

Book One

The Life

The tomb-wrenched corpse swayed in the tavern portalway, a thing of tortured flesh and milky eyes.

Tavern-keeper Sebi gawked at the aberration. "Osiris' lost phallus," he managed. A dozen cups fell from his customers' fear-stunned hands. A heartbeat later, the tavern-goers were in flight, scrambling though the leather-curtained windows and diving out the alley door. Sebi would have run as well but for his shelves of inventory and tablets of account. He couldn't afford to flee.

His burly assistant, Nomti, advanced on the magiced thing. Capable against brawlers and bargemen, he hesitated as the seemingly animated cadaver lurched towards him. He threw a wild blow that took the creature low in its chest. Sebi expected to see chunks of rotted flesh fly loose. Instead there came the dull leather-like thump. The creature staggered even as its claw-like hand snapped down to feel, survey and gauge the assaulting fist. Then the sightless, ruined face focused dead-on at Nomti. A moment later, a club-like arm smashed into the burly man's ear, sending him crashing to the hard-packed floor.

Alone, Sebi could only quail behind the questionable sanctuary of his cup plank as the once-human thing hobbled nearer. Up close, he could see that the flesh was not putrefying but, rather, a mass of swirled scars, the skin melted like old candle wax. The thing stopped, turned its dead eyes towards him, canted its head slightly, then spoke with a voice that rasped like the desert wind.

"I seek Wenamon, Superior of the Forecourt of Ipet-Iset. I seek to confront him. Fetch him. Now."

"Boy," bellowed Sebi, unable to pull his eyes away. From the dark corner shadows, his diminutive son emerged from where he'd been keenly watching to see if he'd become an orphan. "Run north to the temple complex. Fetch the priest. Tell him a creature awaits him, a thing of the tomb."

“Run fast,” the monstrosity advised. Like magic, the boy was gone.

“We have time,” it continued conversationally. “Syrian wine would sooth a harsh throat.”

With automatic motions, Sebi poured the dark, syrupy liquid into a drinking bowl. Into this he added a measure of seawater, as was common in preparation, adding perhaps a bit too much, which was common with his miserly ways. Listening intently, the thing barked “Ut!”, signaling he desist. It appeared to have more than a passing understanding of unethical tavern operational practices.

It raised the draught to its lipless maw and drank deeply. Some of the wine escaped to trickle down its irregular flesh, a disturbing irrigation. The emptied bowl was clapped onto the plank, a clear invitation for a refill. Meanwhile, something very much like a smile crossed what passed for a face.

“A fine beer hall such as this will have women, ones who can be hired for pleasure.”

“Nekhebet!” Sebi shrilled. “Wadjet!”

Like the son, the two women-of-evening had been cowering in their tiny cells, hoping to be overlooked. Relying on long practice of approaching those they found repugnant, they eased closer. The creature touched them with a certain tenderness, a rough hand to each, tracing their plump, painted cheeks, slender necks, delicate shoulders. The courtesans trembled fearfully at his explorative touch like songbirds beneath a feral cat’s paws, awaiting their death and dismemberment. But it did not come. Rather, the thing’s caresses were knowing and gentle. Even... pleasurable.

“Ohhh...” the one known as Wadjet exclaimed in delighted surprise.

“Come my ladies,” the thing croaked. “Retire with me to that dark corner where I can show you the frictional delights of my rough exterior. And you, tavern-man. Keep our drinking bowl filled.”

This Sebi did. Following the realization that he might not be killed came the concern that he might not be paid. Syrian wine was a scarcity now that the Ramesses Dynasty had fallen and the two lands were in turmoil. It was difficult for such luxury goods to find their way all the way up the Nile to Thebes, Egypt’s southern capital.

He noticed that most of his patrons had returned, standing in a loose ring in the lane outside, peering through his entrance in curiosity. Rousing Nomti with a prodding foot, he began ferrying drinks out to the watchers, eager to recoup some of his losses the strange disruption had caused. Inwardly, he cursed the timing of the visitation. Tomorrow was the day of 'The Beautiful Festival of the Valley'. Thirsty travelers and men driven from their houses by locust-like relatives would ordinarily pack his tavern this day. And now had come this unraveled mummy, who drank his best wine, diddled his girls and put fear into his customers. Why him? Why now?

He stood outside in the early evening, noting who Nomti served, adding hash-ticks to their tabs. It was as if he'd crossed a terminus. Inside the beer hall, the fantastic. Outside, Thebes in its timelessness. Here seventy thousand souls lived on the raised hardpack of six hundred generations. Here men labored on the farms of their father's fathers. Here the stalls of the many marketplaces presented goods from trade routes radiating in every direction. Here the temples performed their endless services to the array of gods, favoring great Amon-Re but neglecting not the others. And out beyond the western quays, across the mighty Nile, stood the tombs and necropolises of Egypt's greatest men, her grandest Pharaohs. In all, it was a city of temples beneath a heaven of gods, its surrounding deserts an impenetrable wall, its vast river a bringer of life.

As the shadows grew long, his son returned, escorting a high priest of Amon's Ipet-Iset complex. Like all priests, he was shaven, his head shimmering like gold from scented oils. His eyes were almond and wise. He appeared sturdy, broad shouldered, perhaps even fleshy (Lord Herihor certainly took care of his priests). Strange though was his garb, a linen robe that crossed over his right shoulder and fell to his ankles. Yet, unsymmetrically, his left arm was exposed, his right lost in an overlong sleeve. Strange.

“You have a man within?” asked the priest in an oddly soft voice. “One named Nun?”

“It is not a man,” Sebi shot back, prissy over his business’ disruption. “And I failed to ask its name.”

The priest frowned, then pushed the tavern-tender aside so as to duck and enter the establishment. Sebi gestured for Nomti and followed. Behind him, the crowd drew in tighter.

He found the priest standing in the center of the tavern, facing the dark corner where the thing waited. A girl’s voice trilled laughter, out of place in the stygian setting.

The monster rumbled, “Did you bring your doll along, Little Maaty?”

“That is not my name, evil Nun. I am Wenamon, Superior of the Sanctuary. And the statue of Amon-of-the-Road is not a doll! He is the all-powerful, the true god! He granted me powers to defeat you once. He can grant me powers to defeat you again.”

At that, the priest stepped forward, flicking clear his long right sleeve. Sebi gasped. Exposed was not a hand, no, but a claw, one pink and wizened and ruined. It was clearly a mark of great yet evil magic. As if to confirm this, the priest extended it forward. All braced themselves.

Before him, the horror rose up and advanced, step by shuffling step. Then it brought forward its own leathery hand. The two locked. Sebi assumed great magic was taking place and prayed his tavern would not be destroyed. To his son, it looked more like a handshake.

“Superior of the Sanctuary,” Nun chuckled, gripping tightly, his other hand slapping the priest’s back. “I thought you ruled but the forecourt.”

“A promotion.”

“You know one other?” the girl Nekhebet asked.

“Know each other?” Nun said, plopping down between his harlots. “Wenamom and I fought each other like gods, we did. Titanic blasts that split mountains and shook down temples. Massive blows that rivaled the lightning and thunder. Aye, fight we did, back and forth. But Wenamom’s magic was great, for he had Amon’s blessing behind him. He smote me as Baal smote Yam.” The girls were wide-eyed. “Smote me he did. I was once a man, and this is what his magic did to me. But he was the better man, and I salute him, and call him Lord.”

“It was Amon’s will,” the priest alleged. “His will becomes our path. His desires our actions. He determines...”

“This is a tavern, Wenamom, not your bloody temple.”

“You are correct, old friend. Tavern-keeper, your best beer!”

“That’s what I like about you, Little Maaty. You were always so loose with temple wealth.”

“As loose as your tongue, you old scoundrel. Why aren’t you back in your little estate? We set you up there so you’d not scare the children and cause the goat milk to sour.”

“Bored,” Nun answered, instinctively snatching the small jug from the hovering Sebi. “I grow bored listening to music and delighting in procured ladies. I seek the companionship of men.”

“You seek the companionship of trouble, more likely.”

The monstrosity shrugged, an oddly human gesture.

Seeing that the priest had the strange thing contained, the other patrons began to cautiously reenter. Sebi noted this and a part of his brain came into re-alignment. This trespassing monster, this scarred yet worldly priest, could draw in even more patrons. It was... *entertainm ent!*

“Might I ask, my Lords,” he drolled as he poured deep portions for the two, “how you came into acquaintance?”

“It’s not much of a story,” the priest replied with well-practiced humility.

“You jest,” Nun retorted. “It is an amazing story, filled with temple intrigue, great voyages, tremendous struggles and heinous betrayals. Tell it to them, priest!”

“Why don’t you tell them?”

“I’ll be too busy drinking.” The skull raised the jug in a come-come gesture.

“Very well,” replied Lord Wenamon, settling into his chair. He took a lubricating sip of barley beer before beginning his tale. Behind him, Sebi gestured to Nomti to start distributing drinks among the attentive patrons.