of his people there, and a blanket to cover his cousin and another to bear the body out of the tomb. He stood there for a long time himself, even once Selim had gone with the body.

"Ardeth?" Evelyn's voice startled him, as she put a hand on his arm. "There's nothing more to do here, hmm?"

"No. Nothing at all." He agreed. "Do you know..."

"The armor seems to be poisoned. Rick managed to keep Arebe from picking up a piece. Daoud was-- the only one who touched it." She swallowed hard. "I'm so sorry, Ardeth, I...should have researched more, known better. Nothing is ever as easy as it seems."

He shook his head. "There was nothing written, no warning to be seen. And we were expecting an actual attack not a very ancient booby-trap."

"Sallah and Arebe took the rest of the armor out in some large leather tarps. And everyone is well enough. Why don't we go join them?"

He nodded. "Where is Rick?" He realized suddenly that she hadn't mentioned him.

"I made him take Alex back to camp. He says he's fine, Ardeth.. But I know he touched it too."

"What?!" He turned and stared down at her in disbelief. "You did not tell me?"
"He seems fine." She gripped his arm. "Daoud was gone in moments, Ardeth so, he shouldn't still be fine. But he seems to be, he says he is. I don't understand it either. Talk to him? He-- might tell you something he won't tell me."

He nodded. "If he will not speak of it to you, I doubt he will speak of it to me. But I will try."

"Sometimes, I'm the last person Rick wants to tell, Ardeth, simply because I'm the first one he should." She shrugged. "He forgets that just because he loves me enough to keep me safe doesn't mean I can't share the burden of keeping us both safe."

He blinked a little surprised at that. "I think I understand that more than I thought I might."

"He does it with you too, hmm? You're family now, Ardeth. I can't say I expected him to act too much different toward his brother than he does to Alex or me, or Jonathan in that case."

"Let us see if I can remind him to share the burden a little and then I must see to my cousin...and his burial."

"Amal and Azza were readying him. Sallah said that Arebe sent the fastest rider in the tribes to Aswan for an Imam."

"That is good. But I doubt even the fastest rider will be here before sundown. And we should have him buried before then. It is written in the Koran."

"I know, but we can hope. Can we go now?" She hadn't let go of his arm.

"Are you all right, Evelyn?" He put one hand over hers.

"I'm scared out of my wits actually. He seems fine, Ardeth. I want him to be fine but..."

"But you would know why. Yes, so would I. Come then, sister of mine, let us see to it that we know why." He walked with her back out of the tomb and tried to keep his mind on his friend and the fact that he was well and not on the family he had just let die. But it was very hard not to feel that he had left Daoud behind him in that darkness, and that tasted bitterly like failure.

Rick stopped by the bathing tent he and Ardeth had used the day before. "Alex. I want you to go back to the tent we've been sleeping in and stay there until your mom comes to find you."

"Dad? What's wrong?" Alex blinked, still obviously shaken with Daoud's death. Rick was still shaky himself. "Dad?"

"There's something I need to do, Alex. And I need to know you're safe. This is serious okay, Alex? Stay there until your mom comes to get you. Then you can tell her where I am."

Alex opened him mouth as if he was going to say something and then closed it and nodded. "Okay dad. But you gotta promise to be okay while I'm gone."

He smiled. "Scouts honor, Alex. I'll do my best."

"Okay." Alex started to move a bit closer and Rick stepped back quickly.

"Go on now." He crossed his arms over his chest and waited.

"Something's wrong isn't it dad?"
"That's what I need to go see about. Go wait for your mom and then come back and we'll see."

"I hate waiting." Alex walked backward a few steps. "I could stay and help."

"Please Alex, I don't want to argue now."

"Okay dad." And then he turned toward the tent.

"Tell her I love her okay?" He whispered it softly, too softly for his son to hear. "You too." And then he went into the tent which was as he expected completely deserted. He took off his gunbelt and set it aside then the shoulder holster and then undid his shirt and pulled that off as well. But nothing looked wrong. He knew he'd touched the armor far more than poor Daoud but noting looked wrong, and he felt fine. It didn't seem real likely that only one piece of the armor was poisoned though. He took a wash bowl and jug of water and scrubbed his right hand and arm thoroughly with soap, being careful not to get the water or soap anywhere else in the room. Then he did it again. After the third rinse the bowl was full of sudsy water. He took his shirt and the leather bracer he'd been wearing and put them in the bowl as well and then carried it all carefully outside and walked away from the camp. It didn't take long to get out of the growing encampment and several dunes away. Then he buried the whole mess.

"Did you want to mark that as cursed?" Ardeth's voice came from behind him just as a strong hand settled on his shoulder. He flinched away from the touch whirling around and stumbling back a step to stare at his friend. He could only imagine the look on his face feeling the utter sinking sensation in his stomach. Ardeth just stood there and then carefully lowered his hand. "Shall we count to ten and see what happens?"

"Oh hell...Ardeth."

Ardeth gave him a sad smile. "No harm done I do not think." He shrugged. "It would seem whatever the curse is it is not contagious."

Rick swallowed and then forced himself to breathe. "You didn't know that for sure."

"No." His friend agreed with another shrug. "But I was holding Daoud when he died, Rick. If it was something I was going to catch, then I would already be dead."

He blinked, not sure of what to say to that. "I didn't think about that. I just..."

"Wanted to cause no one else harm. Yes, I noticed. So Evelyn was right you did touch the armor."

He nodded. "Maybe it was only the shield he picked up, Ardeth. I don't know."

Ardeth seemed to consider that for a moment. "Perhaps, perhaps it was how he picked it up. You used the crowbar first and then took hold of the breastplate. Perhaps you are immune to it. Perhaps Allah does have plans for you yet. I do not know. We can not know, not yet. But I would say with certainty that you are not going to give it to us if you come back to camp."

"You can't know that."

Ardeth smiled, still sad. "Then give me your hand and we will prove it true. Or find out what hell looks like together." He held out his right hand. "I have lost my cousin this day, Rick. Please, do not make me lose a brother."

"It could kill you."
"So could have that horrible mess yesterday, so could the next night's sleep come to that. Come now, brother mine, I must go back to camp. Do not leave me to face my cousin's burial alone."

"It isn't going to help anybody if we bury you next to him." Rick shook his head.

"Fine." Ardeth's eyes darkened. "I will send someone with a horse and water and supplies." He took a few steps away. "Shall I give the creature your regards when I see it again?"

"Damn it..." He turned away himself, hating the feeling of helplessness that swarmed over him.

"Idiot." Ardeth said kindly and strong arms went around him suddenly. "Proof enough?" Ardeth's hand clasped his, his left arm still around Rick's chest. "You can hit me again if you feel the need, but I believe I have proved my point."

"Stupid crazy idiot." He growled the words but he had to smile. "You could have died."

"I have a pardon from AmmunRa himself, and a task to perform for Allah, and news to hear from Marakesh. It seemed a reasonable risk. Come, I truly must get back. And I would not wish to go alone. Evelyn will only make me come back and try again or send a dozen to ride you down and drag you back."

"Would they?"

Ardeth nodded. "If she asked, probably." Then he shook Rick slightly. "If I tell them too? Yes." It was a very believable threat.

"I'm outnumbered pretty badly."

"Yes." His friend agreed. "Will you come?"

"All right, just-- let's work at making sure I'm not going to give it to anyone, okay? I'm scared to death she'll hug me before she slaps me."

"Now I am to keep you from being hugged by your wife? Please, you will expect me to part the Red Sea next."

"You're the one talking to gods." He relaxed a bit more and Ardeth let him go. "I wish I could've stopped Daoud."

"And I." A sad sigh. "But he died as he lived my friend, a Medjai and attempting to keep the damned thing in its grave. Allah no doubt has already welcomed him to paradise."

"Yeah." Rick nodded. "Let's go back."

"Thanks be to God." Ardeth put an arm around his shoulders as they walked. "I was thinking I would lose you too."

"I'm too stubborn to give up on that easy."

"As you say. But you are still and idiot."

"Runs in the family." He pointed out.

"We could do worse."
The funeral was simple enough. They had dug a grave a far distance from camp and six of his family carried him on a litter of cedar and the brightly woven blankets of the tribes. As was proper, it was Selim and Ardeth who carried the two front corners and then his brothers, and then two more cousins. His mother and sisters came next, and then the rest of the family. Evelyn, Rick, and Alex hadn't been given much choice about whether or not they were walking with them it was simply already expected.

They reached the grave site and carefully lowered the litter into the ground. Ardeth looked up at the darkening sky and then nodded once. And in the ages old keen of those left behind the women of the Medjai gave voice to the grief of the tribe. The undulating wailing cry carried from the grave site to the camp and back again. And then just as suddenly as it had began it ended. Selim stood at the grave's edge and in a soft voice began to recite Daoud's ancestors and his own back the forty generations to Mohamed, peace be upon him, and then after a moment of pause for the Prophet, back again, until he came to the first name still recalled to his line, some hundred and more generations gone now. "My son is at peace now, in the arms of Allah, in the Paradise we all shall find when we leave this life. I will mourn his loss, but I will not mourn his death. He was Medjai. And he died as he lived keeping that oath."

"The tribes are lessened by his loss, and will remember his sacrifice. Allah grant us all as much courage when he face the same. Rest well, Daoud, cousin, warrior. I will miss you beside me in the battles yet to come and thank you sincerely for your strength in those we have won. Allah, God of my people, this man is Medjai, I swear it. No leader of the tribes has ever lost better. Grant him a place by your side, most merciful, he deserves no less." He took a deep breath and then picked up a handful of sand and let it pour into the grave. "We will remember you Daoud, until the wind no longer blows in the desert."

"Good bye my son." Selim said quietly and added his own handful.

"My heart aches, but I am as proud today as the day I bore you." Azza followed her husband. One after another of the family adding a handful of sand. Ardeth was only half-surprised when Rick picked up one himself and then let it fall.

"I'll knock the damned thing into the wall for you."

He smiled just a little despite the sadness.

"He would appreciate that." Selim said quietly, startling Rick a little no doubt.

"Good."

Evelyn paused for a moment and then picked up one handful herself. And then odd as it was considering she hadn't even moved he could see the change that came over her. "Rest well, Medjai, peace be with you, warrior, none of my father's guards could have been braver. May Ma'at walk with you through the halls of death and see you safely to the other side." The ancient Egyptian was a quiet sigh.

"It has been a very long time since one of us was laid to rest with that Princess. Thank you."

She smiled sadly. "Little enough to thank but I meant it none the less."

The sun had finished setting by the time the grave was filled in with sand. He moved away from it and then when the way was clear he looked up at the night sky and shouted to the heavens. "For Allah, for Daoud, for victory."
And the Medjai warriors came down from the dunes in a sweeping wave of horses and when the
wave was gone there was only level sand before them.

"When we are gone, we leave no trace but for our memories and our families." He explained quietly
to his friends who were standing not far away. "Come there is as much a party as we can manage out
here in the middle of nowhere."

"Party?" Rick asked, obviously lost.

"We should see Daoud into paradise with lamentation? There will be many tears, but tonight is for
Daoud. Mourning is for the comfort of those left behind my friend." He could recall so clearly how
Rick had finally sobbed out his own grief in his arms only the night before. "There is, as you told
me, enough pain in the world without us hoarding what we are given. So it is with grief as well.
Come, you can teach me these drinking songs that will scare the camels." He clasped his friend's
shoulder

"Have you ever heard Rick try to sing, Ardeth?" Evelyn smiled.

"No. But I have heard Sallah. Nothing can be worse than Sallah."

"We'll see." She moved over and slipped her right arm through her husband's and then to his surprise
her left arm through his and followed Selim and Azza into the camp.

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"It's kind of odd for a funeral don't you think, mum? Dad?" Alex asked, watching the people mill
about.

"I kind of like it myself. I've always wanted a wake." Rick answered.

"And given their belief that the moment he died Daoud was assured his place in paradise I suppose
they don't see it as a horrible thing that happened to him. Just that they have to bear the loss." Evie
leaned her head on his shoulder and Rick smiled, slipping one arm around her shoulders. "It's a
beautiful place to be, but I'm happier right here."

"So am I." He squeezed her tightly. "It wouldn't be much like heaven if you weren't there."

"Will I get to meet your parents in heaven do you think, mum? Dad?" Alex asked, not even seeming to
mind their cuddling for once. Rick reached over and ruffled his son's hair with a smile.

Evie smiled herself. "They're looking forward to it. I think they'd given up on me ever marrying to
begin with. But see that you make them wait a very long time, Alex."

"Right." He nodded. "You too dad."

"What? Me?" He squeezed Evie's shoulders. "I'm trying, sport. Honest to God, love."

"I know. You could be more successful though." She teased a bit.

"Right."

"So will I get to meet your parents too dad?"

He looked over at his son and then shrugged. "I don't know, Alex. I don't remember my dad at all,
and I was a lot younger than you when mom died. But I suppose it's possible."
"I can't imagine that, not knowing your mom and dad I mean. I don't think I'd be nearly as good at it as you are."

He smiled a little sadly and then hugged his son for a moment. "You'd be as brave as you always are, sport. But you're stuck with us so it's a good thing you're used to it."

"Well, I could do with less smoochy stuff and I'm really too big for you to keep messing my hair, but it's not that big a price to pay." Alex grinned.

"I'm so glad you think so." Evie laughed and then hugged them both. "Let's go see Selim and Azza. Before they send Ardeth to look for us."

"I've got to ask him why everyone seems to think it's his responsibility to find one of us when we aren't where someone thinks we should be." Rick looked pointedly at his wife.

"Because he is of course, responsible I mean. He's the leader of the Medjai and that apparently includes us. Besides which, you might get Alex and I to stay behind when you go and do something brave and foolish, but I'm rather certain that he isn't going to let you do it alone. Any more than you'd let him go back to Thebes without you there to guard his back. So, at least I won't worry quite so much."

He looked at her for a long moment. "Are you really angry at me for not wanting you to deal with that thing every night?" He wasn't really sure what to make of her statement.

"Don't be silly." She sighed. "I worry less about you both when I can see you of course. I only meant that I'm glad that neither of you have to face it alone."

"Yeah, well, me too." He agreed. Gladder that I can at least sometimes keep between it and Ardeth really. He looked down at his wife and smiled. It'd be a hell of a lot harder to keep playing this game of innuendo with it if you were there. You'd probably slap me. "I'd be gladder if it would just leave us alone."

"So would I." Evie agreed. "But I know you won't do anything too foolish with your own safety if you've got to watch out for Ardeth's and he'll do the same so I can rest a bit easier that you'll both wake up in the morning."

"In'sh'allah, huh?" He hugged her. "We'll beat it again, Evie. We always do."

"Third times the charm, let's hope it stays dead this time."

"Maybe we should put a stake through its heart just to be safe?"

"That's vampires dad, not mummies." Alex sighed. "I think you're supposed to burn mummies."

"Is that what we did wrong? Silly us." He grinned. "There you go Evie, we dig it up, set it on fire and bury the ashes. Simple."

"Why do I doubt very much that it will ever be that easy?"

"Because my friends, you know this creature as well as I."

"Have you eaten?"

"Lots." Alex smiled. "It's really good."

"As it should be." Ardeth smiled a little. "There is to be music, and perhaps some singing, of those
who can sing. Alas, the dancing will be less entertaining than we have seen at Thebes I am sure, but it will be enjoyable none the less. Please, will you come and join us? Selim has asked me twice now where you are."

Rick chuckled a little. "Evie was just saying that we should go join the party before they sent you to look for us. Sorry we didn't get there sooner."

"It is no bother." Ardeth shrugged. "Will you join us?"

"We'd love to." Evie got up and he followed with Alex. "Your people are a wonder to see, Ardeth."

"It is kind of you to say so. I try of course not to be too proud, so as not to anger Allah. But it can be very hard to not be awed at the courage and strength of the Medjai."

"So, if dad's a Medjai, and mom and I are his family, does that make us Medjai too?" Alex asked. "No one's ever said exactly."

Ardeth looked back over at Alex in surprise. "Have we not? My mistake, certainly. You are, all three of you, members of my tribe, unless of course you do not wish it."

"Turn it down you mean? That'd be silly."

"I think Alex has the right of that. We'd be honored, Ardeth." Evie smiled.

"Little late to change my mind now don't you think?" Rick shrugged. "Besides that way Evie at least get's decent in-laws."

"I'll tell my aunt Emily and Jonathan you said that." She glared at him.

"Your aunt Emily and Jonathan are the only people in your family I don't dislike." He reminded her.

"So, if we're Medjai too, uncle Ardeth, will you teach me to ride a horse like you do?" Alex interrupted.

Ardeth smiled. "What do you wish to know? How to race the wind, or jump from ground to saddle? How to keep on your horse and grab things from the ground? Or how to jump walls and not fall off? There is a great deal to learn about riding as we do, Alex."

"Then I guess I should get started, huh?"

"I would be honored to teach you what I can. But I am hardly the best rider in the tribes." His friend smiled. "We shall have to start with finding you a horse."

"Really? Can I mum, dad?"

"You don't have to do that, Ardeth." Evie shook her head.

"If Alex wishes to learn to ride, and there are other young boys learning the same it seems unfair to keep him from it. I have enough horses that I shall not miss one. We will find you a horse tomorrow Alex. If you do not object of course, my friends?"

"No objections from me." Rick said firmly. If it was something that would keep Alex's attention and energy while they went and dealt with whatever else was in the pyramid that was fine by him. Evie looked over at him and he could read almost the same idea in her eyes.

"Then it shall be done."
Ardeth sat down with a tired sigh. If one more person in the tribes asked him to join them for a dance he was going to fall over. They had danced rings and circles and interwoven spirals among the fires. Songs had been sung and old stories of long lost heroes and old magic told. He had been a little surprised and embarrassed by Arebe's retelling of the great battle against the warriors of Anubis on these very sands not long ago. He certainly did not feel that he deserved so much of the honor. They had stood together and done what needed to be done.

"There you are." Selim came over to him. "Come the other women have cajoled Evelyn to tell them the story of awakening He who shall not be named and your brother thought it wise if you were there to help him see she told it correctly. I find I am interested as well."

"Allah have mercy, Selim I am exhausted."

"You have been dancing. That is good. Did Rakhma get you to dance?"

He smiled. "She asked." He agreed. He did not doubt his uncle would be well pleased if he was more fond of the young woman than he was. "I had forgotten how exhausting E'Ageeb is to dance."

"Then you should dance it more often, so you do not forget."

He chuckled. "It takes twenty or more to dance it well, Selim. Where, when there is no crisis to be faced, am I to find twenty to dance it with?"

"At camp where you should come more often." His uncle replied. "But for now you must see to this tale of great deeds."

"We did only what had to be done to see that the creature was returned to its grave."

"I would expect you to say nothing else, that is why it is good you are not telling the tale." His uncle pulled him to his feet and kept a hand on his arm as they walked.

"There you are." Rick grinned. "Evie and I were wondering if we would have to start without you."

"I have been told we are telling of our first fight with He who shall not be named?"

"I've wanted to hear this forever." Alex put in.

"And I, nephew, come, let us see what it is that they will tell us." Selim let go of his arm and then took Alex's hand to lead him over to where Azza and Amal and many of the other women and children of his uncle's tribe sat.

Evelyn was sitting on a blanket not far from the fire and he followed Rick over to sit there as well. "Well, my part of the story begins with my brother Jonathan. I was at the Cairo Museum of Antiquities and he brought me this odd puzzle box he had found."

"Acquired." Rick corrected.

"Acquired, from Rick a while before he brought it to me."

"Where did you find that key?" Ardeth asked.

"Hamanaptura, my first time there." Rick shrugged.

"You let him leave Hamanaptura more than once?" Selim asked.
Ardeth smiled. "I was-- unaware that he was so stubborn. Arebe and I watched him head into the desert and thought that would be the last we would see of him."

"Surprise." Rick grinned. "I made it to an old caravan well and that got me to an oasis and that got me to Menya. And then Jonathan got me arrested in Cairo."

"Which is where he was when I met him. In prison." Evie smiled. "Horrible rude American that he was."

"You were cute, I was going to hang in a few hours and what did I have to lose?"

"He kissed me you see." Evie half-whispered to the young women sitting not far away. "Right there in front of my brother and everyone and I'd only just met him."

There were a multitude of giggles at that.

"Rick." Ardeth shook his head.

"I was going to die, seemed like a nice thing to remember when they hung me..." He rubbed his throat. "That hurt like hell."

"Bis'mil'Allah. They hung you?" He stared at his friend. "How many times have you cheated death now, my friend?"

"Who's counting?"

"So there he was, dangling from the rope and I had to bargain with the warden to get him released. Nasty man...I offered him a 100 pounds, and then he wanted...well...rather more than that. So I slapped him."

"He what?!" Rick's voice was a harsh growl and Ardeth couldn't help but agree.

"Nothing to worry about, love. He put his hand on my knee, nothing more, and I smacked him with my purse. That's when he had them hang you, sorry....and then I had to tell him you knew where Hamanaptura was and agree to let him have part of the treasure so he'd let you go."

"Thanks." Rick grumbled. "You never told me that."

"It didn't seem important at the time. So there we were, my brother Jonathan, Rick, the warden and I all heading for Hamanaptura. We were sharing the boat with another group of American's who were also looking for Hamanaptura. And it sort of turned into a race to see who would get there first. That was when the...oh dear...that was all of you wasn't it?" She looked over at Ardeth.

He laughed. "Who snuck onto the boat and tried to steal back the key? Yes."

"You scared me to death you know."

"We are Medjai We can be frightening when we have to be." He smiled. "But we were unsuccessful in getting back the key and then the boat was in flames and we had to let you go."

"So we found a fellahin village and bought some camels and me some clothes because all I had to wear was my nightgown." Evie went on. "And then we went to Hamanaptura." She smiled a little. "We were searching for a way in to the complex and we came down into the Sa Nedje first."

"Then we nearly got shot by the other group looking for the Book of Ammun." Rick put in. "And Ocid, the warden went off to look for treasure."
"He got himself killed by something, probably those horrible beetles." Evie shuddered. "And then we were trying to dig under the statue of Anubis when the other group...um...knocked the creatures sarcophagus loose above us and...bang...it nearly fell on our heads."

"Scared Jonathan out of his wits. And we were digging around for the book too, so it wasn't all their fault."

"That's true." And that's when we heard Ocid screaming. And the Americans had had some bad luck of their own so we stopped for the night." She smiled. "And there we were, getting ready to sleep. When you showed up."

Ardeth looked over at her. "Showed up? We rode into Hamanaptura with swords and guns."

"Yeah and you nearly killed me." Rick poked at him. "I thought you were going to gut me there for a second."

"For a second I was." He agreed. "Thanks be to Allah, you did not let me. And you were going to blow us all to Paradise with that dynamite."

"Yeah." Rick grinned. "But it got you to leave us alone for another day."

"My foolishness certainly." He shook his head. "I should have known then that you would find someway to find more trouble."

Evie laughed. "So the next day there we were with this large stone sarcophagus and inside was this black wood carved coffin...with all the protective spells chiseled off. Well I'd never heard of such a thing, and buried at the feet of Anubis' statue? So...well...Jonathan had this key you see and...it fit the lock."

"Bis'mil'Allah Rakhman el rahim." Ardeth shook his head. "You had to open it."

"I didn't know any better did I?" She shrugged. "So I did. Put the key in the lock turned it and...then the lid just flew off and out he fell, well bits of him anyway. Nasty horrible skeleton...still um...decomposing really."

"After three thousand years?" Ardeth had to ask. Allah, no wonder you are so insane. Merciful God....

"Yes, and there were these horrible claw marks on the inside of the coffin lid, finger nail scratches...and he'd left a message. That I didn't understand either. Se ahebe ni ket-aa."

"Death is only the beginning." He translated it into Arabic for those in the tribe who did no speak ancient Egyptian.

"Well he was right about that. Then the American's found both the chest and the book of the Dead. I didn't know what the curse on the chest said of course, but I wanted to see the book of the Dead. So we went back up to camp and well, I acquired the book from the poor Egyptologist and well the key fit that too. And so I was reading it, and Rick wanted to know what it said."

"I didn't know any better." His friend sighed. "Silly me."

"So there I was reading out of the book of the Dead, because I certainly didn't know it would really work...and then apparently it did because all of a sudden there were all these locusts. And we ran back into the catacombs to escape them, but now we weren't alone. And it caught Burns first, but we interrupted it. Because it hadn't quite um, finished."
"First the creature took his eyes and tongue, because he had opened the cursed chest. It would have finished him, but you interrupted it." Ardeth put in when she seemed to falter over how to explain the rather grisly details.

"And then I stumbled onto an old secret passage and I found poor Burns and then the creature found me." She paused again. "I had never been so frightened in my entire life. He said something to me in Egyptian that I was a bit too scared to understand but I think at first he had me confused with Anck-se-namun."

"Burns did have pretty bad eyesight," Rick put in.

"There is that. How odd, well anyway thank God Rick and Jonathan arrived then and Rick blasted it with his shotgun and we all ran, right into you as I recall," She smiled at Ardeth.

"Indeed. And I told you to leave Hamanaptura and we would try to recapture the thing. We tried, alas, and failed. But at least for once you listened and left."

"We headed back to Cairo. And we were trying to decide if we were going to stay and help or just get on the next boat for England. But the next boat wasn't for another two days so at that point we were rather stuck," Evelyn smiled. "And I wasn't really ready to call the adventure to an end yet, because I really didn't want you to just disappear into the desert or something." She reached over and took Rick's hand.

"Yeah, well. You were probably stuck with me by then anyway, love."

"And then the creature came to Cairo," Evelyn sighed. "And finished off poor Mr. Burns. And released the next plague, and the water was turned to blood." She shuddered. "And we all went to check on Burns and there was He who shall not be named. And he had regenerated some but not completely yet and he tossed us about like rag dolls. But then Miri, this little cat I'd taken in jumped onto the piano and he panicked. He was afraid of cats at that point. Do you suppose they still bother him?"

"Guardians of the dead? I would not think so, no," Ardeth shook his head.

"Too bad, we could invoke Bastet." She shrugged.

"You could perhaps," He agreed. "I doubt much that she would answer me."

"I might try that instead of Mut. Nefertiri was probably fonder of Bastet anyway, sorry we wandered from the story. So He who shall not be named was scared off by Miri and then we all went to the Museum of antiquities. Because I thought Mr. Nabil might have some answers...and there you were," She looked over at him.

"So I was," Ardeth agreed. "Sometimes I am amazed we did not kill each other in those early days my friend."

"Me too," Rick agreed. "In'sh'allah, huh?"

"As it was meant to be," He agreed. "And the creature's power was growing stronger. For it blocked out the sun and brought darkness and hail upon the land."

"That we saw even out in the desert. We were riding toward Hamanaptura even then," Selim put in.

"For which I will be forever thankful," Ardeth smiled. "But that is another part of the story. Nabil was trying to find someway that the creature could be killed. And you went back to your hotel did
"Sort of." Rick answered. "Jonathan and I went to look for the Egyptologist that was helping the Americans since he'd opened the chest too. We found Bennie, who was helping the creature find all four of the men who had opened the chest."

"Helping He who shall not be named? Was he mad?" Selim asked.

"Bennie was-- just too stupid to know better I think." Rick shrugged.

"He was a horrible scheming little rat." Evie grumbled. "And he paid for it."

"That was later. Anyway we found the Egyptologist just after the creature did so he was pretty dead. And then it released the next plague, flies."

"I was back at our hotel, rather unhappily actually." Evelyn looked pointedly at her husband.

"I wanted you safe."

"You locked me my room."

"So?" He grinned. "I left you guards. I didn't know they were going to get eaten."

"Well Henderson got drained dry and then He who shall not be named snuck into my room. And kissed me." She shuddered.

Several of the women let out gasps and the children giggled nervously.

"I've never been so disgusted in my entire life." She went on. "Because he certainly wasn't in one piece yet. Then Rick and Jonathan burst in."

"We'd found what was left of Henderson in the outer room. I was worried." Rick shrugged. "Then it just tossed me into a wall with a thought. First time that happened, not the last, but I still remember it."

"I thought we were all going to die." Evelyn went on. "Nastily. But Rick had brought Miri with him and that managed to scare the creature away. We were in a bit of a panic by then so we headed back to the Museum to search for the book of AmmunRa."

"And surprise, surprise you were still there." Rick poked him again. "At least this time we didn't try and kill each other."

"As you say, it would have served no purpose." He smiled a little. "But by then the creature had entranced much of Cairo and we had to flee the museum once Evelyn had discovered where the book of AmmunRa was to be found."

"We managed to get out the back and Jonathan had gotten us a car...but it sent all these poor men to stop us who were only under its spell and we didn't want to run them over at first but we had no choice. Then it managed to get Daniels out of the car. And there was no where else to run to."

Evelyn smiled a little sadly. "So there we were the five of us with our backs literally to the wall and out of the crowd walks He who shall not be named, fully restored. And it said that if I went with it, it would leave Rick, and Jonathan, and Ardeth, and poor Mr. Nabil alone."

Ardeth didn't miss the look Rick gave him at that but he said nothing. No, I am not blind to the similarities, please, my friend not here, not now. "I am sorry I did not let you shoot it." He put in.
"Yeah well, silly us we thought it might keep its word."

"At that point I doubt even an oath to AmmunRa would have been sufficient." He agreed. "It took Evelyn with it and we had to escape through the sewers. That was almost as bad as the chasm in the pyramid."

"Almost." Rick agreed. "And Nabil stayed behind so we could get away... He was a brave man."

"Ahmer Nabil was Medjai, my friend. He died a good death." Ardeth shrugged. "And then we went to your friend Winston, who had the airplane."

"That was a damned crazy flight I'll say that. Four of us on a biplane barely able to carry two." Rick grinned.

"At first, I will admit, it was fun." He smiled back.

"My trip wasn't. The creature called up a huge wind, like a tremendous dust devil to carry us to Hamanaptura." Evie shuddered. "It was horrible. And then when we arrived, and I saw your plane. I was so relived." She smiled at her husband. "Until it called up that huge wall of sand, and I thought it killed you."

"I was pretty sure it was going to." Rick agreed. "But then just before it would have the wall just--stopped. Granted we still crashed but..."

"That was me." Evelyn smiled a bit more. "I needed a distraction. So I um., kissed him."

"You what?" Rick turned to glare at her. Several of the women laughed at that and Ardeth had to try very hard not to smile. Selim shook his head but smiled a bit as well.

"Well it seemed like an idea at the time. And it did work." She bit her lip. "Almost, I am sorry about Winston."

"He went out in a blaze of glory, trying to rescue the girl and save the world. He loved every second of it." Rick smiled. "And it was a good idea and brave, but God Evie."

"Yes well, it worked. But he wasn't very happy. And then Bennie knocked me out."

"If he wasn't dead I'd kill him. Why didn't you tell me that either?"

"Because it was done and by the time I had the chance he was dead."

"We salvaged what we could from the plane and headed into Hamanaptura." Ardeth went on with the story before his friends could get to involved in the argument. "We were trying to find the book of AmmunRa, but the creature sent its servants to kill us. Remains of the priests of the temple I think, and we were hard pressed to keep them from succeeding. Even with the dynamite you brought."

"It worked didn't it?" Rick shrugged. "But finally we got the book and then you decided to play hero."

"I did what had to be done. It gave you time to get the book free did it not?" He smiled. "There were only five."

"Only five. How the hell did you survive that anyway, I threw another stick of dynamite that way too. Figured it might kill you but it was a better death than they were going to provide."

"Odd as it is, I appreciate that. It was a good thought. I however knew what dynamite was. They did
not. I pushed past the two closest to the entrance and when it blew I rolled with the blast. That left me with three, and thanks be to Allah I was not alone for long."

"Pasha still says that it was more than three." Selim put in.

"By then, certainly, a dozen or more I think." Ardeth agreed. "But we won."

"We had some good luck ourselves." Evelyn smiled. "Although Jonathan reanimating the guards was not high on the list of good points. And I certainly wasn’t happy with his bringing back Anck-su-Namun."

"He did what?" Ardeth had to ask.

"Sorry, let's see. He who shall not be named was reciting the spell from the Book of the Dead to bring back Anck-su-namun. He had just gotten her soul to reunite with her remains and was about to stab me when Rick showed up and stopped him. That's twice you've kept me from being sacrificed love. Thank you."

"Part of the job." He smiled back. "But we didn't have the key to the book by then, the creature did. So all Jonathan could do was read the one on the front and that animated those gravity defying guys that you and I fought on the bus."

"Those were horrible." Ardeth agreed. "Then what?"

"Well he managed to get close enough to um, acquire the key back from the creature and open the book so he could finish the spell. Which was good because those things had Rick pinned to the ground and were about to stab him to death, repeatedly."

"Yeah, well, I think Anck-su-namun was about to run you through too."

"True, but Jonathan got the spell done just in time and sent the guards after Anck-su-namun instead. And then Rick was fighting with the creature and I took the book from Jonathan and read the spell that made him mortal. Pharaoh came and took his Ka to the underworld I think, and then we could kill him. He fell into the sacred pool and just sort of-- reverted back to the skeleton he'd been before. It was rather gruesome actually because he was conscious right up to the end. And he said that same thing. Death is only the beginning... And then he was gone." She sighed. "But by then the whole place was shaking apart with some sort of ancient booby-trap I think and well we managed to get away but Bennie got stuck there. Good riddance. But we did have some treasure that he got out first, including the scepter of Osiris although we didn't need that until later."

"And surprise, surprise you got out too." Rick looked over at him. "And silly us we thought that would take care of that."

"As you say. So there you are uncle, that is our tale." He looked over at Selim.

"I do not understand how you can be as calm about it all as you would have me believe but I will thank Allah that you were successful. It is a good tale. And it gives me hope that we will once again find a way to win against the thing."

"In'sh'allah." Ardeth agreed. "However, I am too exhausted to tell the second tale. That shall have to wait for another night. Tomorrow will be here too soon, and while I doubt that I will find the rest peaceful I will be in no shape to deal with news that Allah will be sending to us if I do not try."

"As you say. Tomorrow we must try for the book of the Dead, and if we are fortunate we will find the remains of He who shall not be named and destroy it or bind it back to where it belongs."
"As Allah wills." Ardeth agreed. "Will you sleep, Selim? I will not leave you to this night alone, uncle."

Azza smiled and reached over to touch his hand. "You are a good nephew, Ardeth, and a kind chieftain. But we have honored our son with this revelry for his acceptance into Paradise. We will rest now. May Allah grant you rest."

"As you say." He laid his hand over hers. "Sabeh el Keher, MaSalaama."

"And to you." Selim agreed.

"Okay then, back to Thebes, huh?" Rick got to his feet with a sigh. "Are we doing this in shifts or just hoping for the best?"

Ardeth shrugged. "At this point it is barely five hours until dawn. And we do have standing pardons as I recall. Shall we try to rest?"

"Why not? Ready to try and sleep love?"

Evelyn got to her feet and then nodded. "Of course." She hugged her husband tightly. "I wish...you didn't have to go."

"So do I, Evie. But right now we don't have a choice."

An oddly sad smile. "I know. Try to stay out of trouble, please? Both of you?"

"As you say." Ardeth agreed. "I will do my best to avoid it, if I can."

"I'll try love." Rick hugged her again. "Come on sport, let's get a few hours sleep."

"Okay dad. That was a great story." Alex got up with a yawn.

"Yeah, it had its fun parts. MaSalaama, Selim, Azza."

"And to you O'Connell. I wish you a sleep free of He who shall not be named."

"Allah willing." Rick agreed.

Ardeth nodded himself. But he did not truly expect it to be so.
Imhotep sat at the small table waiting with growing impatience and concern for his guests to arrive. It was well past midnight in the waking world and yet neither Ardeth or O'Connell had ventured into sleep. Ammun alone knew what the two fools had done to themselves now. How was he to fulfill Ammun's will if they were incapable of doing what they were supposed to do. There was no certainty of course that Ammun would blame him for the two Medjai's failure but he was not going to risk it if he could at all prevent it.

Finally, he felt the slight tremor in the veil between the world he was privileged to live in now and the waking world his guests came from. And the bed in front of him was filled with them both. Back to back much as he expected them to be. He smiled just a little and then got up, intending to wake them both. But the exhaustion was obvious even in sleep. "What have you done now, Medjai?" He walked over to Ardeth's side and reached out to touch the wounded shoulder. There was no sign of the injury now which was good and nothing of pain to his mind only sadness and grief. He skimmed lightly over O'Connell's sleeping thoughts as well and found the same. So whatever had kept them to the waking world had not caused them any harm. Good. He smiled to himself and then took the time to admire his young guest. Do you know how tempted I am to take your weapons and lie them on the floor and slide in beside you? I could you know, leave your brother to the waking world's dreams, and be in his place when you wake. Would you know it at first or could I do as he did and roll you into my arms before you woke? It would almost be worth it to see your reaction when you woke. You are pleasing Ardeth...and I would relish a chance to feel you in my arms, willingly and with affection, even if you thought me someone else at first. I may have to try that yet.

Sometimes his young guest was entirely too fun to tease. And now that the two warriors had decided to play the game as well it was even more entertaining. I should thank you O'Connell for making him enjoy this despite himself. Do you realize that it only makes the game more enjoyable to play? No, you would stop if you did. You truly do not like that I desire him do you? Who is jealous of whom, warrior? Now is that not an intriguing thought. Do you desire him too? Hmm. If so how far are you willing to pursue the game? Well now, I shall have to try this and see. He poured himself more coffee and then sat back down to plan the next moves in the game of words and attention he was finding so entertaining.

O'Connell woke first, reaching no doubt for his wife but finding his arms empty. He could pick up the knowledge of where he was as it filled the young American's mind and then amusement and concern and he rolled over to see to his brother. Imhotep did his best to ignore the young man, keeping his eyes to Ardeth instead. And the annoyance and anger that got were exactly what he expected. Then much as he had the other day he turned his brother toward him, and away from Imhotep's gaze. Ardeth stirred a bit, waking slowly and after a moment of confusion relaxed into his brother's arms. He said something in English that was both amused and resigned.

O'Connell chuckled and then just stroked his hand through the dark hair.

Surprise caught Ardeth's thoughts back into Arabic long enough for Imhotep to realize it was not really a move he had expected or recalled, but he didn't object either, only chuckled sleepily.

"Was there something you wanted to discuss?" O'Connell asked after a long moment.

"Discuss? No." He smiled. "I was simply, enjoying the wonderful day Ammun has granted us and thanking him for his gifts. Such rare moments should be treasured should they not? Comfort is a fleeting thing in the world of waking, warriors, who am I to steal it from you here? If however, you can be kind enough guests to join me for the day I would see you both in the courtyard once I have
see to my god's midday. There is some concern for the news you will find in the morning, and if it concerns my god it concerns me. And that, warriors, should concern you as well should it not?" He set his cup down on the table. "I will send Tahiri for you both and we shall take the midday meal in the courtyard." He got up with a smile. "Well played, Medjai well played." He left the two alone to make of that what they would.

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"Bastard." Rick muttered.

"Mmm, you do enjoy annoying it." Ardeth chuckled, rolling away and to his feet. "I wonder why it is I do not wake when you do that."

"What put your head on my shoulder? I got that from you in Aswan actually."

"It is good to know I trust you in my sleep as much as I do when I am awake. As odd as that sounds considering we are still sleeping."

"I think I've given up on trying to figure that part out." Rick got up with a sigh, pulling his pistols out from underneath his pillow and holstering them with the ease of long practice. "Wonder what this news it that has it and Ammun nervous?"

"I could wish we were not to find out. Anything that can concern a god who can control He who shall not be named with such ease makes me more than nervous."

"Yeah me too."

"I suppose we shall know soon enough." He headed out onto the balcony. Rick followed after a moment. "Do you wonder what it is Paradise really looks like?"

"No." He smiled a bit. "Evie offered to tell me once."

"Did she?" Ardeth turned to look at him. "And you did not want to know?"

"At the time, no. I had her in my arms and our son was safe and I saw you'd survived the army of Anubis so I wasn't much concerned with whatever heaven looked like. I was just pretty damned happy with right then and there."

"As you should have been." Ardeth agreed. "Nefshen spoke truer than she realized my friend, you are a lucky man."

"Yeah. I am." He agreed. "It could have turned out so much worse. I could have even survived it and it wouldn't have meant a damned thing if I lost my family."

"Death is hardest on those who survive it. Dying may be hard on whoever has to suffer it. But death...no. I almost find I agree with the creature, it is only the beginning, not for the one who dies, but for those of us left to carry the memory. And I, Allah be praised have never had to lose the woman I love."

"I'd sell my soul to not have to do it again." Rick agreed. "Kinda odd, but you know I can almost see why the damned thing did what it did. If it meant losing Evie, or facing that curse? No contest."

Ardeth put a hand on his shoulder. "I am not surprised you would think so. But I would be hard pressed to allow it. The old god's can not have your soul, my friend. Any more than you would let me lose mine."
Rick nodded, remembering for a moment that horrible dream he'd had on the flight to Hamanaptura. And that brought to mind the story he'd heard Winston tell often enough. "Well, I might not get to Paradise when I die, unlike you and Evie, but you won't have to go all the way to hell with me."

"I would."

He chuckled. "I know. But we'll never get past Fiddler's Green, well I won't so you're going to be stuck there with me. I'll have to teach you to drink though."

"You mentioned that place before, in Aswan. What is Fiddler's Green?"

"It's a bar, half way on the road to hell." Rick smiled. "The old U.S. cavalry used to say that there are no cavalry men in hell, because half way there is this bar called Fiddler's Green. And as you go past it, you hear old friends and comrades inside so you go in for a drink. And you stay and swap stories and enjoy the company and then the barkeep will fill up your canteen for you to take on the rest of the road. But he always leaves it just empty enough that you finish it before you get to the gates of hell. And it's better to go back and get it refilled than to make the rest of the journey."

"Ah, so you never quite make it to hell is that it?" Ardeth chuckled. "Not my conception of the concept of Purgatory but I suppose it will do if it must. What am I to do to keep busy while you are drinking?"

"Trade horse riding tips with the old timers? Watch the dancing girls?" Rick shrugged.

"Ah, well you did not tell me there would be entertainment." Ardeth shook his head. "I would rather you come to Paradise with Evelyn and I though. Because you know she will send me after you, or come herself and she might not be so forgiving of the dancing girls."

"Right." Rick chuckled himself. "She really would do it you know. Send you after me I mean."

"Certainly, but she would undoubtedly want to go with me just to keep me from further trouble. So there we would be like Inanna and her handmaiden trying to find Damuz. And we would undoubtedly get into so much trouble in the attempt you would have to break out yourself to come rescue us."

He couldn't help but laugh at that. "Right. Okay, it's a plan. Whichever one of us gets to Paradise first has to make sure the others get there too."

"Of course." Ardeth offered him his hand. "I swear it to Allah."

"Around here you know that just might happen."

A small smile. "We can always hope so my friend."

"Though hell should bar the way, huh? Okay, but you get to tell my wife." He took Ardeth's hand and shook it once.

"I thought we would invite her to join the oath, no?"

He laughed. "Might as well. I guess were kinda lucky she isn't here for this. Which when you think about it is kinda something like Fiddler's Green isn't it?"

"I had noticed the similarity yes. So I have no doubts that you would come to hell itself to guard my back if you had to."
"No. I guess not." He looked down at the courtyard. "Speaking of hell do we go join the damned thing for lunch?"

"It seems wise. I would know what we face tomorrow if I can. I can deal with being polite for lunch it gets us the answers we will need."

"Yeah, well there are worse deals with devil."

Ardeth rolled his eyes but there was more seriousness to the tone. "Do not remind me, please."

"Over my dead body, buddy."

"We shall pray it does not come to that, hmm?" Ardeth clasped his shoulder. "Let us go, the sun has passed midpoint now and I would enjoy the shade."

"Yeah." Rick followed him back into the room and then out into the hall. There were tables and cushions set up in the courtyard under one of the largest palm trees. Tahiri smiled at them as they came over and bowed her head quickly. Ardeth said something to her in ancient Egyptian and she indicated the temple behind them.

"She says the creature is still seeing to AmmunRa, and that she was going to come get us as soon as lunch was set up. Shall we be rude guests and eat before it arrives?"

"Probably confuse it if we eat at all. Sure why not?" He sat down and then took the glass of karkaday Tahiri offered him with a smile. She flushed a bit but smiled back and then filled one for Ardeth and a third she left on the table and went to speak to one of the other women.

"No flirting with her, Rick. She's nervous enough about your wife." Ardeth reminded him.

"I wasn't flirting, just trying to be friendly. So tell me how to say thank you in Egyptian."

Ardeth smiled. "Ni-tau."

"Ni-tau." He repeated. "Okay, that's easy enough."

"Good afternoon, did you rest well?" The damned thing asked as it walked over, looking like one of those carvings come to life again.

"We did not go back to sleep." Ardeth answered with a shrug. "Why waste the morning sleeping?"

Rick had to smile. You're getting good at this. "Especially when there are other things to do." He added.

The thing chuckled, looking honestly amused. "As you say. It is good that you enjoyed yourselves then. AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt has told me that you have found the armor of the Scorpion King. He is pleased by this but not at the time you have taken to do so. There is more to be found at Ahm Shere, and neither your god or mine wish us to fail."

"It might help if we knew what we were looking for." Rick pointed out.

"That I was not told." The thing sat down and took a long drink out of the goblet Tahiri had left for it. "AmmunRa seems to think that you should know this already."

"We have the armor, we will be trying for the rest tomorrow. If Allah wills we will find what more we need then." Ardeth shrugged. "We can do no other."
"As you say." The thing nodded. "What follows this news from Marakesh disturbs Egypt to its core, Medjai Neb grumbles in his banks and AmmunRa himself watches with concern from the sky. What could come to Egypt now that would worry the gods?"

"And why?" Ardeth asked. "We are no longer the glory we were when this was in the waking world." He gestured at the temple around them.

"Egypt only has three things that anyone in Europe or America knows anything about." Rick shrugged. "The Canal, Tombs, and treasure." He thought for a bit more. "And curses."

"We are gathered at Ahm Shere, that is outside the current boundaries of Egypt and the canal is at the Red Sea. So I doubt it is that which we should concern ourselves with. Perhaps the threat does not come from Europe?"

"Africa?" Rick shrugged. "What's in Africa that could worry the gods?"

"What is in Marakesh?" The creature asked. "Where, I should ask, is Marakesh?"

"Is there papyrus?" Ardeth set his goblet aside. The creature said something to one of the women about and a few minutes later there was papyrus, ink and a brush.

"Can you write on that?" He had to ask.

"Yes." Ardeth smiled. "Here is Egypt," he carefully painted the outline on the map. "This is the Nile." A long twisting line down the center. "Here is the canal and Gaza, this the Mediterranean, and this Jordan, Palestine, and Arabia." A few more lines. "The rest of Africa is this way, the Sudan, Libya, and this all the way here, is Marakesh. And then the coast curves down to the great hump and up here is Spain and Italy and Greece; which I can never recall the shape of, but something like this. The Dardanelles, Turkey and back to Arabia." He finished that part of the map. "We are here." He placed a small dot toward the end of the Nile he'd drawn. "Where the Blue Nile joins the White. Here is Ethiopia...and then down to Madagascar."

"Kush." The creature put in. "It will do us well to know them by both names."

"As you say. Kush is here, where we are at Ahm Shere. This is the great Sahara...Akewa was Greece yes?"

"Acheawa." The thing answered. "Hittatia is here, Asyria here." It took the brush from Ardeth and labeled those places with hieroglyphics.

Ardeth rolled his eyes and then took the brush back and put the modern Arabic under that. "So, what comes from across the Sahara that worries the gods?"

Rick looked at the map for a long moment. "There isn't anything much in Morocco. Maybe it's only something that Jonathan has heard while he was there that we need to know. What comes from anywhere on this map that could worry the gods?"

Silence. "What causes your world to tremble now?" The creature asked finally.

"Germany." Rick answered without thinking about it. "Hell America is worried about it and we've got an Ocean ten times the size of the Med between us and them."

"The Axis?" Ardeth asked. "We have heard little about them in the desert except for those that invaded Ethiopia."
"Italy." Rick pointed to it on the map. "But what about Italy wanting to take over Ethiopia worries the gods, huh? It isn't the first time that's happened."

"No," Ardeth looked at the map again. "And why Ahm Shere? Are we only to find what we need, gather there and then move on? It is hard to move all twelve tribes, so I would not think that Allah would gather us there only to move us again."

"And there isn't a whole lot left to Ahm Shere." Rick agreed.

"This enemy you spoke of, what were the words you used?" The creature asked.

"Germany, Axis, Nazis." Rick shrugged. "Germany's about here. And it's making a big stir with taking over smaller countries around. Italy's here and they're allies with Germany. Together with Japan which is way over here they're the Axis powers."

"Axis." The thing tried the word. "Very well."

"Was it not you who destroyed their tanks over a week ago now?" Ardeth looked up from the map in surprise.

"Destroyed what?"

"There were troops coming from the Sahara into Egypt, only a few but we had reports of a sandstorm that was not a sandstorm swallowing them all."

"Ah, yes, there were troops. Ammun woke me and told me that they were not to reach Egypt. So I did as my god commanded and they did not." The thing shrugged.

"So if AmmunRa's willing to wake you up to destroy them, maybe it is Germany we have to worry about?" Rick looked back at the map.

"I do not think it is that simple. Because, obviously that has already been dealt with. What does Allah want the Medjai gathered at Ahm Shere for that he would speak with AmmunRa and tell me so?"

"Something threatens Egypt, Medjai. And you are her guardians as you have always been."

"I hate waiting for orders." Rick grumbled.

"Again O'Connell we agree." The thing sighed. "I will speak with my god again before he journeys to battle Set once more. Perhaps he will at least tell me from which direction the enemy comes..." He paused. "But perhaps there is another who is more likely to answer. Come, let us see if Osiris' bright son at Edfu, or this sister at Abydos will give us the answers that we will need as warriors." It got to its feet.

"We are going to ask for answers from Horus and Sekhmet?" Ardeth translated that for Rick.

"We shall see if their priests have answers that a god of battle might give." It agreed. "Come." And then it headed toward the temple again.

"Do we go?" Rick asked.

"I would know what we face and perhaps here of all places it is possible to get answers."

"Right, okay. You know even last time I was in Egypt I would have thought this was strange."

His friend smiled. "And I." He agreed, but he got to his feet and Rick followed as the creature led
them through the forest of columns and out through a far doorway that led toward a huge sacred pool in the distance. They followed it up some steps to a high pylon that over looked the fields behind the temple. "Now what?"

"We send for answers." The creature replied. And then it spoke to the man that appeared out of the other doorway. Ardeth listened but shrugged.

"He says only to send word to Edfu and Abydos to ask what it is that the are needed for."

"How are we going to do that? It isn't like we can just call them up is it?"

Ardeth shrugged. The creature took some papyrus from another man who came out of the building and carefully drew a few hieroglyphs on two pieces before rolling them into tiny tubes. Another two men came from the main building behind them with the answer to Rick's questions. Large falcons sat on both men's arms and accepted the messages into the casings on their feet.

"Some things don't change, huh?" Rick asked with a smile.

Ardeth nodded, but Rick didn't miss the sadness in his eyes.

"Why didn't you get another bird, Ardeth?"

His friend sighed. "How does one simply replace a friend, Rick? No, I avenged him that will do. If we must send messages, I will let Arebe do it. He is better with falcons."

The two birds took to the sky and circled the temple once and then were winging in separate directions over the Nile to the west.

"It may do no good, but it might." The creature walked back over to them. "Do you still use birds to send messages, Medjai?"

"Sometimes." Ardeth agreed softly. "Not as much as we used to."

The thing looked from Ardeth to him and then back again. "Your world is a dull place, warriors."

"We could wish." Rick replied. "It's usually pretty crazy."

"As you say. Do you have many pets, Ardeth?"

"None." His friend replied coldly. "I do not have time for them, nor use. There are horses and camels for traveling. Dogs for helping to guard the camp, and a few cats to catch rodents and bugs, but we are not a people for possessions. No."

"I see." The thing smiled a little. "In that then, you have changed more than I realized." It shook its head. "The Medjai that I recall from Memphis, when it was the waking world, were some of the most honored and therefore well possessed people in Egypt. There was an entire city of Medjai out near Armana. Do you still stay there?"

"No." Ardeth shook his head. "Not for almost two thousand years now."

"Things do change, do they not? Come, it is hot up here with no shade. There will be no answer until before nightfall I would not think."

"Then we may not be here for it. There is little night left for us in Ahm Shere."

"I noticed that you were late in arriving. I thought perhaps you had done yourself more injury,
Ardeth. It is rare that you come to Thebes well."

Rick almost smiled at that. He could agree all to easily. "Thought we'd try it just for variety." He smiled.

"As you say." The creature headed back down the stairs. "What kept you to the waking world so long?"

"We-- had to see one of the tribe to Paradise." Ardeth answered quietly.

The thing paused and then continued to walk until they were back inside the temple. Then it stopped again and lit a brazier against one wall. "May Ma'at guide you safely to through the halls of death and all of the challenges you will face to see you safely by the side of your god." It smiled a little. "We can all use a prayer or two and a light to see us through the darkness, Medjai."

Rick looked at Ardeth but his friend only shrugged.

"Nuts. Just nuts." Rick muttered to himself but they went back to the courtyard and their interrupted lunch.

"It is a pity you can not swim, Ardeth it would be a good day to swim." The creature sighed. "Do you swim O'Connell?"

"Yeah. Guess it isn't a skill you need much in the middle of the desert though."

"No. Sometimes we would play in the oasis pools or in the Nile when I was a child but I never learned to swim." Ardeth shrugged.

"I learned it in the Legion. It was that or drown. They kept marching us through rivers in full kit." He shook his head. "Crazy bastards."

"I have never understood the western form of leadership. How does one lead if one is behind one's men?"

Rick chuckled. "By ordering them to get shot first. That way you're around to order more of them to get shot later."

Ardeth shook his head. "That is very strange. I do not think I would like to follow someone who would not be willing to fight and die beside me."

"I had that problem a lot."

"It is a strange world you live in." The creature shook its head. "Even Pharaoh would ride into battle with his army."

"Can't say as I was ever really good at following orders, but if we are going into battle here soon. I'll follow." Rick gripped his friend's shoulder.

"That, my friend, I do not doubt. I could ask for no better." Ardeth smiled and then gripped his hand.

"Thanks." He smiled back, not missing the smirk that the exchange got them from their host. He held the grip a few moments longer than he would have normally and then let go. "I just wish we knew that the enemy was likely to be."

"For now there is nothing we can do for that. Come, we shall we go down to the river and spend a drowsy afternoon in the shadows and with a cool breeze off the water. Even if you can not swim,
Ardeth. I will not even toss you in the river for the pure enjoyment of it. Tempting though it might be."

"Watching him drown?" Rick didn't even try to keep his voice calm.

The thing chuckled. "Hardly, that was annoying. Afterwards was worth it though."

Ardeth flushed and Rick stepped over without thinking about it. "Okay?" He asked softly in English.

"Only embarrassed as usual." Ardeth replied. "I should know better than to let it bait me so." A sigh. "I suppose I should be thankful you left me my clothes at least." The last was in Arabic with only a trace of anger to the words.

"Little good though they did you, yes. Really Ardeth, if I was going to be that rude of a host do you think you would awake here each morning dressed?" The thing smiled. "Not that I understand your fondness for wearing so much in this heat as it is. Why so modest when Allah has gifted you with such beauty?"

Ardeth sighed. "I am as thankful for Allah's gifts as any man. It is your interest I would do without."

"Would Allah give out such gifts if they were not to be admired? Your wife is very beautiful O'Connell as she was when she sat beside her father in Memphis. Is it somehow a crime for you to admire her or for others to do so?"


"Ah, well then, it is a good thing for me that it is not your wife I admire is it not?" And then the thing laughed and got to its feet. "Come now, let us go to the river. You can explain to me why your god is so unhappy with both his sons and his daughters showing their beauty, Ardeth. I truly do not understand the reasoning."

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." Ardeth muttered.

"I'm going to just knock it into next week, if it's the last thing I do."

"A small price to pay O'Connell. A small price to pay." The thing tossed back. Ardeth gripped his arm and kept him where he was.

"Live today fight tomorrow, remember?"

"Yeah, I still hate it." He growled. "How do you keep so calm?"

"Calm?" Ardeth chuckled without much humor. "I am not calm. It is only that while it enjoys the game I need not truly worry that it will-- decide to end the playing. I find myself much like the snake charmers at the bazaar my friend, if I keep its attention, then I will not get bitten."

Rick closed his eyes and counted very slowly to ten. "He's going to have to kill me first."

A sad smile. "No. Unfortunately for us both, my friend he could pin you to the wall with a thought and make you watch. We walk with asps, Rick. All we can do is try to keep moving and pray."

He swallowed hard. "I'd blow its brains out if I could."

"I know that." Ardeth sighed. "Come, we will do our best to keep a few victories to this game."

Rick nodded and then smiled. "It didn't like this morning much did it?"
"When you had me in your arms? No." A smile that lightened his friend's eyes again. "I would almost think it believes us sometimes."

"Yeah. Okay, so if it annoys the hell out of it for us to get along so well let's." And he slipped his arm around Ardeth's shoulders.

His friend chuckled. "Claiming territory again?"

"If it works? Hell yes."

"If it works, I will hardly object." Ardeth agreed and then laughed. "But you will have to explain it to Evelyn."

"She told me to keep you out of trouble right? So I am." He grinned. "Let's go swimming, well I'll go swimming you can cool off. And it can go hang."

"We could hope." Ardeth sighed. "It will undoubtedly make more comments about its-- interest, Rick. You can not keep it from doing so, and I would hate for it to truly get angry enough to hurt you when there is no cause."

"I'll try to behave. If you can put up with it I can put up with you having to put up with it."

"Thank you."

But damned if I let him hurt you. Rick thought to himself. No way in hell.

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"Wake up, Rick." Evelyn's voice was meant for the man behind him but it woke him as well. He blinked, finding it odd to have been on the sunny bank of the Nile one moment and then in the darkened tent. And much chillier as well. He was glad now for the robes he would have happily shed in Thebes if not for their host. It had seemed truly content to laze by the river and occasionally dive into the cool water. Rick had relaxed a little when the level of teasing had not continued although he stayed closer to Ardeth than he would have here. Finally, he'd taken off his boots and rolled up his slacks to stick his feet in the water. Ardeth smiled remembering the look the creature had given him when Rick calmly reached over and laid one hand on his calf and offered to undo his boots for him. He'd been both amused and a little surprised at his own calm reply of certainly since you are getting so good at it. Rick had just grinned and done just that. And it was worth it for the damned thing's look of annoyance and something oddly like respect. Well played as it had said. And any victory in this was victory enough.

"Is it time for prayers?" He sat up himself, yawning as he did so.

"You have time for coffee." Arebe answered offering him a cup. "Did you rest at all?"

"Enough." He answered. "Whatever news comes from Marakesh today we are undoubtedly going to need our tribes to defeat it. Let us pray to Allah for understanding old friend." He turned to his brother. "I will come get you for breakfast, all right?"

"Sounds good." Rick agreed. Evelyn smiled at him and then snuggled back up in his arms. He went with Arebe and left his friends have at least these few minutes alone. If there was any way to steal them the time he would give them a few hours to themselves this morning. Perhaps he could give Alex the horse he had promised and set the boy to riding with the other Medjai about his age and see about getting the Medjai to begin clearing some of the rubble out of the passage that led to the area they expected they might find the book of the Dead. He doubted very much that once they reached
that area of the pyramid and Evelyn's brother arrived from Marakesh that there would be much time for any of them.

He took the refill of coffee Amal handed him and then went to join the others for prayer. It took little effort actually to give his friend's their morning alone. And if he wasn't quite as subtle about it as he could have been both of them were equally forward on occasion. He found Selim, Sallah, and Arebe looking over the maps of the pyramid and joined them.

"From what Rick and Evelyn and Alex have said they had to have lost the book in what had once been a sacred pool, here." Sallah pointed to an area on the drawing. And for a moment Ardeth saw the map that he had sketched in Thebes that night. He blinked and then nodded.

"And we reach that area how?"

"We take the right tunnel after our bridge and then down the stairs here," Sallah indicated the area. "There should be a doorway that opens onto a large pathway flanked by scorpion statues the main one of which Rick says is the one the curator said unlocked the army of Anubis."

"Let us avoid that one then." Arebe smiled a little.

"Yes." Ardeth agreed. "Then where?"

"Down several passages until we reach the doors that go into the lowest level. I am hoping that it remains in good shape, and that takes us to the main temple area which is where we should find both the book of the Dead, the spear of Osiris and the crevice in the earth where He who shall not be named fell."

Ardeth nodded. "It will be good to know where we stand finally." He looked over the map again. "Tell everyone to wear their battle gear, and to bring ropes in case there is more crevices to cross, and each of you choose three warriors you would most like beside you and we will take this battle to where the creature lies."

"As you say." Selim rose to his feet. "We will gather our men and be ready."

"Ahmer will be sorry he didn't arrive in time." Arebe smiled. "I will go tell Gamal."

"Thank you." He turned to Sallah. "Will you come with us?"

"Where you go, my friend, we follow." The man clasped his arm. "We are Medjai."

"Thanks be to Allah." He agreed and then turned back to the pyramid for a moment. "I will go find Kahid, he is good at this sort of climbing through ruins."

"And the O'Connells." Selim said. "We would not want to leave them behind."

"We might, but it would be useless." He smiled. "I will get them as well."

"After you find Kahid I think." His uncle smiled a little. "And we have gathered the others."

"As you say." He smiled back. Let them have as much time as they could steal.

He took the time to speak to several of the band leaders within the tribes and set them out to scouting patrols. Something was coming, something that had even the old gods nervous and it would do them well to know of it in advance if they could. Arebe sent out three falcons to deliver messages to the other leaders who were not yet with them. Ardeth smiled a little, watching the birds circle into the
sky. Some things did indeed stay the same. Odd how at times he could almost forget that the damned thing was something to be feared and hated and enjoy the wonder that was Thebes and then in the space of a moment have the very precarious nature of his visit brought home. Yet Ammun had spoken to him and told him that he had a task to perform for Allah, and that wonder and joy made the less enjoyable times in Thebes almost seem insignificant. Annoyance was after all a small price to pay for hearing the voice of one of the old gods was it not? And if AmmunRa, chose to allow the creature to remain as his priest then Ardeth would take on faith that there was a cause and do as Allah willed.

"Are we heading in to find the Book of the Dead?" Rick asked, walking over to stand beside him as he finished unsaddling his horse. Evelyn smiled as she slipped under her husband's arm.

"I was going to come find you." He nodded. "Selim and the others should be gathering at the entrance. I sent riders out to scout the area and see if we can find some idea of what it is that worries the gods." He turned back toward the pyramid. "And Arebe sent out falcons to see if the other chieftains have any more knowledge as they ride to join us here."

"Sounds like a plan. Whatever is coming is going to get here pretty soon I'd guess."

"I do wish that we had a little more warning of what it might be." Evelyn sighed.

"As do we all. But this time at least we have some warning, that is an improvement over the last two adventures is it not?"

"It is." Rick smiled. "Ready to go?"

"Y'Allah." Ardeth smiled back. "As always."

"That becomes a bit literal around you, you know." Evelyn shook her head. "We go for Allah?" She tried the English. "It lacks something."

"We go with Allah." Ardeth corrected. "As we always do...perhaps it is better to say Allah goes with us?"

"Crazy language with no verbs." Rick shook his head. "Let's just hope he does and get to it."

"Spoken like a my friend." Ardeth chuckled and walked down to meet the rest of the warriors who would brave the pyramid with them.

"Rick brought the scepter and I brought the book of AmmunRa, just in case. Do you want that shield of Horus we found at Hamanaptura as well?"

"It might do us some good." He agreed. "If I have the translation right it is to grant the bearer the protection of Horus is it not?"


"What does that mean?" Rick asked.

"That of course we do not know." He smiled a little.

"Great, so not only are we walking with Asps were doing it in the dark."

"What would life be without challenge?" He smiled a bit more. "It is an apt description though."

"It is. Let's brave the snake pit then shall we?" Evelyn patted his arm. "Y'Allah, Medjai The day is
getting old."

He chuckled. "As you say." He got the shield from the storage tent and then they went to join the others. "Selim, Arebe, Gamal, are we ready?"

"We are." Selim nodded. "Allah go with us."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed nodding at the other and then taking the lead and heading into the pyramid. It took surprisingly little time to navigate the passages and come to the doors that Sallah had mentioned this morning. "How do we open them?"

"I'm not sure, they were open already last time I was here." Rick shrugged. "Then again the damned thing had already gone through them."

"Yes but we can not just wish them open can we?" He returned.

"Back to doing it the hard way then." Rick pulled his crowbar from his pack. "My turn again?"

"No. We would do better I think if you had that spear ready." He took the crowbar from his friend. "Be ready." It was all he needed to say, the fanned out weapons drawn and waiting. He slung the shield onto his back as he had seen depictions of many warriors on the walls of tombs and temples do. "Anything I should know Sallah, Evelyn?"

"Apparently the Scorpion King was not fond of written curses." Evelyn replied. "It's his symbol, with the crowns of both upper and lower Egypt and a prayer to Anubis for his strength."

"Well, that at least is something. It is always good to know who one is expected to fight." He set the bar into place between the doors and pulled. They gave but only in the sense that they warped even further on the frame but did not open.

Selim moved to his side and pressed his shoulder against the door, Arebe, and several others moving to do the same. He pulled on the bar again and the doors grated forward not much, but enough that they could squeeze through. And nothing seemed to care to come out. He handed Rick back the crowbar and took up his torch. Taking another deep breath he stepped into the darkness beyond, his boots crunching down once more on the remains of scorpions. He waved the torch in front of him but although there were more of them here they seemed as dead as the ones they had found the day before. There were blocks of stone in a haphazard pattern ahead and he paused, because there should have been a ramp leading over a large pit and a huge scorpion statue on his left. The room filled with torch light as the others followed him in. The room was full of dead scorpions and more than a few scarab beetles. But they all seemed dead enough. The former bridge was now more of a path of stepping stones through a sea of black bodies.

"There was a path, where those blocks are, and the crevices were pretty deep around it. And filled with these things when they were alive." Rick came over to stand beside him. "So, we probably want to be really careful crossing this. I sure as hell don't want to end up over my head in dead scorpions."

"Allah forbid." He shuddered. "Better than live ones as I suppose someone might be able to pull you out. But certainly not a pleasant thing. Give me a hand?" He held out his left arm and Rick gripped it firmly, as carefully as he could he stepped out onto the first block of stone. It held with surprising solidity. Kahid moved to land beside him with a quick leap and a smile.

"I will go if you will hold this for me?" The young man asked with a grin. "It is why I am here is it not?" He handed Ardeth the end of a rope which he had tied around him in a harness of sorts. "We
will always follow you, Ardeth, but sometimes it is good to send out scouts." And then he seemed to judge the distance easily and made the leap to the second stone, which held as a safely as the first. Ardeth wished he had some of the young man's ease at this and then passed the end of the rope to Rick and reached out to grip Kahid's arm as he made the leap across. The block held both of them as easily as one. Rick let go of the rope and Ardeth held it and Kahid made another jump, this one hampered a bit by the fact that the next block was higher and at an angle but he gripped the top with his hands and pulled himself up to the half-fractured surface. He found good footing and then jumped hard. But the rock simply sat there uncaring. "Come, I will give you a hand." He held out his arm. Ardeth turned and helped Rick to the block beside him noticing that Arebe was behind him waiting. He let Rick hold the safety rope once more and made the leap, grabbing onto Kahid's outstretched arm. He outweighed his tribesman by a bit but he found a good grip with his free hand and climbed up with the young man's help. "Four more to go." Kahid smiled a little indicating the blocks ahead. "We'll need to leave someone here with a rope to make certain we can get back up to this one. I don't know that I could make the leap in the opposite direction."

He turned to his fellow Medjai, knowing very well it was not going to be an order they were happy with. "Husan, you are the strongest here, so you must come last and hold this place for us so we may come back out again."

"As you say, Ardeth. But I am not happy." The chieftain agreed.

"I would have you beside us if I could old friend. Be careful there Kahid."

"Certainly, how else will you find your way across?" The young man smiled and then leapt to the next block with ease. Ardeth tied the end of Kahid's rope around his waist and then leaned over the block he was on and offered Rick his arm. It was much the same for him as it had been for Kahid no doubt because Rick weighed more than he did but he kept the grip and then pulled his friend to stand beside him on the stone. The block did not seem to mind the extra weight and held nicely. They repeated the same steps easily enough one after the other. Finally, Husan tied one long rope securely to a fallen statue and followed until he reached the highest stone block and sat down. Selim clasped his shoulder and then followed the others. Ardeth watched from the far steps as Sallah came to stand beside him and then Evelyn was all but picked up and passed between Gamal and Selim and then to Rick. Then Selim made the last leap as well and they were all standing on the steps that led up to the pathways Sallah had shown him on his map. They made some progress toward the lower chambers but it was hard going, squeezing between increasingly tumbled stone blocks. And then they came to the second doors which were no longer standing, only tumbled in to the great mass of rubble that awaited them.

"Great. Now what?" Rick stood next to him and looked out over the mess. "There's a entrance buried under that wall that should lead to where the book, the scepter and that damned thing are." He indicated the left wall.

Ardeth sighed. "Now we see how many men we can get in here to move the stone I suppose. What other choice do we have?"

"Not much."

"Sallah, will you and Evelyn go back to those papyri and see if perhaps there is another way to do this?" He turned to look at his friends.

"Certainly. We might get lucky." Evelyn shrugged.

"It is worth trying." Sallah agreed.
"Why don't you go with them for now?' He looked over at Rick. "Jonathan should be arriving soon and I would know the news from Marakesh."

"All right. Then I'll come back and help you dig."

"As you say, there is certainly enough work to be done."

"Here," Rick pulled the scepter of Horus from his pack. "You open it like this," A quick twist and the thing became a spear. "Just in case whatever's in there doesn't like you waking it up before I get back."

He smiled and took the spear, retracting it to its former size and sticking it through the sash next to his sword. "Thank you."

"No problem. See you later." Rick clasped his shoulder and then went with Sallah and Evelyn. Ardeth nodded and then turned with the others back to the task at hand.

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"You are more of a maniac with this thing than you were with that balloon. Jonathan muttered, half-stumbling off the plane. "Rick your friend is a lunatic! Hello Evie."

Evie smiled at her brother and then hugged him. "Bad flight?"

"We flew this close to the ground!" He held up one hand about waist high. "I thought we were going to crash."

"It wasn't that bad now. But I did want to stay low. Just in case."

"Actually," Rick smiled. "Higher would have been better, see you remember that wall of water that nearly got us all here last time?"

"Like I'm going to forget something like that!" Izzy grumbled.

"He likes to do the same trick with sand. Higher is definitely better. Just in case of course," He grinned. Evie shook her head but she smiled as well.

"You are going to get me killed!"

"You haven't even got shot at once this trip, quit complaining." He put his arm around Evie's shoulders. "So, Jonathan, how's Marakesh?"

"Mara...oh Morocco, right, well same as always really, hot, very nice casinos, wonderful shopping and worrying that Spain is going to come charging across the rock of Gibraltar and try and take over. Someone really should tell them the Crusades and the Knights of Malta and all that are long gone you know."

"So nothing go on in the rest of the world? Just same old same old?"

"Well I wouldn't go that far. We're at war you know."

"We?" Evie looked over at him. "Who's at war Jonathan?"

"England Evie, His Majesty and all the rest of us I imagine. Dreadful mess, I wouldn't suggest going home. Germany's taking over France."
"What?" Evie stopped to look at him. "You aren't serious?"

"Perfectly. Horrible mess. From the sound of it they'll do it to. Then we're next. Not a good time to go home I don't think. Fancy us coming to your side of the Pond?"

"We might have to consider it, yeah." Rick sighed. "Any body deciding to come over this way soon?"

"Well there's those Italians in Ethiopia...and there's rumors that the Nazi's are sending some troops to take the Canal. But then there's always rumors that the German's are going to take the Canal. They tried that last time and it failed miserably. But His Majesty has sent more troops to hold it."

"Great, more military in Egypt. The Egyptians are going to love that."

"And there is some crazy bastard who said that the German's were sending an entire tank division straight through the Sahara for God's sake. Like anyone would be crazy enough to do that. Not that Hitler isn't apparently a fruitcake of monumental proportions. VonBork, this wonderful man I was gaming with in Morocco says that he thinks he's Alexander, Cesar, Napoleon and who knows who else all rolled into one. Which still doesn't explain why he'd sent an entire division of tanks into the Sahara. What in the world is in the middle of the Sahara?"

Rick sighed, and tightened his arm around Evie. "In case you missed it, Jonathan. We are."

"We...ah right, but nobody knows about this place."

"We do. And so did those other guys you mentioned. You know Alexander, Cesar, and Napoleon. We just got out alive. But now that we've finished off the undead little cannibals there isn't much standing between Germany and the pyramid is there?"

"The pyramid's buried." Jonathan stopped and just stared out at the encampment of Medjai and the excavations going on below. "Oh God, this is going to get nasty again isn't it?"

"You don't know the half of it." Rick sighed. "Let's go warn Ardeth." He shook his head. "Tanks--I'd almost rather fight those mummy guards you know. Those I know how to kill. Izzy what's our supply of dynamite look like?"

"I brought you a case like you asked. We are not going to war with the Germans are we Rick?"

"No. You are going back to Cairo and taking Jonathan with you and you are going to get me every explosive and machine gun available on the black market."

"Now wait a moment we just..." Jonathan began.

Rick just grabbed his brother in law by the lapels. "We are going to need that. And if I thought for a moment that it would do a damned bit of good I'd put Evie and Alex on the plane with you."

"You would not." Evie gripped his arm. "And put my brother down, Rick. We've dealt with worse before we'll do this together like we always do."

"I knew you'd say that."

"Well we aren't going anywhere tonight." Izzy put it. "I've got to put in oil and let her cool down and that'll put us taking off at night. Not happening out here my friend. So we leave for Aswan in the morning. Fine. Hope you have the money to cover this."
Rick looked down at the pyramid below. "All the gold you can carry, Izzy. All the gold you can carry."

"Let's get to work then."

"Why am I going back to Cairo? Wouldn't you be better at this?" Jonathan asked.

"I'm...expected for dinner." He sighed. "Like always."

"What?"

"Come on Jonathan, I'll explain it to you. Rick, please, love, they aren't here yet. We don't know that they're coming. And even if they do we've got ten tribes of the Medjai here already, with more to come."

"They're men on horseback, Evie, with some guns and swords and all the guts in the world. But those tanks are going to mow them down like wheat. What in the world does Allah expect them to do?"

"We'll know that when it happens I suppose." She leaned up on tiptoe and kissed him. "I'll go explain it to Jonathan. You go warn Ardeth."

"Right."

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Imhotep woke to the voice of AmmunRa, He who was lord of all Egypt. And as he had done before he listened to his god, knowing somehow that this was not Thebes he woke in. AmmunRa told him that there were things to be done at Anubis' lost temple in Ahm Shere and that even all the Medjai were not going to find those things it time. Allah did not bestow upon his followers the strength to move mountains with a thought these days it seemed. So Ammun would send this new god of Egypt a man who could. And perhaps remind the young one of what it meant to be the God of Gods of Egypt.

Imhotep listened to his god and then bowed, swearing to do as AmmunRa commanded. "See that you do." Said the voice of the god in the waking world. "I am pleased with thee, Imhotep and so I restore to you that which was taken from you in waking world; walk you the sands of Egypt in my name and do so as benefits the High Priest of Thebes. Go."

And he blinked and found that he was standing on the area of desert that was still littered here and there with the troops he had destroyed before. And AmmunRa had been kind indeed because he was whole and himself in this world as he was in Thebes. He drew his powers about him with a thought, overjoyed to find them whole and went to Ahm Shere. This time, perhaps, he would see if the Medjai would offer him dinner.
"How, in Allah's name are we to get these moved?" Selim leaned back against one of the large blocks of fallen stone.

"That, I have no answer to Selim. But we must, if they were moved here with nothing more than rope and wood and muscle we can move them again." He looked over the progress that they had made. "Perhaps we should see what Sallah and Arebe can come up with for this one."

"And we better make it quick." Rick came over to stand with them. "Because the news from Marakesh is that Germany is going to be invading here, soon. With at least a division of tanks."

"And how many is that?" Ardeth closed his eyes.

"A hundred or more." Rick's voice was sharp. "Maybe somebody didn't tell them that Ahm Shere isn't what it used to be, or maybe they don't care, either way, they're on their way here so..."

"So we have the name of our enemy then." He sighed. "Allah have mercy, we will need more guns."

"I'm sending Izzy and Jonathan to Cairo to buy all they can, explosives too. But..."

"But it will take time and we do not know how long we have, yes." He nodded. "Then we do what we can. For now, we find those things we need to find, so that perhaps we can see what it is that Allah wishes us to do with them."

"Great, and just how do we do that?"

"I was asking that myself." Selim sighed.

There was a strong sudden gust of wind where no wind should be blowing and without even thinking about it he drew his sword, and yelled for his men to do the same.

"Really, Medjai. And here I thought it amusing to knock, so to speak." The creature walked calmly up to then holding him and all of the others still with no more than a thought. "You seem to be in need of some help."

"Go to hell." He forced the words out, despite the fact that it was hard to breathe with a weight that was not there holding him in place. The thing smiled.

"Are you going to come with me?" It slammed him back against one of the blocks. "Tell your men to put away their swords, Ardeth and I will let them live. You have my word to AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt."

"And why...would you...do that?"

"Because foolish Medjai, Ammun wishes it of course. Allah has need of your men, Ardeth, and Ammun has plans for us all so, do I leave them alive or not?"

"We will only try to kill you if you do." Selim's voice sounded as breathless as his own.

"So I realize. But you are no threat to me, Medjai, not now. Well, Ardeth?"

"Live today fight tomorrow." Rick said harshly in English.
"As you say. Put them away, for the moment." He found the strength for a mocking smile. "Now will you go to hell?"

"Since you keep inviting me." The thing chuckled and the pressure was gone suddenly. "Draw that O'Connell and I will snap your son's neck from here."

He turned his head to see that Rick had his hand on his pistol. After a moment his friend let go of it and just stood there. "You even think about touching him and I'll make sure I rip your tongue out this time, with my bare hands."

"At least it is an inventive threat." The thing shook its head. "Come now O'Connell, you have repeatedly offered to join your brother on a trip to hell have you not? Shall we go?" It held up both arms and the stone blocks ahead of them were pushed aside like handfuls of sand. Rick made the three steps that brought him to Ardeth's side, gripping his arm hard. He felt Selim catch his other arm and wondered for a moment just why they thought any of it would help. Allah...if it must be..I would rather go alone. Let them be.

Then there was sand that blew out of the hole revealed by the moving of the blocks and they all turned away, covering their faces with sleeves and scarves and trying to breathe. And when the sand was gone so was the creature and there were only flames and what might have been the crumbled remains of statuary that he could see inside the shattered doorway. "Allah have mercy, it can not expect us to follow."

"So we kill it on the way out?" Rick asked. "It's going to be expecting that."

"We must try." He drew the scepter Rick had given him earlier. "Kahid, go warn the others!" The young warrior nodded and ran toward the exit. "I would think of tossing some of your dynamite in to close this portal but undoubtedly it will only blast it open again. And we would suffer the debris."

"Yeah, I hate this part, Ardeth. How the hell do we kill it if it's in one piece already?"

"We send all twelve tribes against it until we can chop it into enough pieces to get it back in its coffin I suppose." He shrugged. "This is not your fight, my friend, go. Take Evelyn and Alex and Jonathan and Izzy's plane and go."

"You know ten years ago I would have done that." Rick smiled. "But it won't stop with Ahm Shere, Ardeth. And I think one power-mad maniac trying to rule the world at a time is enough don't you?" He drew the shotgun from across his back. "Ready?"

"In'sh'allah." Ardeth smiled. "I will see you in Paradise, or come find you at this bar of yours, whichever is necessary."

"Wouldn't have it any other way." Rick agreed.

There was a sudden gust of wind that blew out the flames just ahead of them and then rushed past before any of them could to more than swing once, Rick got off a blast but if it did any good there was no indication of it. But the scepter of Osiris lay at Rick's feet. And something that might have been a laugh echoed down the corridor leading back to the surface.

"Evie..." Rick muttered and took off at a run. Ardeth followed as quickly as he could.

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Imhotep let the wind stop just outside the tent where Evelyn, her brother, son, and a Medjai were sitting then he pushed the tent flap open and walked inside. "Princess, Alex-- Jonathan, was it not?"
He laid the book of the Dead on the table with a smile. And then placed the other bundle on it as well. "Do you have the book of AmmunRa, Princess?" He asked in the old tongue. "Sit down Medjai, I mean no harm at this moment. Do you have the book?"

"And if I do?"

"Then I suggest you read it." He smiled and began to calmly recite from the one in front of him. She matched it, reciting the spell she had once used against him and repeated again in Thebes. They finished at almost the same time. "There, you see? I thank you for your help, Nefertiri. I will leave you your family in one piece, as a gesture of my gratitude." He picked up the bundle again.

"You didn't bring one of those horrible things back to life, did you?"

He chuckled. "Only to have you make it mortal so you could kill it again? Hardly. AmmunRa gives you a fine gift, Nefertiri, keep both books. You will need them, I have no doubt. Ah, here comes your husband and Ardeth. It is wonderful, is it not, when everything works?" And he turned and walked back outside. "Do come, I would like you to see this."

"Oh bloody hell..." Her brother muttered as he left. "Not again."

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim..."

"Mum! What did it mean by..."

"Rick."

He chuckled at the overlap of voices and strode toward the edge of the dunes. "Hello again, Medjai. I trust you have your scepter, O'Connell? You will have as much need of it in the days to come. Truly, I mean neither of you harm at the moment, Medjai, nor your family, O'Connell, or your tribes Ardeth. I only do as AmmunRa bids me and give you those objects you were to find." He smiled. "And I found your gift, Ardeth."

"What?" They had both come to a stop just out of easy reach, Ardeth with his sword in one hand and the scepter of Horus in the other. O'Connell had that large gun of his and the scepter of Osiris in the other.

"You recall the wager do you not? If I find you a gift you would keep you must come to dinner and be a good guest." He chuckled, pleased to see Nefertiri her son and her brother skirt around him to join O'Connell and several of the other Medjai come up to join Ardeth.

"You would remind me of that now?" Ardeth looked at him in undisguised disbelief. "You are mad."

"We have had that discussion already." He laughed. "Ah Medjai, it must amuse the gods to no end to have us on the same side. Truly it is the only explanation. Your gift Ardeth Bay, will you have me take it back?" And he let the bird go and it winged its way to its master's outstretched arm with a whisper of wings. "I will expect you for dinner." And he let the sand swirl about him until he was long gone from Ahm Shere.

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Ardeth stared for a long moment at the spot where the creature had been and then at all those gathered around. "Allah have mercy, I do not understand." He sheathed his sword carefully. "Horus..." He trailed one hesitant finger along the soft feathers as Horus walked his way up his arm until he could touch his beak to Ardeth's jaw. "Yes," he said softly. "I missed you too."
"Ardeth?" Selim's voice was uncertain.

"I told you it was mad, Selim. Now it seems it is tired of only haunting our dreams and would bother us during the day." He sighed. "Are we all well?"

"It certainly scared us to death." Evelyn muttered. "But it only put Horus on the table, read the spell from the book of the dead, had me recite the one that made it moral and then told us to come see whatever it had planned. I wasn't expecting it to give out gifts."

"I am beginning to think it almost always does what we do not expect, only to see our reactions." He sighed. "I wish to Allah, I knew what to think now."

"You don't think it was serious, do you? About the gods expecting us to work with it?" Rick asked, one arm around Evelyn and the other hand on Alex's shoulder.

"It gave us the scepter of Osiris and the Book of the Dead. And it harmed none of us in the doing. I no longer know what to think. Come, we will sit and try to make sense of some of this. And I would hear more of this Germany we are to face." He took the scepter of Horus from his still outstretched left hand with his right. "How appropriate my friend. Shall I give it to you then?" He retracted the spear and put it away at his belt. "I will have you know, I have to go to dinner and be a good guest now, my friend. So, you will have to catch your own. Allah, but it is worth it. I will even thank it I think, Horus. If only to confuse it as it would confuse me." He chuckled. "I truly did not think it could find me a gift I wanted to keep."

"Come, I will find something for Horus to eat." Arebe offered him a leather gauntlet. "And we will see what it is we know and what it is Allah would have us fight."

"As you say." He agreed. He pulled the glove on and let Horus find a comfortable perch now that the bird had to worry less about his grip. "There, Arebe will find you dinner. Are you hungry my friend or do you wish to stretch your wings? You flew to my hand well enough, so I think you must be truly whole. Welcome back to us little warrior. Thanks be to Allah and AmmunRa that you are here."

Horus turned to look at him and then flapped his wings and took off to circle over head a few times before coming back and this time settling on the rim of the shield still slung across his shoulder.

"Are you reminding me of your namesake then, my friend?" He turned his head to look at the bird perched on the shield rim. "What is it that I should be avenging then, hmm?"

Horus only tapped his beak against his chin again.

"I did you know, I cut him down and watched him die in the dirt, my friend, for making you fall from the sky. And it was a hard fight let me tell you." He stroked the soft feathers again. "You will have to find a different perch, my friend. I do not intend to keep this with me constantly."

Horus folded his wings and kept where he was.

"Do I then?" He smiled a bit. "Would that please you?"

Another tap of beak against his jaw.

"You'll have me believing he understands you." Rick shook his head.

"Of course he does." He smiled back. "Horus, you remember Rick, do you not? He is my brother and my other best friend. He is of course not quite as clever as you, but he is a bit better with a
pistol."

Rick rolled his eyes. "Thanks."

"You are welcome." He smiled.

"Hello, Horus, it's good to see I'll have some help guarding his back. Allah knows he needs it."

Horus caught one piece of his hair in his beak and began to groom it as he would his own feathers. Ardeth chuckled. "I think he may agree with you."

"Then he's as smart as you say he is." Rick returned. "Let's go see what we can do with what we've got to win a war against and enemy we really know nothing about."

"Walking with Asps in the dark with our hands tied behind our backs, perhaps?"

"This just gets better and better."

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Imhotep checked over the banquet hall again, pleased to see the cooks had done an excellent job in setting up the feast. He had assured them that not only was he certain of his guest arriving and staying, but that he would definitely eat. He went to the room he had given the Medjai and sat down to wait. This evening at least, his guest went to sleep reasonably early. He sipped the coffee he had waiting and then smiled as the veil trembled and his young guest was once more asleep in bed, alone this time. He had no intention of inviting O'Connell to this particular banquet. This one he intended to enjoy. He smiled a bit more and moved over to the bed side and brushed the long waves away from his guest's face. "How can one be so blessed with beauty and yet so very unknowing of its effects? You could have any woman you wished if you set your mind to it. And more than a few men, I would imagine. Here certainly. But it does not even cross your mind that the smiles and looks mean anything at all, does it? I have to practically toss it in your face and that makes you nervous. But, no matter how much, you dislike the game, playing it is better than it ending, is it not? You are so certain I will simply decide to take what I want. Why would I do that now, Ardeth when it would have been easy enough to do when you first arrived? Or if I pressed the point of letting your brother go if you would be in my bed. Foolish warrior, where is the sport in that? Someday Ardeth, I will have you doubting it would be all that horrible a fate, and then of course you will worry that much more that you might enjoy it. What will you do then, Medjai? What will you do then?"

He chuckled to himself letting the young man sleep for a bit and going back to his coffee and contemplation.

Ardeth stirred finally, realizing with growing familiarity where he was and then rolling over to look for his brother no doubt.

"This evening's invitation was only for one." He answered the unspoken question.

A sigh but only resignation and acceptance to the sound and the young man rolled out of bed and gathered up his weapons. "I suppose I shall be thankful for you letting him sleep."

"Hmm. He will undoubtedly not think so kindly of it. You will have to convince him you did not spend the evening in my bed, I am sure."

Anger and then a bitter sort of acceptance. "You are probably right."

"Of that I have no doubt. So, as the wager stood I believe I was to give you a gift and ask you, shall I
take it back, and if you said no you were to come to a banquet and be as good a guest to me as you would to any of your fellow Medjai. Correct?"

"As you say."

"Shall I take it back then?"

A small smile and a joy that lit those expressive brown eyes. "No." It came with a nod of acceptance of his lost wager. "Thank you for the gift, it is truly wondrous."

He smiled just a bit himself. "As all good gifts should be. I have a banquet prepared for us and entertainment for the evening. Do you wish some coffee first?"

Something like surprise and disbelief but he nodded. "As you say. For me it is only the middle of the night after all."

"Ah, well here AmmunRa has just gone to battle with Set once more and gifted us with another night in paradise."

"May his journey be as easy a victory as it can be." Ardeth offered, coming over to the table and taking the other chair.

"That is a good wish, Medjai." He agreed and then poured Ardeth a cup of coffee and handed it to him. "So what news came from Marakesh today that caused AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, to send me to the waking world and retrieve what you undoubtedly would have retrieved on your own in the days to come?"

"Germany marches on Egypt." Ardeth replied. "With many more of those troops that you destroyed earlier. Many more and with weapons unlike any we have ever faced."

"You have many warriors at Ahm Shere do you not? I recall many."

"I have. But what good is the best warrior on horseback if he faces a machine that can destroy mountains?"

Imhotep sighed. "As you say. I am certain your god would not simply gather the might of the Medjai together if he did not feel that there was some hope for your victory."

"I will have faith that Allah will have this outcome be something he wills. I can do no other."

"Then odd as it might seem, Medjai, I will offer a prayer to my god that your victory is swift and that you and your people survive it well."

More disbelief and confusion and a prayer to Allah for patience and understanding. "If you are praying for our victory, creature I am truly frightened of what Allah will give us."

He chuckled. "That, is a point I meant to make of this evening, Medjai. You may, if you wish, stumble over that silly title you have given me before or you may call me by my proper title of High Priest, or even simply Priest, or you may if Allah has not somewhere in that book of yours expressly forbid it, call me by name. But I doubt very much you would refer to any of your fellow Medjai by such an insult."

A sigh but then his young guest nodded. "As you say. It will be difficult at times to remember I am certain but I would offer you no discourtesy tonight." He took a long swallow of coffee.
"Good. If I wanted to be insulted, I would have invited your brother to accompany you."


"Some of your brother's amusements I can understand, Ardeth. Some however escape me. Why would one bait a crocodile if one did not expect to get bitten?"

An odd smile. "To keep one's friend from being bitten in your place of course."

"Ah." He nodded. "So, if I were to tell your brother that I find him pleasing that would be better than telling you the same?"

Ardeth choked on his coffee and Imhotep had to laugh at the utter disbelief in his thoughts. "Oh Allah, that might be more than any of us would survive."

"It might at that. He is though, pleasing I mean, in an odd outlandish sort of way." He shrugged. "And he has courage and bravery both, and honor and dedication and he loves well. Are not all of those things to find pleasing?"

More disbelief and confusion and then a resigned sigh. "They are, if not in the sense that you use the word."

"Pleasing?" He chuckled. "Desirable?" He tried instead. "We are at the moment speaking in the abstract, Ardeth. Of attributes and behaviors and not of-- more obvious physical attractions. Your brother is, without a doubt a good man to have at your back for any confrontation."

"He is." Ardeth agreed. "I could not ask for better."

"Then you are a fortunate man." Imhotep smiled. "As is your brother. Because you are undoubtedly all those things I have just mentioned and modest as well."

"Do you expect me to be flattered?" Ardeth asked, raising one eyebrow at the question.

"Flattered? No." He sipped his own coffee with a smile. "Flattery implies somehow that there is a level of untruth to what one has said. I meant it. It is a compliment Ardeth, nothing more or less."

"Then I shall thank you for the compliment, if not for the way you would intend it."

He chuckled. "I intended it as only that. Now if I were to tell you that I find you as attractive as you are admirable, that would be a different sort of compliment altogether."

A resigned sigh. "As you say."

He chuckled again. "Since you are my guest this night, Ardeth, why do you not tell me that tale you never finished of the man who lived outside Baghdad?"

"Ali Baba, I never did get to that did I?" The young man nodded. "Very well."

Imhotep listened to the tale, more for the enjoyment of his guest’s telling it than for the tale itself although it had its amusing and entertaining parts.

"So he finally made a wise decision did he?" He asked at the end. "His wife at least was a good choice."

"She was." Ardeth agreed. "She saved his life."
"So she did. Well told, Ardeth, well told. Come, we shall have dinner now if you think you can eat. I am hungry."

"I can eat." His guest agreed.

"Did you bring the word of Allah with you today, Medjai?"

"I did." He pulled the book from his robes. "Why?"

"I would hear more of it of course. I am curious yet to the appeal of Islam but it seems to cultivate great warriors."

"I suppose it is easier to face battle bravely knowing one is assured one's place in paradise by doing that." Ardeth agreed.

"As you say. That may be a good part of it yes." He walked into the main hall and over to the banquet table. "No wine I take it, Ardeth?"

"Will I need it?"

There was a surprising bit of seriousness to the question. He smiled. "If I tell you no will you believe me?"

A sigh. "I am your guest, would it not be rude to not believe you?"

"As you say." He smiled. "No, you will not need it. I was only teasing. I have rather fond memories of the first banquet here when I gave you wine."

"Do you?" Ardeth shrugged. "The dancing was enjoyable yes."

"Watching you toss young Alex through the image of Mut was enjoyable as well. That was well done."

A small smile. "It did seem to surprise everyone."

"It did that. Karkaday then? Tea?"

"Tea will be fine." Ardeth replied. Imhotep handed him a plate and filled his own before heading to the dais and taking his seat and the goblet of wine Shusha had waiting. Tahiri came with Ardeth's tea and set that beside the other chair.

"I hope you will eat something, tonight."

"I was expecting to." His guest answered as he set his plate down. "As long as I am not going to be part of the entertainment of course. No crocodiles this evening?"

"No." He chuckled. "That was also well done though. I did it to annoy the Princess actually not to cause you any harm. But you fought well."

"I did not know that my health was a matter of concern for you at that point."

He chuckled. "A matter of concern? No. I would not go that far. But someone should be concerned for your health I think, you seem to care little for it yourself."

A nod and a bit of amusement. "Some days no doubt most of my tribe would agree with you."
"You need a wife like your young hero from Baghdad."

Ardeth coughed and then stared at him in amazement.

"What?" He chuckled. "Really Ardeth, I am flattered that you think my opinion of your marital status should matter." He sipped his wine.

"Matter?" His young guest managed after a bit. "I-- suppose I let myself hope for a moment it might."

"Deter my appreciation?" He offered. "Certainly not. And then of course you would have two women to explain to why you keep sharing your bed with your brother."

A resigned sigh. "Many reasons."

"No doubt." He smiled a bit more. "He is pleasing is he not?"

Amusement colored Ardeth's response. "I think it is better if I do not tell him you said so."

"As you say." he agreed. "Tonight I fear you must sleep alone."

"Thanks be to Allah."

He had to laugh. "Tempting as always Ardeth, but the game is much to enjoyable to just rush through so, would you not agree?"

Studied silence. "Even I will admit that the-- game as you say, is worth continuing for as long as possible."

He looked over at his young guest and then shook his head. "Really Ardeth, if I wanted so unsporting an end to the whole thing, it would be already done."

"I have already said I do not understand you and that I find you mad. How am I to know when the game ends?" So much bound up in those few words.

He nodded. "Then I give you my word, you will know well in advance when I tire of the game, Medjai, I swear it to AmmunRa, he who is lord of all Egypt."

Disbelief and then resignation that gave way a little to hope. "It is something."

"As you say." He smiled again. "But for now, we have entertainment," He paused and then chuckled. "Perhaps you will not have to sleep alone at that."

Confusion and then something like embarrassment and disbelief. "She is beautiful."

"So she is." He agreed. And he clapped his hands together so that the dancing could begin.

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Rick pulled himself from a crazy dream of having a snowball fight with Evie, Alex, Ardeth, and two of his old, and now dead friends from the orphanage in Cairo. The fact that they’d been having the snowball fight in Cairo certainly hadn't helped the dream make any sense. Evie was curled up beside him and he’d rolled onto his back sometime during the night, so her head was on his shoulder. The tent was almost pitch black inside but he could make out the not so dark moonlit outside around the edges of the door flap and a few of the connections along one wall. Alex was a small bundle of darker black about five feet beyond Evie's left shoulder. Jonathan was out of sight somewhere
against the far wall by their feet. One of the Medjai he didn't know as well slept near the doorway just in case he supposed and Ardeth was lying next to his still on his side.

Damn it. I hate thinking you're there alone. Just be careful, huh? It frightened him more than anything had in a long time to think of what that damned thing might do to his friend, and what surviving it might do to Ardeth. You'll hate yourself just like you did in Aswan, and I don't know that any god or spell or book will be able to make it right. He recalled how lifeless Ardeth had sounded on the roof before he'd fallen back to sleep. Soulless, Ardeth had said. Maybe that was a good description. He'd seen it in too many eyes in his life and damn but he didn't want to see it in Ardeth's.

"Bis'mi'llAllah rakhman el rahim." He whispered softly, and squeezed his friend's shoulder with his free hand.

Evie reached over and laid her's on top of his and said something almost as silently in Egyptian.

"When did you wake up?" He asked, pulling her hand away as he did his and tangling their fingers to lie against his chest.

"Before you did." She replied softly. "Is he all right?"

"I don't know. I'm not there." He sighed.

"Was he before you woke up?"

"No, I mean I haven't been there all night."

"Oh." She snuggled closer. "Shall we wake him?"

"He asked us not too." He reminded her. "Or believe me I would."

"How bad has it been for you two while I wasn't there?"

He stroked his hand through her hair. "It hasn't been bad at all, sweetheart. It's just-- that we both keep waiting for the other shoe to fall, you know?"

"Yes. I'm glad. I was worried."

"I noticed." He squeezed her fingers tightly. "We both have standing pardons, and it isn't like it couldn't hurt us here apparently as easily as it could there. And since AmmunRa and Allah have something in mind for us, well for Ardeth anyway, the damned thing isn't likely to do anything to piss off Ammun."

"So why are you so worried for him then?"

How the hell do I answer that? Because it could do so much harm with out really causing his friend that much physical damage and that maybe it would think it was worth the risk...or... "Because I'm not there and I don't know that it won't-- just decide to see how much damage it can do just because it can."

"I suppose it could just fix it afterwards. Couldn't it?" She shivered. "That wouldn't keep either of you from whatever it is Allah needs you for."

"God." He swallowed hard because he hadn't thought of that at all. It wasn't the physical part of it that had really worried him up until that point, only the fall out afterwards but if she was right...Oh
God. Allah, Ammun, any one, please he's too good a man to hurt like that. No matter if we defeat the thing and the Germans and whatever else it won't mean a damned thing if he's already lost. "I guess--we're going to have to go on faith, huh?"

"In'sh'allah." she whispered. "Just hold me, hmm?"

"Yeah." He pulled her close, only a little surprised when she moved their clasped hand's back to Ardeth's shoulder.

"MaSalaama, my friend."

"Yeah." He agreed and they laid like that for a very long time before either of them fell back asleep.

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Ardeth set his plate aside, content for the moment to watch the dancers as they moved about the floor. He vaguely recalled watching the men with torches dance once before but that was a memory more than a little hazed by wine.

"So does this unhappy god of yours not let you dance as well as drink?"

"No, Allah does not prohibit dancing or music. It is a wonderful thing to dance with one's friends and share the joy the music brings." He answered.

"That is good to know." The creature smiled a little. "I would hate to think your world was quite that dull, ."

"No, it is different, but it is not dull." He disagreed.

"As you say. Perhaps next time I am fortunate enough to walk the waking world you will have to invite me to a banquet and provide the entertainment."

Allah have mercy, he thought to himself trying to imagine for a moment what that would be like, a gathering of the Medjai, dancing, feasting, story telling, and there in the middle of it all the very creature they were sworn to keep buried. Somehow, it was almost amusing.

"Really Ardeth, try calling me something else. It will not hurt you. I swear it." His host sighed.

"As you say." He returned but he took a deep breath and then gave the least offensive title he could manage. "We would have to keep you in disguise Priest as I would not want to have to provide entertainment and keep my fellow Medjai from killing you all at the same time."

His host chuckled. "There is truth to that. Thank you for the attempt at least. Will I have to get you another gift before you will use my name?"

"If you can find me another gift I treasure as much as the one you have given me I will thank you by name." He offered with a smile. "Is that a wager?"

"Hmm, tempting, truly. Hard to manage though." There was honest amusement in the voice. "Very well, I will find another gift and I will say to you are you pleased enough to thank me properly and you can answer yes or no. But I want a very nice thank you, and you have to come to dinner again."

He sighed. "A nice thank you, your name, and another banquet. It would have to be a wondrous gift." He smiled just a little.

"Is not your falcon such a gift?" His host asked in return.
"He is." Ardeth had to agree. "I did thank you did I not?"

"You did. I am glad you were pleased. I think it was almost worth the effort just for the look on your face when it happened." A chuckle. "Does no one give you presents, Medjai?"

"Most of those who do, have never thought to bring me a friend back from the dead I am certain." He rolled his eyes. "A unique gift, Priest. I am thankful."

"Good." A smile that was only slightly teasing. "He is almost as pleasing to watch in motion as his owner."

"I could benefit from half his grace." He returned, ignoring the compliment once more.

"As you say. Ah, you best decide if you are sleeping alone or not, ."

He cast the thing an uncertain look before he realized that Nefshen had taken the floor and relaxed again. He told you, you will have some warning before the game ends at least, swore it to AmmunRa even. It is both a blessing and a curse as it was meant to be no doubt. Now you must wait for the warning and then wait for the rest. Allah, please, I am only one man, be kind to me oh my God and walk with me through those dark places I must travel. He amended the prayer Evelyn had offered the other night and then with a small smile thought that just perhaps it had been granted at that. May Horus walk between you and all the dark places you must travel. And now he had his friend back to go with him on at least his waking journeys. It was no small miracle and he could put up with even his insane host and its teasing for the joy of having Horus back.

He was more than slightly embarrassed when the young dancer repeated the move she had the other night and bent over backwards almost putting her head into his lap in the process. But she smiled at him and then straightened and turned so that she was facing him so she could run the back of her fingers along his jaw. "No companion?" She asked softly.

"No." He answered honestly enough.

"Pity." She smiled again and then twirled away to offer a not nearly so teasing smile to his host. And then she twirled back onto the floor.

"She does desire you, Ardeth." His host chuckled.

"As you say. I will be thankful then that there is at least someone here who's interest I do not object too."

A soft laugh. "As you say. I will give her credit for exceptional taste. And bravery." A smile. "You could do far worse, Ardeth. She is beautiful."

"She is." He agreed, not really certain how he felt about the young woman's so obvious interest. Or how he would react if she offered him another bracelet and all it entailed. Would it be such a bad thing to enjoy the pleasure she offered so freely?

"You are an odd man, Ardeth. And an intriguing guest." His host chuckled. "So does your god also forbid you to enjoy yourself in bed? And how does he expect to keep up the number of followers if he does?"

He could not help but flush. Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim, how do I answer that? "Passion is not forbidden, only that it should be shared between a husband and wife."

"And how does one know how to share passion with one's spouse if one has had no other practice?"
He forced down a deep breath. "Like all in marriage I would suppose you find it out together."

His host set the wine goblet down and regarded him for a long moment and he could not fathom the look in his eyes. "You are serious."

"Is that so surprising?" He asked in return. "I will not say it is required for a husband to be as unknowledgeable as a wife, thanks be to Allah or there would be few enough men who could marry, but it is not something we flaunt."

"Thanks be to Ammun, for a moment there my young Medjai I thought perhaps you were even less knowledgeable than I had feared."

That took him a moment and damn the thing if he did not flush. "Would it matter?" He managed the question finally.

"Matter? As a deterrent you mean? No, Ammun knows it might even make it more appealing to tease you."

"Then I will, Allah forgive me, be thankful for my indiscretions when I was young and foolish." He took a long swallow of his drink. "I take from this unimaginable conversation that your gods do not require or expect fidelity?"

"Fidelity and virginity are two very different things my young warrior. Men and women both are free to share passions when and where they will, until they are married. Then one is expected to stay faithful only onto one’s spouse. It is a testament to the love they share that they do so even knowing what other joys there may be in the world." A sigh. "You should ask your brother on that, I think. It seems to me, he and Nefertiri are a fine example of exactly what I mean."

Ardeth had to consider that for a long moment. Knowing Rick it was very likely that he had done far more than flirt with his dancing girls and yet in no way could he find fault or doubt his friend's devotion and love for his wife. "As you say. It is not our way, but there may be some honor in it none the less."

"And yet your god allows for a man to have how many wives?"

"Four." Ardeth answered. "Though most men have only one or two. And a man must be able to provide for all of them equally in possessions, affection, and care. Otherwise he can not marry again and they are free to divorce him."

"How odd." His host shook his head.

"Does your god not allow more than one wife to a husband?" He asked after a moment. He knew he recalled that Pharaoh had, had many wives. Ramses the Great alone was said to have fifty.

"He did." There was something like sadness to the voice now. So he turned to look at the man beside him. "Pharaoh may have as many wives as it pleases him to have, or concubines, or slaves. But Pharaoh is the embodiment of the gods here on earth and so what rules might apply to the rest of us of course do not apply to Pharaoh. No, Ardeth, we are allowed only one wife."

"So are the Christians I believe and some of the Jews I think have gone to that although I do not understand since we are all children of the same book."

"Truly, Ardeth this god of yours is beyond my understanding. I will only thank Ammun that I have his blessing and am permitted to serve him as I do."
"As you say."

"So Allah would not be pleased if you were to take Nefshen's token?"

"That I can not answer, it is not forbidden only discouraged for men to make themselves too familiar with passion before they wed and she is not a child of Allah so there would be no shame for her..." He shrugged. "I do not know your answer."

"How very odd, Ardeth. How very odd indeed." A sigh. "There is precious little joy in the waking world my young Medjai, perhaps you would do well to find what you can when you visit us here in paradise."

He looked back at the dance and smiled just a little. "She is beautiful."

"She is." His host agreed. "It is odd is it not, Medjai, what a man can find beautiful?"

It took quite a bit not to flush at that. "What makes you say that?"

"I was quoting you actually." His host chuckled. "When you asked me if I found you beautiful."

"When I what?" He kept what annoyance he could from his voice.

"AmmunRa is beautiful, this city is beautiful, you said. And then you went on to say that I must find you pleasing if not so beautiful as that. It is a different sort of beauty to be certain yours and hers. But any weapon can be beautiful if it is well made and wielded well. I see no reason why I should not apply the word to you, Medjai."

He sighed. "And that, is only more proof that there is not understanding between us."

"As you say." The thing smiled again. "But for now we are ignoring the wonderful dance for this, unbelievable conversation, as you said." He chuckled and then called out to the floor. "I apologize Nefshen the Medjai and I were deep in a discussion of Allah and I kept him from enjoying your dance. Refresh yourself and then if you will forgive my rudeness you may dance for us again."

She twirled to a stop and then pouted. "All that and you only now notice?" She rolled her eyes. "Men."

Ardeth had to smile. "Please, it is my fault as well, and your dancing is one of the few entertainments I have here that I enjoy."

She smiled a bit more and then walked over to him with a very purposeful saunter and ran her hand along his jaw again. "For you, Medjai, I will dance again."

He flushed just a little and then threw a prayer to Allah for forgiveness and returned the caress. "Then I will enjoy my stay just a little. Are you thirsty?" He offered her the refilled goblet of tea.

"Thank you." She took a long drink and then licked her lips and smiled. "Let me rest a bit, and I will find something that will keep your attention." She giggled and then twirled away and headed out through one of the side doors.

"Well played, Ardeth. Well played. Allah will forgive you I am certain."

"In'sh'allah." He agreed. It was a slight transgression to be sure and it was far preferable to wondering all night when his host might decide to come and watch him sleep.

"More enjoyable for you certainly. I alas, will have to find other entertainment. Your bed is well
made, but still, I fear, too small for three."

"Not even if it were to rain in Aswan." He replied coolly.

"As you say."

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Imhotep stood just outside the curtained balcony and listened to the sounds of his young guest and dancer as they came in the far door from the hall. Ardeth chuckled at something and then was hushed by a long soft kiss as the door closed. Imhotep drew the shadows deeper around himself and looked in on the pair. "Nefshen, wait, please?" Ardeth asked finally.

"Did you want to make certain your bed is empty?" She teased.

Embarrassment and then amusement. "My brother is kind enough, I think, to find somewhere else to sleep if he was here."

"That is good. I do not desire Nefertiri's husband, or to share the bed with more than just you."

Ardeth flushed just a little. "But you would share it with me?"

A soft laugh and she ran her fingers along his jaw and then traced his lips with one. "Do you doubt it?"

"No. I am only flattered that you would desire it."

"It is I who am flattered. I do not know what gift I have given Bastet that she finds such favor with me tonight." And she kissed him again, soft skin and jewelry sliding across the dark fabric of his robes as she put her arms around him. He had to lean down into the kiss because she was so much shorter than he. Ardeth sighed and one hand came up to slide through her long braids, the other resting hesitantly against the small of her back.

"I am not certain it is such a favor." His voice was deeper than Imhotep had heard it before, a little breathlessness behind it.

"No?" She laughed. "Do not try to tell me you do not know how attractive you are. I will not believe you."

A soft sigh but he traced her cheek with gentle fingers. "I am glad you find me so. You are so very beautiful you know."

"I am glad you find me so." She teased back and then ran her hands up across his chest to his shoulders. "Say your name for me again so that I may get it right."

"Ardeth" He rolled the r just a bit.

"Ardeth." She repeated, making it a caress of its own. "What does it mean?"

"It is only the name of a follower of the Prophet." He replied.

She tilted her head to one side and studied him for a moment. "How odd. Ardeth, it is a strange name for you to carry but it suits you." She ran one hand through his hair, freeing a bit more of its curl. "What is this strange world of yours like that you wear so much?" Her fingers stroked down his neck and then continued down his chest. "I will be all night undoing it all."
He laughed, only a little embarrassed now. "That, I can help with."

"Good." She kissed him again, more serious this time and Ardeth's soft groan was a pleasant sound. Nefshen appeared in no true hurry, sliding against him and letting one kiss slip into several, until they were both gasping. Then she backed up, pulling him with her as she swayed, her movements full of all the grace she had in the dance and just as seductive. "You are too tall, Ardeth, to do this on our feet. Come to bed."

And the confusion was an obvious on the young man's face as it was in his thoughts. "On our feet?"

Imhotep chuckled silently to himself. You are so naive my young Medjai. Ammun knows that is almost as intriguing as the rest of you.

Nefshen laughed and the tilted her head to one side, considering the possibilities. "You might have the strength to hold my weight, Ardeth but what if you lose your footing?"

A deeper flush across his cheeks. "I-- would hate to disappoint you Nefshen, but I truly have no idea what you mean."

She looked at him again. "No?"

"No."

"Well then " A teasing smile and she moved back to him and wrapped her arms around his neck. "Lift me up, Ardeth, so that I can kiss you well."

He put his arms around her waist and lifted, then groaned again as she wrapped one leg around his waist and the other around one of his to help the grip and kissed him fully. A long heated sharing of breath as their tongues slid against each other. Imhotep closed his eyes for a moment, enjoying the soft sounds almost as much as the image.

"Allah have mercy, Nefshen. I will fall and hurt us both."

She laughed. "So, we shall not try this without all your clothes in the way?" She kept one arm around his neck and the other hand slid down his chest, long fingers spread over his stomach and just teasing for a moment a little lower.

Ardeth groaned, the sound heavier now, somehow darker and sweeter to hear. "Please."

"Bed, Ardeth." Nefshen teased, sliding against him as she lowered her feet to the ground. "Sit." She pulled him around and pushed so that he sat down on the bed. "How do I do this, hmm?" She looked at him for a long moment then smiled and walked the two steps to the bed with a swing of her hips as if she were dancing. It was hard not to chuckle at Ardeth's astonishment as she went to her knees in a slow shimmy to run one hand up each of his boots. "Are you not warm in so much, Ardeth?"

"I do not think it is my clothing that make me warm."

"No?" she smiled. "These feel good." She slid her hands along his boots again to the tops. "But how do I undo them?"

Here." His hands fumbled with hers and he undid the buckles. Imhotep smiled, remembering the feel of doing the same and wishing for a moment that he had, had the luxury of drawing it out as she did before sliding her hands back up Ardeth's legs to his waist. She started to undo his sash but he caught her hands. "You will hurt yourself." He drew his long sword and set it beside the bed, and then placed his other blades on the small chest at the bedside. Nefshen chuckled.
"You are Medjai to the bone are you not, Ardeth? Why keep your weapons so close here in the safety of Thebes?"

A sigh and something like dark amusement. "Habit I suppose. Little good though they will do me here, as you say."

Imhotep smiled at that. It was true enough if not for the reasons Nefshen would be thinking of.

"Any more, swords I should worry about?" She slid her hands up his legs again and then kissed him fully, those long fingers sliding up to caresses him gently through the layers of fabric. "Or only this?"

"Please..." The word was almost too soft to hear.

"Has it been so long, Ardeth? How long have you been at battle then?"

Ardeth flushed again but caught her hands and brought them to his shoulders instead. "You would not believe me if I told you."

"No?" She laughed and then moved to undo his sash with a slow pull. "It is good to know that you share your shield-mate's bed for only sleeping. I would hate for the princess to be angered at you."

"So would I."

"Really?" She kissed him again. "He is pleasing enough that I could almost be tempted to share you with him." The words were broken up with kisses and then she pushed him back onto the bed and straddled his waist, long dark braids sliding over her breasts and her skirt riding high on her thighs. Ardeth's hands went to her waist and he groaned again as she swung her hips in a slow circle. "But tonight, Ardeth, it is only you and I."

"Then I will be thankful that your gods and mine have given us this."

"So am I." She laughed and repeated the slow circle of her hips. "How do I find my way through all of this?"

"If you-- do not stop, you will not need to."

She laughed again, a soft silvery sound that made Ardeth laugh with her. But she raised herself up on her knees and looked down at him. "Show me."

And gods but he wanted to give that same order and have it obeyed with such willingness and enjoyment. Ardeth undid the lacing that held his robes closed with a slight awkwardness that was only that much more endearing to Nefshen and Imhotep both. She helped where she could and then shifted back so he could sit up and shrug them off. The moonlight played along strong shoulders and along his back before he laid back down. Nefshen ran her hands down his chest, teasing lightly along his ribs with her nails. "So many tattoos, Ardeth."

"A rite of passage and a testament to faith."

"Do they not hurt?" She traced one along his shoulder.

"Now? No. When they are done? Yes."

She shook her head. "You should not give yourself pain, warrior. There is too much given to us without our consent."

"True enough. They do not pain me, and your hands feel very good when you trace them."
"Do they?" She smiled and then leaned down and traced the one on his right cheek with her tongue instead of kissing him again. Ardeth whispered something in Arabic that even Imhotep could not understand and pulled her against him. She laughed and raised herself on both arms to look down at him. "Show me the rest."

"Rest of...? Ah." He smiled but there was embarrassment now and shyness. "I need to sit up then."

"Just undo them, Ardeth. I will do the rest." She nibbled at his throat and he arched his back with a hiss that held nothing but pleasure. Imhotep swallowed his own and gave himself a long moment to imagine what the skin tasted like and how that uncontrolled sound of passion would sound right next to his ear. He opened his eyes to see Nefshen slide back off her knees until she stood beside the bed and then drew the dark pants down his legs and onto the floor.

"Nefshen, please."

She laughed that same silvery chuckle and undid the belt that held her dancing skirts in place and let them fall to the floor as well. Ardeth pushed himself onto his hands and watched, entranced and embarrassed all at once. Imhotep would have given a great deal to see the look in the young Medjai's eyes at that moment. "Am I so beautiful to look at, Ardeth?" Nefshen whispered.

"Yes."

"Then we are even on this." She licked her lips and then went back to her knees and lowered her head to tease him with her tongue. Ardeth did his best to bite back the cry that evoked but it was a sweet sound none the less. His thoughts slid from Egyptian to Arabic to the language of his tribes and back again as he finally managed to tangle his hands in her braids and pull her away.

"Have mercy-- please?"

Imhotep wondered for a moment if that was for Nefshen or Allah to hear but the young woman laughed and then got to her feet and rolled them both onto the bed, winding up underneath Ardeth's considerable weight on her small frame and not minding a bit. "Kiss me." She commanded again, and the envy was even stronger this time. Gods but he wanted to be in her place. He wondered absently to himself when the teasing had grown to real desire. But it was a flame now that was certain. Nefshen brought Ardeth's head to her breast and he obliged her hesitantly, so obviously uncertain of how to please her. She sighed and then stroked her hands through his hair. "I am not that fragile, harder now." He must have obliged because she arched her back this time and moaned. "More."

Ardeth chuckled just a little, pleased to have found something she enjoyed and raised his head to look at her. "More?"

"Yes," she sighed. "Again? Please?"

"Yes," he agreed, his voice a low growl now, eyes completely black in the moonlight but the desire undeniable and he lowered his head to her breasts again. Long fingers raked down his back, just short of pain Imhotep guessed from the groan the move pulled from Ardeth. Nefshen pulled one of his hands to between her legs and he stopped his kisses to look down at her in confusion. "What...?"

"Oh Hathor, you can not be as innocent as you would let me believe, can you Ardeth?" Her voice was soft.

Embarrassment now and a flash of regret or shame. "I..."

"Blessed goddess you are. Oh bright lady, what did I do for the gods to grant me this? Come here
Ardeth, kiss me."

He did, a long melting slide of tongues his hands in her hair now and her's in his. "I am sorry."

"Sorry? For giving me such a gift of teaching you the joy to be found in this? Take that back." She smiled at him and Imhotep smiled as well, reminding himself to find a very nice gift for her, she could have been very cruel about it instead.

"I-- if you wish. I-- was only worried, I had disappointed you."

"You have made me honored foolish warrior. Now kiss me again, and let me show you how honored I am."

He smiled, a warm soft smile that only made him look so very appealing and then kissed her as she requested, letting her guide him where she would have his lips next. When he returned to her breasts she drew his hand back between her legs and then gasped. "Yes?" He asked, breathless himself now.

"Yes." She laughed and then raised her hips a bit more. "My turn now." And she must have returned the caresses because Ardeth's thoughts went to pure pleasure and he threw his head back with a groan. Nefshen laughed and then pushed him onto his back and found her place above him, sliding down until they were completely joined. Ardeth only choked off another of those cries that roused him further. Nefshen laughed again, that soft chuckle that was so hard not to join in. "Please, tell me, this feels as good for you as for me, Ardeth."


"More." She agreed and twisted her hips as she had earlier and then took his hands and brought them to her breasts. "Like this." She ran her own fingers over his chest. Ardeth whispered something and did so. And then Nefshen froze for a long moment finding her own completion and drawing Ardeth's out of him with a cry that he did not even try to smother.

He stood in the shadows for a very long time as they lay entwined on the bed, their breathing slowing and an occasional sigh or soft murmur the only sounds. He smiled to himself, enjoying the unsatisfied burn of desire that coiled in his stomach. "It may take me another eternity Ardeth but I will have that with you. Somehow, willing and with only joy. It is a good thing I learned patience the hard way, Ardeth." And he left his young guest and Nefshen to themselves. For now, it was just enough to desire something so strongly again.
"Wake up, Ardeth." Rick shook his friend’s shoulder as lightly as he could. "Ardeth."

"Hmm?" He started to roll over and then must have caught himself and woke up completely. "Rick?"

"Yeah, it's almost time for prayers."

"It is...?" He sat up and then looked around for a moment. "I must have fallen asleep in Thebes." A sigh. "Thank you my friend. I will come and get you for breakfast."

He gripped Ardeth's shoulder a little tighter, relieved when the move didn't seem to bother him any. "Okay?" It was a question not an agreement.

"Ah," Ardeth smiled. "As you see. No less. I will talk with you after prayers." A squeeze of Ardeth's hand over his and then his friend got to his feet.

"Yeah." He let it go, because he wasn't about to bring any of this up where Evie, or Alex, or the other Medjai might overhear. He laid back down and held Evie close.

"That was-- better than I expected." Evie whispered finally.

"Yeah..."

She sighed and then snuggled closer. "I feel horrible about being glad that you're here and all right when I'm not sure that he is...but I am, damn it all."

He stoked the dark curls under his hand. "I'm glad I'm all right too, Evie. And he seems okay. Who knows how the thing thinks? Hell it probably threw a wonderful party and made him the guest of honor just because Ardeth, you, and I were expecting him to have to go fight crocodiles again."

She managed to smile at him. "From what Ardeth said yesterday it might do just that."

And it was just as possible that it had he supposed. Although he didn't doubt Ardeth had spent more than a good portion of the evening embarrassed at the very least and worrying that the thing would just toss him up against the wall at worst. I can deal with you having to deal with it, he'd told Ardeth. And he'd meant it. But damned if it didn't make him want to just tear the damned thing's head off all the same. "You know it probably would. Especially, if it does think that the gods want it on our side. Because then it's going to be sure we can't hurt it so what does it have to lose by playing cat and mouse?"

"Can we hurt it?" She asked.

"You keep deciphering those spells love, and I'll find someway to blow it to enough bits to get it back in its box and between you, me, Ardeth and the rest of the Medjai we'll figure out how to keep it there. One thing about Ahm Shere, we aren't lacking in statues of Anubis to bury it under."

"Well no there is that." She leaned up a bit and kissed him. "I love you Rick O'Connell you know that?"
"Yeah, and I love you." He kissed her back. "Which is really good considering how we spent the morning yesterday."

She giggled just a little. "Well, yes. I don't know how to match Horus of course but we really will have to think up something nice to do for Ardeth for allowing us that."

"Yeah. He wasn't real subtle about leaving us alone was he?"

"No. And for Ardeth that was probably the hardest part."

"Yeah." He squeezed her tightly. And they laid like that, her head on his chest and his arms around her until Ardeth came back from prayers. "Breakfast?" He asked.

"Indeed, and then we will send Jonathan and Izzy back to Aswan. Izzy is already up and reading his plane. I do not think he likes it here."

"Can you blame him?"

"No." Ardeth smiled. "Will you wake Jonathan and Alex?"

Rick looked at Evie and she smiled. "Go on and get coffee, love, nasty stuff. I'll wake Alex and Jonathan. It shouldn't take me more than an hour to get Jonathan out of bed. You can bring me back some tea though."

"Right." He got to his feet and then walked out after Ardeth. The sun was just cresting the dunes and he took the opportunity to grip his friend's arm and ask it simply. "You okay?"

A smile and then Ardeth gripped his hand. "I am. I swear it to Allah, my friend. No harm done. He came near to driving me mad with teasing but nothing more."

"Okay." He relaxed with a sigh.

"I knew you would worry. Oddly enough he knew you would worry. I think that amused him too." Ardeth shook his head.

"Great." He sighed. "Just so long as you're okay. But I do want to know what happened since I wasn't there to guard your back." He meant it to. Ardeth smiled and it was an odd sort of look that Rick hadn't seen before. "What?"

He wasn't expecting Ardeth to flush. "Not now hmm? I will only embarrass myself more."

"Oh we are definitely talking about this later."

Another odd look and then his friend reached into his robes and smiled a bit more and then just held out one hand. And it took Rick a moment to recognize the bracelet in his friend's hand. "Will that do or will you leave me no dignity at all?"

Rick chuckled and then slapped him on the back. "Explanation enough. Damn and here I only slept half the night because I was worried about you?"

Ardeth smiled and then put the bracelet away. "A transgression I have faith Allah will forgive me for, and since you were not there, the far more preferable way to spend my evening, no?"

That took him a long moment. "Than what?"

Ardeth just looked at him and it was easy enough to get the answer from his eyes.
"Damned bastard," Rick growled.

"On that we agree. Come, he did me no harm and was all things considered a very good host. I am only weary onto exhaustion with this game. Let us eat breakfast and then we must see what can be done about the battle we face here. I will leave the concerns of Thebes for the night to come."

"Yeah. Great. One war to fight during the day and a different one to fight at night. Why is it that Allah seems to think we can do this again?"

Ardeth chuckled. "Because my friend, once you have saved the world twice apparently you are expected to be able to do it again."

"Silly me. I thought once was enough."

Ardeth looked over the odd collection of artifacts once more, not at all sure what to do with them. The only one that might possibly be any help in battling the Germans he would think would be the armor of the scorpion king and that was deadlier to them than their enemies. The black and gold books of the gods had yielded a few spells that Sallah and Evelyn thought might do some good. Especially if they could be certain that the one which controlled the undead guards that he and Rick had battled on the bus in London was workable. The things had done great havoc to both the bus and Rick's car so they might indeed be useful against tanks.

Horus gave a shrill cry from outside and he opened the tent flap in concern to look out at his newly returned friend. To his surprise the falcon took the opportunity to wing his way directly into the tent and onto the table. "Horus," he chided. "I do not have time to be a good friend today, Horus. I am truly sorry." He was. It still made his heart glad just to see his friend. And he had stolen a few minutes this morning to feed him and tell him quietly of the wonderful evening he had spent in Thebes as payment for his return. He had expected so much worse and was still overwhelmed with the gifts Allah had seen fit to give him. "Come now, we have battles to..."

Horus walked unerringly to the scepter of his namesake and tapped it with his beak. "Is it yours then?" He asked, not at all certain he was not completely serious. His friend turned to look at him then taped it again.

"Ardeth..." Sallah began. He held up his hand.

"What is it you are trying to tell me, my friend that I do not understand?" He reached out and took hold of the scepter uncertainly. "Is there more to this than I know? What then?"

Horus blinked and then hopped over to sit on the shield. And the carved image of the hawk on the metal became an eerie shadow for his friend. "Very well, if you wish me to have them, I will do so. But I do not know what to do with them, my friend." He put the scepter away at his belt as he had yesterday and then took the shield and slung it back over his shoulder. "Now what?"

Horus picked his way across the table, not touching any other artifacts and stood on the edge to look at him. He sighed and offered his forearm as a perch. His friend took it and then carefully walked his way up his arm to find the same perch on the golden shield as yesterday. "I do not understand."

"He does seem to want you to keep that doesn't he?" Evelyn asked.

"Yes." He agreed. "But what good do they do me? The scepter is a good weapon for dealing with those creatures we are used to facing no doubt but how do I use it to injure a tank?" He shook his
head. "And what exactly does it mean the grace of Horus." He sighed. "You are very graceful my friend, and I could do as I said even to the creature last night with half your grace but what does it mean?"

"Htem-heset-heru." Evelyn repeated the Egyptian. Horus flapped his wings and then settled again to tap at Ardeth's jaw.

"Does he know what you are saying?" Sallah asked in disbelief.

"Perhaps. I would not have thought so, but who am I to say what he has seen while he flew through the vaults of Paradise?" Ardeth swallowed once and then turned his head a bit to see the falcon beside him. "Heru..." He tried the old way of saying the name. "Htem-heset-heru." He spoke the words softly. Horus shook himself and then tapped the shield. "Shall I try it then? Very well, I do not understand this my friend but I will follow where you would lead." And he headed outside to find the room he needed to wield shield, scepter and falcon all.

"Ardeth!" Arebe's cry carried across the encampment and he forgot the attempt at old magic and ran for his fellow leader, Horus taking wing and soaring ahead. He reached Arebe's side as the other cradled the body of one of their tribesmates in his arms. A horse lay panting and shivering in the sand nearby. But there were enough gathered around to help it. He fell to his knees beside his friend.

"Ar..deth..." The young rider could not have been much past Alex's age, not even yet a man.

"I am here." He offered. "Save your strength."

"A...Ahmer...my...tribe...."

And Allah forgive him but he could not council the boy to be silent again. "What of your tribe, warrior?"

"Allah...mercy...we...fought...hard...."

He blinked to clear the tears of anger and helplessness. "Allah and I know you did. How long ago now?"

"Three...days...I rode..." The boy bit back a cry, bloodying his already torn lip.

"I will see to your tribe, young one."

"Gone." The boy whispered. Then his eyes cleared to a hard black. "Avenge us." And he sighed. "Papa..." And there was no more breath.

Ardeth growled an incoherent curse not sure who he directed it at and got to his feet. Horus screamed above him and then settled again on his shield. This time the tap along his jaw was not so gentle.

Arebe was whispering prayers over the boy but Ardeth could not find any yet to offer. "I do not understand." He hissed, knowing he should. That Horus knew more than he at this moment and could no more tell him than he could understand.

"May Ma'at walk with you and see you safely to your god." Evelyn's, Nefertiri's, voice was soft as she and Rick came over to where the young boy lay.

Horus shrilled a cry, nearly deafening him with the sound so close to his ear. "Horus..." He stopped and then tried the only thing he could think of. "Seb-heru-am-tcher-uk ha-aftet-en tuten-setcha."
Horus travel with me through all the dark places I must journey. "Ai-Hetem-heset-heru." Grant me thy grace oh God of Avengers. And Horus took to his wings heading out over the dunes in the direction the boy had come from, streaking faster than Ardeth could ever recall him flying before. And then with a wrench of the world a god he had never even thought to consider reached out from an Egypt long dead and granted his prayers. One moment he was standing amidst nearly all of his tribes and the next he was standing on a blood soaked field with only the remains of half of those that had been missing from the oasis of Ahm Shere. He groaned, keeping his feet somehow. His head was spinning as if he had spent too long in the sun but he drew his sword in one hand, the scepter in the other and began to work his way through the field. In all his years of facing battle, even against the armies of Anubis he had never seen such horror. Camels, horses and people lay dead in groups, shot through with bullets, or torn apart by whatever had blasted into the sand near them. He walked slowly at first and then quicker, searching in vain at first and then finally, coming to the bullet ridden form of his fellow leader. He knelt down beside Ahmer and draped the corner of his own robe over his sun baked staring eyes. "I will avenge you my friend. I swear it. To Allah, and to the old gods that brought me here. I swear it."

Horus cried out from overhead and then swooped down to settle on his shield rim again. "Find me anyone left alive, my friend." He asked it seriously and Horus tapped his jaw and took off again swooping down finally. Ardeth ran that way as quickly as he could coming to a stop at the small collection of exposed rocks that tumbled into an ancient dry riverbed. He slid down the slope, not caring much for his own safety. "Salaama!" He called out as he reached the bottom.

"Al'hamdil'Allah..." An old woman's voice said and she moved out of the shadows. A young girl maybe ten and another maybe five clung to her sides. "Ardeth..."

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim. Easy now grandmother, I will see you safe."

"Do you have-- any water? We are so thirsty. It ran out last night."

He reached for the waterskin that should have been at his belt but it was lying back in Ahm Shere. He shook his head and then glanced back at the sky. Horus cried out and he sheathed his sword and the scepter. "Come. We will go to the others." And he picked the older girl up and placed her on his hip. "Can you find the strength to lift her grandmother?" He indicated the little one. The old woman nodded wearily and did so. Ardeth smiled despite his tears and then hugged her close with his free arm. "I will see you safe or die." He promised softly and then he gave voice to the old prayer once more. Horus streaked back to the west and then they were standing in the middle of Ahm Shere where he had been only a bit ago. "Water!"

Rick caught the old woman and the little girl as he let them go and Arebe took the other child from him. "What the hell did you do?" Rick asked.

"I will tell you when I have time." He grabbed three waterskins from his tribesmates and then thanked the old gods again and repeated the words.

Horus was circling the battlefield when he found himself in another area of it. His friend swooped down to a huddle of what might have once been the tents his people traveled with. He made it to the cluster of fabric and poles, and then drew his sword carefully. "Salaama!" He tried again.

"Sa...lama?" The voice was a hesitant sigh. He moved some of the fabric away and found a young man, a few years younger than himself. His arm was held tight against him, broken or worse Ardeth was uncertain, and a young woman was curled against his side, a baby maybe a month old held close. She blinked at the light and the baby made a whimper. "Please, my family..."

"Your family is safe now." He promised. "Here, drink hmm?" He opened one of the skins and
dribbled some water into his mouth. The mother took another one with a quiet sob and wet her child's lips. "Come now, we will go to the others. Can you stand?"

"My leg is broken." The woman answered in something like apology. "I told him to go, chieftain but he would not."

"Of course he would not." He smiled and squeezed his tribesman's good shoulder. "He is your husband and a Medjai. Can you stand warrior?"

"For Allah I will try." The man answered. It took just a bit to get them all to their feet. Asyid on his right side, Leha on his left, leaning on him and the child cradled in his right arm. He looked up at his friend circling the sky once more and then voiced the prayer. It was all he could do to keep his feet when it was over but Allah be praised it seemed to harm his tribemates none. He handed the baby to Rick because it would keep him busy, gave Leha to Evelyn and was not certain who took Asyid but it was enough to give him room to repeat the invocation once more.

Horus was waiting for him in the sky again but it was a bit hard to focus on him. Then he landed on another outcropping of rock that led to a small wadi much like the one he had found the old woman in. "Salaama." He called again, swallowing hard to get his voice to work.

"Papa?" It was a child's voice, barely a whisper.

"No, child, it is only one of your tribe." He came down the incline carefully.
"I will shoot."

"Please do not, Allah will be a bit annoyed if I die before he wills it, I think." He offered one of the waterskins into the shadows. "Water?"

"Mama, wake up now." the boy whispered. "Please?"

He swallowed his tears and moved forward. The boy was at best eight, but he held a pistol in his hands none the less. His mother was curled on her side on the ground. Ardeth reached over gently and touched her neck as courteously as he could. 'Sister?' He tried.

A small whimper of sound but it was life. "How long since she drank?" He uncorked his water.

"Yesterday?" The boy was fighting tears now. "She said, I should drink more."

"She was right." He saw no reason to say otherwise. "Here, now there is plenty." He shifted the woman into his arms and pressed the waterskin to her lips. Some trickled down her throat because she coughed and then swallowed. The boy drank from his own, sipping it with the control of a child of the desert even as thirsty as he had to be. Ardeth let her drink some more and then re-corked the skin and gathered her into his arms to get to his feet. "Can you hold tightly to me now? This is going to be a hard journey."

The boy nodded and then stuck the pistol into his belt and took hold of Ardeth's sash. And somehow all he could think of was that it could so easily be Evelyn in his arms and Alex at his side. He looked back at the sky and asked for a miracle once more. And Horus cried to the heavens and they answered again.

This time he could not keep his feet in AhmShere either. He managed not to drop the young woman in his arms but it was a close thing. He could feel the hands that gripped his shoulders, knew without a doubt that Rick was going to shake him but he couldn't quite get his mind around the words. "Help me up?" He ground the request out through a throat that hurt to swallow. "Please?"
Rick's voice was more gentle now, like it had been so long ago in Aswan. It seemed odd to think of less than a week ago as long but it was. "Is she well?" He asked.

"Yeah, the kid too." That finally registered as words.

"Good. Is there water? I am so thirsty." It was a horrible thing to lie to his friend like this.

"Yeah," Rick let go of him and he gave the words one more time and was slammed hard into the desert floor. But Horus was on the ground beside him and nudged his head against Ardeth's until he could stir.

"Yes. I know. I am here." He managed. He got to his knees and then did take a long drink of water from the two skins he still had, hoping it would help. "I-- do not know how much more I can do, my friend." He was not certain he got the words out. "But Allah will give me the strength I need or see me into Paradise." He found his feet. Letting his friend use his arm as a perch to take off from. Horus circled and only then did he realize he was some bit away from the battlefield now. Horus swooped low across the sand and then down into what must have been another wadi. He made the steps required, but he had to lean heavily on the scepter in his hand as if it was a staff. Oddly, it did not seem to sink into the sand at all. He reached the edge of the drop into the small canyon and forced the word out again. "Salaama!"

"Thanks be to God." Another woman answered. Her voice at least sounded stronger than most of the others he had found. "It is safe here, for now."

He slid down the slope and came to a stop. "You are well?"

"No." She answered with a shrug. "Water?" She asked in something like disbelief. He handed her one of the skins. "How badly are you injured?"

"I am not." He shook his head a little, because he kept wanting to see two of her instead of only one. Her light blue head scarf was smeared with blood on one side and her arm was held with another scarf against her chest.

"Keshi, drink now." She knelt beside the shadow and he realized there were at least four other women and perhaps three or more children and two wounded warriors as well. He pulled the other skin from his belt and shook his head hoping to clear it. He passed it to another of the young women.

"Ardeth!" One of the men hissed. He found a smile and knelt beside the man.

"Jamil." He clasped the old warrior's arm. "How bad are you injured, my friend?"

"I will live." The man replied.

"That is good. Your friend?" He indicated the other warrior.

"Unconscious but he may yet survive. How did you find us?"

"I had-- the help of a good friend." He felt Horus settle onto his shield rim again. "It will take some doing but I think I can get you safe. Let me gather all of us together if I can. Can you take me to the others my friend?" He asked the falcon. Horus sat where he was and tapped his beak very gently against Ardeth's jaw. He blinked, and then realized with a sharp pain like a sword through his heart what his friend meant. "Then we will go. Come, I need you all as close as you can gather." He got them arranged, children in the women's arms, the unconscious man in his, Jamil leaning on his shoulder. But everyone had a hold of him somehow and Allah be thanked they did not even ask why. Then he raised his face to the sky and asked once more for a way to see them safely home.
And the god of old Egypt was kind and he was back in Ahm Shere and shaking hard in his brother's arms.

"Damn you." Rick's voice was a harsh growl.

"Not-- quite yet..." He smiled. "Horus?"

"He's fine. They're all fine. Even Kasim. Allah knows how you didn't drop him."

"That is good. I feel-- very odd."

"Yeah, you look like hell. Don't even think about saying anything I don't understand or I'll tape your mouth shut."

He started to chuckle but somehow it came out as a sob and he did once more as he had done in Aswan and turned his head against his brother's shoulder. "There-- is no one else to find."

"Oh God." Rick's voice cracked and the strong arms felt good around his shoulders. And then the darkness snuck up behind him on silent feet and pulled him down into dreams.

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Nefshen's arms slid around him, teasing again, and she laughed that wonderful laugh and burrowed closer into his arms. He held her back, sliding one hand down her back. "Medjai to the bone are you not, Ardeth?" She teased again as she had the night before.

"I suppose I am." He replied.

"Shhh, go back to sleep, hmm? Trust me?" Rick's voice had that same odd gentleness and he laid his head back on his brother's shoulder. "I'll watch your back."

He could not find the strength to argue only did so, wishing for just a moment that Nefshen had stayed.

"Your bed is well made but still too small for three." The creature chuckled, and Rick only pulled him tighter but it wasn't Rick's hand that stroked through his hair with maddening familiarity.

"Will he be all right?" Evelyn asked softly, placing a wet cloth against his forehead. She did not seem to mind that he was curled up like a lost child in her husband's arms. That was good because he doubted he could have moved.

"It is good to know that you share your shield-mate's bed for only sleeping. I would hate for the princess to be angered at you." Nefshen whispered, sliding her hands down his chest and he arched his back at the pleasure the caress brought. "Are you not warm in so much, Ardeth?"

"I do not think it is my clothes that make me warm." He answered with a smile.

"Here," Rick held a glass against his lips and he swallowed. "You're burning up."

"Mmm, I am so tired, Rick."

"Then we'll sleep." Rick told him gently, such an odd tone to his voice. "I'll go with you."

"Would you?" He couldn't keep the hope from his voice. The roof top was uncomfortable to lie on but it was a distant pain now. "I do not think I can go alone, not again."
"All the way to hell." Rick promised.

"Come now O'Connell, you have repeatedly offered to join your brother on a trip to hell have you not? Shall we go?" The creature asked.

Ardeth had to wonder if they had. He felt so hot. "Bis'nil'Allah rakhman el rahim..." He whispered the words. "La ilaaha Illallah" He believed that still despite Ammun despite the gifts Horus had granted him. But were there not ever so many faces his God could show him. "There is no God but Allah."

"Then believe in the fact that he'll forgive whatever it is you can't forgive yourself for." Rick's hand rested so gently on his shoulder. "God can forgive us a lot more than we can forgive ourselves, Ardeth."

"I failed my tribe." He tried to explain. "I failed my cousin, and my God."

"Shhh, you did what you could, nephew, rest now." Selim's voice was as gentle as Rick's had been. "When this is over and the creature is bound again to the earth and we take up once more only the task of seeing that it stays so will you tell me, son of my sister, what it is that truly haunts your dreams?"

He blinked and tried to recapture that moment of pride when he had looked down at the bridge his people had made. But now the chasm was filled again with the horrible remains of men and beasts. But it was not Lok-Nah's soldiers that lay amidst the ruins but his own people. And not all the sand in the Sahara would cover them all.

"Oh Allah, forgive me. I will take their place, oh my God. Please I am only one man..."

Selim's strong hand on his shoulder. "You tell me what I already know. We are warriors of Allah, Ardeth, and while the deaths it may bring us all are indeed horrible, have faith that it is only the dying we must suffer. Our souls, and yours, belong to God."

He tried to nod but suddenly he could not move. And his host smiled at him, pinning him so easily to the chair. And ran one strong hand with maddening familiarity through his hair and leaned over to whisper into his ear. "Just for that I will let you listen to him scream."

"No!"

"I'll shoot." The young boy said, and Allah but he believed he would.

"Your father would be proud I am certain." He took the pistol from his nephew's hand and gathered Evelyn into his arms. "Come now, I will see you safe." It was all he could do.

And the old god listened to his prayer and he was slammed hard into the sands. Horus screamed over head and it was such a horrible pain filled cry that he knew his friend was lost.

"Rest well, Medjai, peace be with you, warrior, none of my father's guards could have been braver. May Ma'at walk with you through the halls of death and see you safely to the other side." Evelyn's voice was a quiet sigh.

"Be careful with that one warrior, there is actually room for two. Shall I lock us away together then?" The creature asked. And the arms that went around him were not gentle at all, and he could not break free.

"Next time make certain to stay within the light, Medjai. It is-- unpleasant if you do not." The
creature's voice was oddly haunted.

And he could hear the scuttling hissing sounds that came from the darkness ahead. "My soul belongs only to Allah, I shall not fear your curse."


"Do you wonder what it is Paradise really looks like?" He asked Rick.

"No."

"Come, cousin I will show you." Daoud offered, holding out his hand already blackened with death.

"Still decomposing really. It was horrible." Evelyn shuddered.

"Just for that, I will let you listen to him scream."

"Please, no. Lock me away if you please. Perhaps my torment will please Allah at least a little."

"If your god finds any pleasure in hearing one of his chosen sons eaten to death and screaming with no voice for days then he does not deserve your devotion Ardeth. Come now, we will see this right."

"Let them be? You can do as you please with me and I truly will not care but let them be?"

"Shhh, it's safe now. Shhh..." Rick's voice was so very gentle, but there were tears to be heard in it none the less.

"Even the strongest of men have need of tears when they are mourning the loss of a loved one. You let me cry against your shoulder did you not? I promise to Allah, I will not go nor think you weak because of it." He let his friend cry out his grief against his shoulder.

"You can't go, I need your help." Rick pleaded.

"I must go." He tried to explain.

"Ardeth!"

"Come cousin, I will show you." Daoud repeated.

"Silly child. Allah is Allah. I am I. We are what we are." The warmth of the sun on his skin like the first day after the wet season. "Just because I am now, as I was, as I will always be. Does this mean that Allah is not as he is, and was, and will always be?" And the light chuckled and he felt a strong embrace as if he was indeed a small boy and his father was still alive. And then the light faded and was gone.

"Come now, Ardeth. You have put your body through a great deal and you need to rest." The creature said.

"Did you want to discuss something?" Rick asked it, his voice cool but he turned Ardeth into his arms once more and he laid his head on his brother's shoulder.

"Shall we go?" The creature gestured them into hell.

"Shhh, rest now, I've got you." Rick's voice was gentle.

"I do not want to die."
"Good." Strong arms around him but he could move at least. "Shhh."

"I am so tired, Rick."

'Then rest. Hush now, Ma Salaama, huh?"

"In'sh'allah." And his voice broke on the word but he cried out his grief against his brother's shoulder and then slid once more into darkness.

It seemed like a very long time before he woke. And it took him a bit to realize that he was in a now familiar bed. He sighed, and then realized he was lying in Rick's arms again, his head on his brother's shoulder. Rick was sound asleep however and there was no sign of their host. He blinked and looked around again. But the room was empty.

"You awake finally?" Rick asked sleepily and only pulled him back down to lie next to him. "Stay still." His friend grumbled. "Okay, so we aren't awake. Shit. Damn it Ardeth you scared the hell out of me."

"I am sorry." He shook his head a little trying to clear it. He was hot and his throat was dry with thirst. Despite himself he shivered just a bit.

"Your fever broke about an hour ago. Guess I dozed off. Great. Like we need this now."

"There is no need to claim territory my friend, you can let me go."

"What? Oh, yeah, sorry. You were thrashing around so much, and I think you were half-convinced that if I kept a hold of you, you wouldn't go to hell."

"I probably was." He sat up slowly. "Allah I am thirsty." He had not meant to say the prayer aloud, and could not bite back the wince as he did so. His throat was so dry it actually hurt.

"Here, just sit." Rick got up and poured them both a glass of karkaday from the jug on the table. "Here."

He took the drink and swallowed the cool liquid thankfully. "I am sorry I worried you."

"What the hell did you think you were doing?" Rick sat down beside him and traded his empty goblet for a full one, without him having to ask.

"I am the leader of the Medjai my friend, it is who I am, could I let those poor few who survived die?"

"You nearly died you idiot."

He nodded. "If that is the price Allah demands of me. You would do the same for Evelyn and Alex, Rick do not try to tell me otherwise."

His friend sighed. "Idiot."

"Pot and kettle." He finished the second glass of karkaday and laid back on the cool sheets. "Allah it
"No, you're fevered." Rick explained. "Let me get Tahiri to bring water and some cloths and we'll get you cooled down again."

"We should wake." he argued. "There is so much to be done."

"It isn't going to help if you kill yourself. Lay there and relax. What's the word for water?"

"Nebsa."

"Nebsa, okay." Rick opened the door and looked out into the hall. "Great why the hell can't I ever find anyone when I need them?"

Ardeth chuckled, and then sat up uncertainly as the wind blew in from the balcony.

"Shall I have to find you a gift every day so that you come to Thebes well, Medjai?" The creature asked.

"Perhaps." He found a small smile.

"Good, you can be useful again." Rick growled moving over to take the goblet from his hand and refill it. "Dammit Ardeth, lay down. You, find someone to bring us some water and cloths will you?"

Their host stood there for a moment and then just laughed. "You are undoubtedly to worst mannered guest I have ever had O'Connell. And considering your brother there I thought that impossible. Ammun knows why I bother to invite you. Behave, or I will leave you to the waking world more often."

"He worries." Ardeth explained.

"And you are ill, yes. Very well O'Connell we agree on something once again. Lay down foolish warrior and I will see if there is something that can be done to help." A sigh. "If you are in such a rush to see your god, Ardeth, I can ask mine to be kind enough to take a message."

Ardeth chuckled. "Allah...that is tempting."

Rick's hands were gentle on his shoulders and then one took the goblet away. "Lay down now." He was pushed back onto the bed. And suddenly, inexplicably he was so cold he shivered. "Damn it..." His brother's fingers felt cool against his forehead though.

The creature went back out onto the balcony and he was uncertain how long it was before it came back. Rick was helping him drink more of the karkaday in the goblet. "There is water on its way. Get him undressed, O'Connell; since he can not do it himself, and my help, I am certain, would only make matters worse. I am going to have to tie you to the bed, yet Ardeth just so you will stay whole."

"Please do not?" He requested. "Rick will worry."

"I'll rip your head off more like it." Rick threatened.

The thing chuckled. "As you say. I will even be so good a host as to turn my back, although I think you at least Ardeth are too ill to care."

"I think I would prefer if you did not look, yes." He agreed.

"Then you are coherent at least." And damn the thing if it did not do just as it said and turn away.
Rick was muttering to himself in English but his hands were still surprisingly gentle as he got Ardeth undressed and under the sheets.

"I suppose I could have sent for Nefshen to do that for you, hmm?" The creature turned back around.

"That would have been a very nice gift indeed." He agreed.

Rick looked at him worriedly and then smiled just a little. "Now who's lucky?"

"Mmm," He felt a little better now. "Did you come only to see to your guests or was there more you wished to discuss?"

"Much, but you will be here for a while yet, you are not well. And it is time for me to see to my god's evening meal. I will join you later and we may speak of what the gods will for us all."

"Will you, Allah forgive me for asking, do me a favor then as our host?" He wasn't sure how else to word it.

Rick’s hand squeezed his shoulder hard but the creature only chuckled.

"Perhaps, if you ask nicely of course."

"Of course. Will you ask AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt to give my thanks to bright Horus? It was a miracle I shall always treasure that I found any of them alive at all."

"Spoken like a Medjai. Very well, Ardeth. But you must ask nicely."

He closed his eyes. "I am ill, not drunk. But I will do. Would you be so kind a host, High Priest of AmmunRa, to carry my humble thanks to your god?"

"See you can have manners. There is your water Ardeth, and while I am so very tempted to stay and help your brother-- cool you. Even such entertainment as that would provide is not worth angering my god. I will see you both later. Do not under any circumstances feel like you must dress for dinner though, Ardeth." And it laughed again and then went out the door and let the servants in.

"Damned bastard." Rick grumbled once more.

He chuckled. "As always. He did at least have the courtesy to turn around while you undressed me. Thanks be to Allah of course. And you did not even tease it back about it."

"I was a little too worried about you. I'll figure out something later."

"Good." He closed his eyes as Rick got up and then returned with a cool wet cloth to wipe across his forehead, then folded it and placed it under his hair against his neck and took another from Tahiri to wipe his face. "I am not a child."

"No, Alex has enough sense to stay in bed and let Evie and I take care of him when he's sick. You are a stubborn, idiotic, insane arab who is going to get himself killed."

"In'sh'allah." He chuckled.

"Drink some, hmm?" Rick's voice sounded resigned now but he pressed a goblet of water to Ardeth's lips and helped him raise his head so he could drink. And Allah but he was still too thirsty to care that he could not hold the goblet himself. He only drank it thirstily. "I don't know if it'll help in Ahm Shere but it seems like what happens here carries over there and vice versa so it can't hurt."
"It was like spending too much time in the sun." He tried to explain. "But water did not help."

"Jamil told us some once we got him tended too. Mahmoud doesn't even think he'll loose the arm. Or Asyid either."

"That is good. The woman with the boy?" He asked and then sipped more of the water Rick held to his lips.

"Resting okay. Brave kid."

He nodded, remembering how the boy had reminded him so of Alex. And that moment in his dreams when it had been his nephew and Evelyn in his arms. "He threatened to shoot me."

"Like I said, brave kid." Rick's hand rested against his forehead again. "You're burning up."

"I feel-- light headed, but not so bad at the moment."

"Drink." The goblet was placed at his lips and he finished the water it held, thankfully.

"If the Germans attacked Ahmer's tribe three days ride ago, they must be close to Ahm Shere."

"It was a scout division that attacked the tribe, so it's possible they've gone back to tell the others before they'll all be in our laps, but Selim and Arebe have scouts out all the same. And Arebe sent a falcon to find Pasha and warn him to travel quietly."

"Allah, I will pray they are well."

"Me too." Rick squeezed his shoulder. "Guess we found out what good that shield and scepter of yours are huh?"

"Indeed. Now I must figure out how to wield that weapon against a tank. How does one injure a tank?"

"That we'll have to work on. And we better figure out how to do it without doing this to you, because there are a hundred or more tanks coming Ardeth and four times using that stuff nearly killed you."

"As you say. How many tanks in this scouting division that attacked Ahmer?"

"Ten, maybe twelve according to Jamil."

"Ten-- and I have lost an entire tribe. Ten to twelve to the remaining tribes would put at us your 100 would it not?"

"Yeah."

He nodded wearily. "Surely if Allah wishes us all to join him in Paradise in our entirety there are simpler ways to do so."

"If that's what he wants he's going to have to wait because I'm not losing you and the rest of my family to some stupid Germans who want to take over the world."

He smiled sadly and put his hand over the one Rick still had on his shoulder. "We will do as Allah wills us, my brother, we can do no other. But I will pray that he gives us victory instead."

"You and me both." Rick squeezed his shoulder and then got up to go refill the goblet and bring it
back. Tahiri had set up a small table beside the bed and set a bowl and cloths on it. "Can you ask her
to check back in about an hour with more water maybe? And you need to eat something, maybe just
flatbread and tahini or something similar?"

He forced the Egyptian to mind and asked Tahiri for the things Rick had asked for. She nodded and
then clicked her tongue and smacked him lightly on the arm before doing the same to Rick. "You get
better. You, stop letting him do this. Or I will send word to your wife that you are killing her guards
for no reason."

Ardeth laughed and repeated the threat in Arabic for Rick's benefit.

Rick smiled. "Yeah well. If it'd work I'd have Evelyn order you to take care of yourself."

"You would." he agreed. "Thank you Tahiri. I will rest now."

"Good." She went to the door and then smiled over her shoulder. "Nefshen will appreciate it if you
are well soon I'm certain."

Ardeth felt himself flush and then just closed his eyes with a sigh.

"What did she say?"

"Nothing of importance."

"Uh huh, I gotta learn Egyptian just so I can hear stories about you and your dancing girls since
Izzy's spilled all of mine."

Ardeth smiled. "As you say."

"Drink some more." Rick held the goblet to his lips and he did so, until it was empty. "Good." He set
it aside and drew another cloth from the bowl and wrung it out. "You are worse than Alex, you
know."

"He is a fortunate boy to have you and Evelyn to care for him."

"Thanks." Rick smiled and then ran the cool cloth over his arm to his shoulder and then across to the
other. "Guess we should do this before that damned thing get's back, huh?"

"Please." He flushed again despite himself. "I am not so ill that I can not bathe myself."

"Wanna bet?" Rick shook his head. "Try and sit up and reach your feet then."

He raised himself up on one arm and the very dizzy feeling made him realize how silly that was. He
could have achieved the move but it would have made him ill. He only laid back and sighed. "As
you say."

"Well at least you didn't do it just to be stubborn." Rick smiled. "Maybe I should see if your dancing
girl's available for this, huh?"

"She is beautiful, and I would, Allah forgive me, not object in the slightest to seeing her again. But
she is not going to guard my back when our host returns is she?"

"No." Rick sighed. "And you're in no shape to deal with it alone. Okay, roll over."

Rick had to help him a bit and the sheet was shifted out of the way so that he lay uncovered from the
waist up and the cool cloth was drawn over his back. Another cool cloth for him to lay his head on
and it was almost enough to put him back to sleep. Rick rolled him back to his back finally and re-wet the cloth to do the same for his chest. It was a little hard not to be embarrassed by that but as it had when his shoulder had been so hurt it felt too good to worry about that.

Rick pressed another goblet of water to his lips and he drank it, oddly enough more thirsty this time than last.

"You feel cooler." Rick decided and set the goblet aside.

"I feel better." He agreed. "You are too good to me, my friend."

Rick chuckled. "You're going to owe me a hell of party when this is over you know."

"It is a small price to pay for your friendship." He sighed and then cast a prayer to Allah for strength as a wind that was no such thing stirred the curtains and their host walked in off the balcony. "Was AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt pleased with his meal?"

"Yes." The creature smiled and then took off the headdress it was still wearing and set it aside. "He was not however, pleased with you. What were you thinking, carrying them all at once like that?"

"That it was going to kill me to do it one at a time." He shrugged.

"Let me explain just a little of what is involved in feats like you would accomplish Ardeth. Did you not notice that it takes even me time to amass the powers I use in your world? You must work towards it slowly, and you are only mortal, Ardeth, the grace of Horus is a mighty gift warrior but one you would do well to wield with caution."

"They are well. That is worth being ill."

"As you say." The thing sighed. "How will you keep protecting your tribe if you do yourself such damage, Medjai?"

"There we go agreeing on things again. We really are inviting doomsday you know." Rick chuckled but there was a bit of anger to his words yet. "So did Ammun give you any idea how long we've got until the Germans come to blow us and Ahm Shere to bits?"

The creature looked at him oddly. "I think, I just might have followed that oddly enough. You and your fondness for blowing things to small pieces." It rolled its eyes. "No, Ammun did not say. Only that I was to tell you to rest, Ardeth and he would give your thanks to bright Horus when they go to battle Set. And I was even kind enough to enquire if there was a way for you to summon Horus' aid without such damage to yourself."

He looked at Rick and then shrugged. "That was-- kind."

A chuckle. "If you are well, you are more fun to tease." The thing smiled a bit. "Although I suppose the fact that your brother has already undressed you for me is worth listening to Ammun's displeasure."

"Like hell I did." Rick growled. Ardeth found the strength to grip his arm and keep him where he was.

"No." He whispered it with all the firmness he had.

The thing chuckled. "You are easy to bait, O'Connell. Take a lesson in patience from your brother,
hmm? You are no threat or deterrent to me, warrior despite your courage. And you are here to be beside him by my leave. Remember that, hmm? I will send dinner here, Ardeth. Rest and we will talk more later. Ammun assures me we will see each other in the morning." And then it chuckled again. "You can if you wish tell him he is quite pleasing when he's angry." It gave the last in Egyptian and then laughed and walked out the door.

"Oh Allah." He laid back on the bed with a groan.

"What the hell did he say?"

"He finds your anger amusing." He translated it as un insultingly as possible.

"Let's see if it thinks so when I blow it to pieces." His brother growled.

"In'sh'allah, no harm done, Rick. Please. Let it be."

"Okay, for now." His friend smiled a little. "Guess I should be thankful you kept me from trying to swing at it. You aren't in any shape for that."

"I know." He agreed. "I find myself hoping it can get Ammun to find me a way to this that will not hurt so much."

"Yeah, you know I really hate it when I have to agree with it on something."

"Undoubtedly why it will try and find things you do." He sighed. "May I have some karkaday?"

"Yeah."

He laid back and closed his eyes. You can not keep me safe Rick, and I will hate it all the more if you are harmed because of its desire for me. Please, oh most merciful Allah, I will take what pain you wish me to bear but let it fall to me and not to my brother. I would not bury any more of my people.

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Rick woke a little uncertain for a moment where he was. He raised his head to look around registering the tent and the pallet where Ardeth lay. Evie was asleep just a few feet away with Alex and Selim had taken up the position by the door. He sat up and reached over to check his friend's temperature. "Thank God." He rolled his shoulders and sat up to pour himself some of the water. The camp was silent in the predawn night but too many tents had lights burning as theirs did, indicating that there were wounded to be tended and less sleep to be had.

"He seems better." Selim offered quietly.

"Yeah." He smiled at the older and sat down with a sigh. "Was he always this stubborn?"

The man smiled as well. "Always." He sighed. "Allah have mercy on us all. He near to drove his mother mad I think."

"Your sister was a very great woman to have put up with such a son."

The older man blinked in surprise and then chuckled. "Thank you, O'Connell. It is good that you are here, warrior, to give me someone else to help keep him whole. I would pray to Allah he will find someone to marry and have children of his own to drive him mad with their stubbornness."

"Yeah." He looked over at Evie and Alex. "It's worth it though."
"I have always thought so." There was a sad note to the man's voice.

"I really am sorry about Daoud."

"I miss my son." Selim agreed. "But he is with Allah now and I will be content with that. Does He who shall not be named let you rest tonight?"

"No." Rick tried his best to keep his voice level. "I should try to doze back off so he isn't there alone."

A sigh. "He says that the creature has caused neither of you harm only threats. Is this true?"

He smiled a bit. "Yeah, I didn't know if I believed it either Selim since I'm not always there when he is but he swears it to Allah so..."

"Then it is true." Selim relaxed a little. "I could wish it would leave him be, but he is our leader, so I suppose the thing will delight in tormenting him for our dedication to keeping it in its grave."

"Yeah, it isn't real happy with me either." Rick found an answer that wasn't one, because he really didn't think that had anything to do with why the thing was tormenting Ardeth. And no way in hell was he letting Selim in on the real reason.

"No I imagine not. You are a brave man Rick O'Connell to journey into the land of the dead of old Egypt with nothing more than your faith and wits."

"And Ardeth." He corrected.

"And Ardeth." Selim agreed. "Truly you could do with no better at your back."

"Yeah." He smiled a little and then set his cup aside. "Speaking of which I should get back."

"As you say." The older man agreed. "I will watch him for a while to make sure the fever is truly gone and I will wake you for breakfast."

"Thanks Selim." He went back and laid down beside Ardeth, and then decided it was damned silly to worry about keeping them back to back when he'd gone to sleep with Ardeth's head on his shoulder. He laid down on his back and put one arm over his eyes to block out the brazier light and then let himself fall back to sleep.

It was still night in Thebes when he woke up beside Ardeth again. "No company at least." He muttered to himself. "How the hell do you keep so calm knowing he's going to be there watching you sleep? I wouldn't even want to close my eyes." He looked over at his friend and then sighed. "I just want to rip its eyes out you know. And I know I can't. What the hell do I do, Ardeth when it stops playing? What the hell do I do then, huh? And just how much does it do when I'm not here, anyway? What do you mean by it's only touched you to annoy you? How much is that? It annoys the hell out of me just looking at you like it does. Damn it I hate this. I hate not knowing I hate not helping and I hate having to be so damned patient. I am not patient Ardeth. You know that, the gods I figure have got to know that." He laid back with a sigh and covered his eyes with his arm as he had in Ahm Shere.

"He has touched my hand, run his hand through my hair and brushed against me far more frequently that I would like. You worry too much." Ardeth's voice was a soft sigh. "And I will tell you again, I am not calm. But what good does anger do us, my friend, except drive us mad with frustration because we can not harm it any. Let it be. We can do nothing else."
"I didn't know you were awake." He couldn't think of anything else to say.

"Obviously, you are too good a friend to burden me with your own worries when I am ill and dealing with my own even when those are mostly the same worries actually. Let it be."

"Okay." Rick sighed, trying to sound a little less embarrassed than he still was. "You sound better."

"I feel better." Ardeth agreed. "Still a little weak but nothing like before. I think I will be well when I wake."

"Good." He sat up with a sigh. "You want anything to drink?"

"Is there karkaday left?" Ardeth sat up slowly as well and then sighed. The move didn't seem to bother him any so Rick didn't complain. "How can you stand to lie beside me when the bed is soaked and I am drenched?"

"You'd be amazed what you can learn in the Legion." He smiled a little and then poured his friend a goblet full of the hibiscus drink. "You feel up to trying to walk? We could move to the room Evie and I had before. Bet the bed is dry."

"As you say. I need to bathe."

"There's enough water left for you to wash off with anyway." He went over to check the chest against the wall. "And more of your clothes."

Ardeth chuckled. "That is good. I wonder how many sets of the same clothing I have left here now?"

"Hey clothes for me too." Rick smiled. "And extra boots. Damn wonder if I can take these back with me. I love these boots."

Ardeth sighed. "I have given up trying to figure that out as well. I will wash then and dress, if my legs will hold me that is."

Rick offered him his arm and Ardeth smiled but took it and pulled himself to his feet. He swayed for a moment. "No fainting in my arms when the thing isn't around to annoy by seeing it." He teased.

"Bis'mil'Allah rakhman el rahim." Ardeth chuckled. "And me wearing nothing. As you say, too good an opportunity to yank its chain no?"

"Yeah. Think you can stand?"

"I think I can even walk, Allah be praised. I will not let you carry me."

"You'd have to explain that one to Evie." He agreed with a smile. Ardeth chuckled and then went over to the large bucket of water to wash off as best he could. Rick left him alone but did keep an eye on him just in case. He handed him a dry cloth and then his pants and robes. "Your sword and knives aren't here."

"I noticed that. I wonder where they are." He shrugged. "Little good they were to me but I feel better with them."

Rick pulled his own knives and held them out handle first. Ardeth smiled and took them tucking them into his sash. "Now you look like you. Want to move next door?"

"I do not think I want to sleep. Are you tired?"
"No. This being awake while sleeping stuff is just weird."

"I agree. Come then, I will teach you to play Hounds and Jackals until the dawn and the creature comes to annoy us once more."

"Sounds good." He agreed. And for right then it was enough to know they were all safe and well.

Ardeth wasn't expecting to go from playing Hounds and Jackals with his friend to being awake in Ahm Shere but he sat up and looked around the tent in surprise.

"Thanks be to Allah, you're awake." Selim's voice was gentle and his uncle came over to sit beside him and touched his forehead with concern. "And you have no fever."

"That is good. And the others, Jamil, Asyid, Leha?" He realized he knew so few of their names.

"Jamil will be well, even Kasim made it through the night."

"Thanks be to Allah."

"As you say. But I think we owe you some thanks as well. Whatever miracle you managed nephew it was well done."

He felt himself flush just a little. "Thank you uncle. Is it close to time for breakfast though? I think this working of magic leaves one as hungry as it does exhausted."

Selim chuckled and then nodded. "It is. We shall see what we can find to eat before prayers hmm?"

"You should rest Selim. Allah will forgive you for not being at prayers this morning. And I fear we will all have little rest in the next few days."

"It may be you are right. Then we will eat and I will sleep and you can rest and we will trust that Allah will understand."

"As you say." He agreed. He was pleased to find that there was indeed breakfast. He ate sparingly still uncertain of his stomach but it seemed well enough that he took one cup of the tea Amal poured him and drank that along with the water that she constantly refilled.

"You could have woken us you know." Evelyn told him with a sigh as she and Rick and Alex came over as the others went to prayer.

"Selim and I were hungry." He smiled.

"That's all right then." She leaned over and to his embarrassment kissed his cheek. "It is good to see you're better."

"It is good to be better. Go to sleep Selim, I will sit here and rest and wait for the others to finish prayers and see if Arebe's falcons have brought any news. Nothing more strenuous until it is necessary I promise you."

"Then I will rest." His uncle replied. "We may need more help O'Connell."

Rick chuckled at whatever that meant. "Right. So where is Horus this morning?"

"Horus?" Ardeth looked from his uncle to his friend and back and then shrugged. "It is only dawn now, he will be waking and hungry no doubt. If I am fortunate he will not bring me some of whatever he catches for breakfast back for me to share. My stomach is uncertain enough without
"being offered half a rat."

"Oh, that's nasty." Evelyn shuddered.

"Yuck." Alex agreed. "What do you do with them?"

"I thank him for the thought, but tell him I have already eaten." He smiled. "He is usually hungry enough to finish it for me."

"Get him to catch you a fish or a hare or something you don't mind eating." Rick suggested.

"As you say." Ardeth smiled. "Ma Salaama, Selim."

"And to you Ardeth." His uncle went to his own tent.

"So no news yet?" Rick asked after a bit.

"No. Falcons are birds of the day though so perhaps once the sun has risen we will see what Arebe's falcons bring. Did we think to ask the creature the news from Abydos or Edfu?"

"No." Rick shook his head. "Sorry."

"If it was of too much importance he would have mentioned it no doubt." He shrugged. "I suppose I shall have to send some of the tribe to the field where Ahmer's tribe lay so that they may be buried."

"Let's see if we can pinpoint where the German's are first." Rick suggested.

"As you say. It will do none of the dead any honor if those sent to bury them only join them in Paradise." He sighed. "But Allah it is a horrible sight..."

Rick's hand squeezed his shoulder. "We'll avenge them Ardeth."

"Yes." He agreed, letting the anger through to that one word. "For that I will happily feed the damn invaders to Set piece by piece myself."

"Let's make sure you get the chance." Rick suggested. Ardeth nodded and then got up to go and see to Horus. Arebe finished prayers and joined him with the birds. It was a calming sort of task to see to his friend.

"So, Horus. Will you speak to your namesake for me again and see if perhaps there is more to this magic he would give me?" He stroked the soft feathers on the bird's chest.

Horus looked at him for a long moment and then flapped his wings and launched himself into the sky.

"I will take that as a yes?" Arebe asked.

"I think we must." He agreed. "I will go find a horse and ride the perimeter I think. I must do something to see to our safety or I will go mad and I have not the patience to wait this morning."

"I will send word to you when it arrives from Pasha." Arebe offered.

"Thank you, my friend."

"Ahmer and his tribe died as Allah willed, Ardeth. It is horrible and it is true, mourn them as we all do, but do not claim their deaths on your head. Only the vengeance to be had on those who would
do such things."

"As you say, Arebe I will do my best to listen."

"Go ride. May it clear you mind if it can not lift your burden."

"Ma Salaama, Arebe."

"Ma Salaama, Ardeth." His friend clasped his shoulder and let him go. He was only a little surprised when Rick and Evelyn joined him on his check.

"Where is Alex?"

"Learning how to ride. It seemed like the best thing to just let him continue." Evelyn answered.

"I am sorry for the sadness and grief your son must see while he is with us, my friends."

"Not your fault, Ardeth." Rick told him firmly.

"As you say." He smiled a little. "The young boy rode in from the east, and Selim sent scouts out that way. Ahm Shere lies to the west, and Egypt to the north. Let us check on our southern perimeter I think."

"Makes sense to me. Where's Horus?"

"He flew that way." He pointed ahead of them to the south. "My other reason for going."

"An even better one, I think." Evelyn replied. They rode some distance but there was nothing to find. So they went back toward camp. And then suddenly a wind swirled the sand into a large dust devil and there was the damned creature simply waiting for them. "Not again." Evelyn sighed.

"Princess, Medjai. I bring you news from AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt, and his sister at Abydos, and his bright brother at Edfu."

Somehow he kept his temper. "What do the gods know that they would send you here to the waking world?"

"Do not be rude, Ardeth or I will go back to Thebes without telling you."

"No." He smiled a little, coldly. "You will not, because you and I both know that you will not dare to anger Ammun."

A chuckle and a slight bow. "As you say. Horus thanks you for your thanks and says only that the further you would fly the harder the trip, you would do well to realize that your falcon flies fastest before the strike and glides for much of the rest."

"I will do my best to make sense of that. And what news from Abydos?"

"Sekhmet is angered and will announce her plans when she will and not to those of us foolish enough to demand answers now."

Ardeth sighed. "No help at all then."

"Your enemy she said only comes from the direction you least expect." The creature shrugged.

"And the news from AmmunRa, He who is lord of all Egypt?"
The thing sighed and suddenly there was something like sadness to its eyes. "Ammun says to me that you have four days to find and claim those weapons you will need. Then it will be too late to hope for more. And he reminds you that you turned down death in Thebes once and therefore you should recall his warning that it might not come when you wish it."

He sighed. "I do not wish to die, but all men must, so I will only do my best to face it bravely when it happens."

"Four days, huh? Well it's something anyway." Rick sighed.

"Do you know what weapons it is we are supposed to finding and claiming, priest?" Evelyn asked coolly.

"No, Princess I do not. That says Ammun is for you and your Medjai to find on their own."

"No other news?" Ardeth asked.

"No."

"Why send you here then? Surely all of this could have waited until nightfall?"

"I do not question the will of my god anymore than you question yours. He only said that I was to come and deliver the news and wait for you to ask me a favor in return."

"I have no favor to ask." He returned

"Then I must wait a while yet." The creature shrugged. "Where do you ride, Princess, Medjai?"

"Back to camp. And we all know it is insanity for you to accompany us."

"As you say, but I will walk with you a ways." It shrugged. "Until you think of your favor, Ardeth."

"I suppose go to hell is to much to ask?" He smiled a little.

The thing laughed and Rick even smiled at him. "That is an order Ardeth not a favor. Come now we both know you can be polite and ask nicely when you want to."

Ardeth rolled his eyes. But he walked his horse forwards a ways in thought and the damned thing only followed.

Horus cried out from overhead and then swooped down and landed on the arm he held up. "Hello my friend, is there news you bring me as well?"

Horus looked back at the direction he had come from and then Ardeth heard the pounding of hooves and tossed Horus back to the sky to draw his sword. Rick was a moment behind with his shotgun and even Evelyn drew a pistol but the creature only stood where it was. "One man on horseback, Medjai, one of yours." It shrugged.

"As you say." But he kept the blade in his hand until one of the scouts came riding like mad over the high dune to their left.

"Ardeth!" The young man pulled his horse to a stop. "Tanks. A dozen, heading from the south west." He pointed behind him. Ardeth kicked his horse hard, heading back up the hill of sand. "Warn the tribe!"

The scout rode on and he reached the dune's rim followed a second later by his brother and Evelyn. Rick pulled his spy glass from his pack and looked into it, scanning the horizon. "Oh God." He
handed it to Ardeth who looked through it and spotted the line of metal behemoths's rolling toward Ahm Shere.

"How do we stop them?" He asked desperately.

"Like I know?" Rick's voice was a harsh growl.

"Alex..." Evelyn whispered, brokenly. "Oh God Rick." He reached out to hold her close.

"There's no way in hell we can stop them. We won't even reach Ahm Shere before they do." Rick sounded so lost.

"Oh God." Evelyn sobbed.

He whirled his horse back toward Ahm Shere, damning himself for not bringing the shield that had allowed him to travel so quickly yesterday. Had Horus not told him he was to keep it close? The creature stopped him with the simple expedient of moving in front of his horse.

"Is there something wrong, Medjai?" The creature asked from his side.

And he had time for one quick prayer to Allah. "Please, you can stop them." It did not matter that he had to plead. It would mean little enough if it worked. "I swear it to Allah, I will spend tonight in your bed, you may do with me as you will. I will do as you wish. Only do not let them reach Ahm Shere?"

The creature smiled and then nodded. "Foolish Medjai, all you had to do was ask." And then the sands swirled about it and a huge dust devil like he had seen once before in Hamanaptura sped toward the tanks. He rode back up the dune to meet Rick and Evelyn and they watched as the huge wall of sand grew and grew and then slammed across where the tanks were in the distance.

"What the hell?" Rick stared at the raging sandstorm in something like horror. Then hope and then anger crossed his face. "What did you do?"

"It was the only thing I could think of that could stop them." He answered.

"And what the hell did you offer it?"

He smiled, only a little surprised that it came out right and then he gripped his friend's shoulder.

"Ammun sent it here to wait for me to ask it a favor remember? As the creature said, all I had to do was ask."

Rick let out a startled sort of laugh.

"Come let us see to your son, and I would see to my people." He headed back toward Ahm Shere and offered yet another prayer to Allah. Please most merciful God, just let me survive and keep my brother from doing anything foolish to stop me from what I must do. They are my people and it is my tetend to pay.

Chapter End Notes

This is the end of the first section of No Certain Victory, Fajr. The second set of chapters: Duhr, will be posted early next week.
All in all there are five sections of 12 chapters each. All are completed with only editing and formatting still needing to be checked.

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