

The Library of Tanen-Tet

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My four companions and I had just unearthed the greatest archeological find in a hundred years. The lost library of Tanen-Tet. While our competitor, the British funded company of El-Jeeth, had 20 score men, scores of slaves and machines larger than houses, we had beaten them, thanks to the cunning of my sister, Mary.

Mary was an astronomer, and believed that she had some useful knowledge about the local villagers, the ones who called themselves the Descendants of Tanen-Tet. She had studied their language, their culture, their history, but most of all she had studied their gods. She had taken a heavy interest in two of them. The male god Saleed and the female goddess Okole. They manifested themselves, as many religion's gods do, as the sun and the moon.

The descendants of Tanen-Tet had been suspected for many generations of knowing the location of the library. While the El-Jeeth company had tried bribery, torture and then bribery again, my sister knew that the devoutness of religion could only be cracked with divine intervention.

She had predicted an upcoming solar eclipse. The night before it was to happen, she explained to us her plan, and each of our roles.

The descendants of Tanen-Tet were living prosperously in the flood season. They danced every night as the sun fell, playing music on drums and harps made from the gizzards of birds and crocodiles. The dances were extremely hierarchical, as was their society. The king and queen began the dance. Following them were their closest relatives. Then, in a perfect pecking order, every villager would join in, one at a time. Not even children were spared from the strict ceremony, every person had their place.

Sometimes, but very rarely, a villager would jump up early. It was a statement, a statement that they believed they deserved to be of higher rank. Everyone would look to the queen for her decision. A nod to the left would signify that a new order was to be accepted, and the villager would supersede everyone they jumped past. A nod to the right, and they would be gone by next morning.

That night, we all took a fatal risk. We entered the village together, Mary leading the way. Alice and I followed closely behind while the two men of the group, John and Samuel, trailed last. Alice and I had removed from our persons and luggage what little jewelry we had, and Mary had used it to ordain herself as a dazzling queen. Alice, a materialistic girl, complained heavily when the plan was proposed.

The locals had gathered in a circle for the dance. The royal couple sat together. The king was broad shouldered, and had a short, thick beard. He had prominent ears, and small, sunken eyes. Dozens of pendants of silver and amethyst dangled from his chest, legs and even his beard. One in particular, the largest hung from his left cheek, attached through a piercing. It had a golden coin in the middle, and studs of amethyst circling around, it depicted a radiant sun.

The queen, tall and slim, bore a refrained, pursed expression. She had jet black hair that flowed all the way to her hips. Conversely to the king, she wore no jewelry at all. Instead she was coated with fine powders and makeup. Most of her skin was left bone-white by powder, but her features, eyes, nose, mouth and the edges of most of her chin and neck, were blackened. The material that caused the darkening was undeterminable, it had no shine or gloss and was virtually invisible in the late night, even by the fire. It gave her the appearance of a crescent moon, as though half of her wasn't there.

We stepped through the wooden gates, Mary continued on alone and stepped right into their circle, dancing along to their music. Right in front of the king and queen.

The King looked at us first. He was stern at most, but seemed ever patient to allow us to pull Mary out of the circle and rectify our mistake. He turned to the Queen and they whispered together.

I grew fearful for my sister. She had promised me that she wouldn't get hurt. But she left unclear what the consequences would be if an outsider challenged the royals. I made to move into the circle and pull her away, but my companions clutched me and dragged me back.

The king rose and walked into the circle. My sister danced on, ignoring his presence. He grabbed her by the arm and went to drag her out, but she ripped free. He went to grab her again, lunging at her with two hands this time, but she stepped back, almost out of the circle. The king, seeing her back away, relaxed his posture.

I relaxed too. The trap had been sprung, with the jaws set to clamp in the morning. The events had proceeded exactly like Mary had told us they would. Our group waited for her to lead us from the village.

The circle of villagers tried to pull Mary out. But she wasn't finished. She stepped into the centre again, right up to the chest of the King. Face to face, she met his eyes and snapped her head to the right. A sign that to them, could never be misinterpreted.

As quick as a Nile monitor, the King struck my sister across the face. He struck her with his right hand, straight at her right cheek as if he were trying to straighten her neck and undo the gesture. An earring, my earring, sailed through the air and into the crowd. No one gave the diamond a second look, they were all locked in to the spectacle inside the circle.

To my relief, she finally retreated. Out of the circle and out of the village with the group.

While the men extolled her bravery, and Alice doted on her well-being, I muttered to myself, scorning her foolishness. She always went further than needed.

The next morning, several hours before the moon was set to eclipse the sun, we returned to the entrance, ordered by our makeshift hierarchy once again. A villager ran from us as we arrived, quickly returning with the king.

He yelled upon seeing us. His jewelry rattled as he shook his fists. And yet, he refrained from stepping past the gate, as if it were the border between our territory and theirs. Alice stood closest out of us all. The king pointed and spat at her, but she remained unmoving.

We stood there, waiting in the blistering sun for several hours. We had all prepared ourselves by wiping our skin with lupine, but the heat raked our skin and we took to pegging the sand and stretching a tarp from the fence. We took turns sitting underneath for shade. Alice, however, not once moved her feet from where she had planted herself. The king grew uneasy as Alice refused to respond to his insults, and he returned to the village.

Minute by minute, the moon began to creep over the sun, eating up its power. And so Mary's plan reached its second stage.

The locals, Mary had discovered, saw the sun and moon not only as an embodiment of a man and a woman. But the embodiment of *man* and *woman* themselves. They believed that men sourced their strength from the sun, and women from the moon. This was why at the dances at night-time, the Queen had the final say.

As the sun shrunk further and further, more and more villagers gathered near the entrance and eventually the queen came by. The king looked on from his temple.

From the king's angle the sun rose above Mary and the entrance. And only once the sun was completely covered, and the eclipse complete, was it directly above her.

The gods had spoken.

I myself had never seen a solar eclipse before, and was chilled by the sight of it. I could not imagine what the villagers thought. The sun, even to a Catholic like me, symbolised life, passion and strength, and to see it snuffed out was frightening. Hopefully, The king would see it as a judgement on his actions, and not as some apocalyptic sign of evil.

The king cowered in fear at the sight. Slowly, the king reached up, grabbed his pendant, and dropped it at his feet. Then he bowed down.

Mary's coronation was done. She was queen.

The queen stayed silent. Her expression, I would cautiously say, tightened by the slightest of margins.

The rest of our group were still foreigners to the village. We continued to camp by the river. Mary took to bed in the temple along with the queen, with the king left to find his own place among the villagers. We waited for several nights, meeting with Mary in the day, as she tried to pry the location of the library from the queen. But the queen, perfectly willing to eat, sleep and bathe alongside Mary, refused to utter a single word to her.

The villagers knew not of the library, or at least acted as such. The king, who was found

working on the village well by Mary, insisted that any sacred knowledge of the ancestors was passed from queen to queen.

But then on the fourth day after her coronation. Mary met us at our meeting point clear of all her ornamental prizes from the village.

She had found a child, a little girl, in the village. While the child kept house with most of the other children, Mary spotted her one day running off down to the well, alone. Mary followed along, curious about her break in protocol.

At the well, the girl was shooed away by the king. The girl kept her distance, and when the king turned his back and focused on his work she would trail after him like a duckling. Mary noticed that the girl bore some distinct features. She had the small, sunken eyes of the king, and the tight chin of the queen.

Once the girl had left from the well to return to the other children, Mary intercepted her. First she tried to charm the girl, promising her fine quilts and precious jewelry from the temple and complimenting the girl's little eyes and chin. But the girl was wary, and tried to walk away. So Mary switched her tactics. Dragging the girl to her toes by the ear, Mary threatened to feed her to the crocodiles in the river. The child broke down, and told Mary the location of the library.

And so we were off. Mary had shed from herself all signs of her recently attained royalty. We didn't plan on returning to the village, it had served its purpose.

The site was not far, a few hours down the river by boat. There we set up camp, and began to dig. It was not long before our shovels met with the thud of wood. The wind and sand had hidden only the surface of the library.

We found an entrance and entered soon after. We had to grab our spoils and leave before the company of El-Jeeth spotted us. In the desert, they could slit our throats and take our discovery for themselves with impunity.

A hall went on from the entrance for a hundred paces, down at a one third incline. The roof, to my amazement, had windows, something not yet mastered by the villagers. How had it been mastered by such an ancient civilisation? The windows were large and many, and they bore the weight of tonnes of sand above without cracking.

The insides of the library were not as ancient as the tales. The wood bore no rot or damage. But more importantly, and with a greater mark of fortune than a road to El Dorado, the books lined the shelves by the thousands.

Had they been maintained by the villagers? If so, why was it still sealed? Or had a tight cocoon under the sand protected it for all these years? It mattered not to us, we cared only that we were now destined for wealth and fame.

We ripped into the books like vultures. Tearing out page upon page with the crudest

judgement of value. Maps to more treasures, majestic illustrations or any translations for use like the Rosetta Stone. Bound tombs of myth and culture, normally a worthy find by themselves, were no longer worth their weight in our sacks.

I did find one book of myth however that caught my eye. It showed a progression of women, all covered with the same make-up that the queen had worn. Each woman was also depicted dead at the feet of the next woman in line, without her makeup on. Only a few of them were depicted as being older when dead.

In our enamoration with the books, none of us cared to notice the trickling of the stream begin to grow louder. And as we exhausted the books along the shelves, we drew ourselves deeper and deeper down into the hall, fighting over every last scrap of parchment, Mary leading the way. It grew darker and darker the further down we went. Eventually, we had to light candles and line them along the shelves.

It was John, lagging behind, who first noticed the water flowing down the gaps in the floor. Upon him alerting us, we all sought each other for explanation, but found none. Rain had not been expected for months.

The water began to dampen our sacks. So we opted to leave with what we had, and began to climb back to the entrance. But the flow of water widened further, turning into a slow stream and making it unsteady for us to climb up the tilted hall. Alice slipped and landed on all fours at one point, and she dropped her sack. Papers fell out and quickly soaked inside, while the sack itself rolled several paces down the angled floor. It would have taken moments to retrieve, but our uneasiness about what was happening had crept up on us. I helped Alice to her feet and we all moved on, leaving the sack behind.

The stream continued to grow. It was clearly not the rain, it had to be the river.

At thirty paces from the entrance, we could see around the middle shelf. The sun had set. I saw a crescent moon hanging at a low angle. At least I thought I did, for I looked down at the floor for a moment to keep my balance, and when I looked up it was gone.

It was impossible to avoid the water now, and everyone had slipped like Alice at one point. Danger was growing ever more serious, and the sacks weighed us down. Samuel dropped his sack. John and I followed suit. But Mary trudged on, gripping hers even firmer by the neck.

Then, ten paces from the open air, a shape loomed over our exit. Its large form quickly barred the way.

It was our boat.

Seeing what was destined, four of us dove to the sides of the hall and flattened ourselves to the wall. John froze, stunned like a preyed fish. The boat slid down the hall and rammed through his chest. He grunted for a second before either the boat knocked the wind from his lungs or crushed him dead. Either way, he was plunged down deeper and deeper by the

boat, all the way out of sight.

Mary left no time to waste. With one hand still holding her sack. She lunged upwards the final few paces and held onto a wooden beam at the entrance. The water was gushing through, and combined with the angle of the hall, made it difficult for her to leave through the door.

Samuel and I strode up and grabbed a hold of the beam on the opposite side. Alice tried too, but slipped into the stream. It dragged her down several metres where she collided with a shelf. Her back made a cracking noise and she yelped. She bent to the ground in agony. The main force of the water was still smacking into her lower legs, before splitting off either side of the shelf and flowing down.

Mary looked back at Alice, hesitating. I hesitated too. I looked up at the open air through the entrance, and back down the lengths of the hall where the water was flowing.

Samuel didn't think twice. He swung out into the stream and hoisted himself through to the outside. He stretched out his hand for me. I raised my arm, considered it, but then withdrew it. I couldn't leave Alice.

She was still in the same place, but leaning against the shelf to prop herself up. She stared at me, her eyes were begging me to help. The water was still growing more and more ferocious. I had to act now.

Against all natural instincts, I swung into the flow and slid down to the shelf. I planted my feet on either side of her. And inspected her back.

Near the entrance, Samuel had managed to work his way around to the other side. He stretched out to pull up Mary. She looked back at me, hesitant, but she grabbed Samuel's arm and hoisted herself up and out with her sack in tow. Both of them disappeared from view.

Alice's legs buckled as I tried to hoist her up. She had grown exhausted from the climb. She had no energy to push directly up through the stream, and she would get dragged down to the depths trying to jump over the stream to the side of the hall.

The only one I could save now was myself, but I doubted my own strength.

Suddenly a figure came bursting through the opening. They swung around the beam and slid down the side. It was Mary. She held out her hand for us.

After some encouragement, Alice tentatively reached out. Her fingers brushing Mary's. I almost shoved her to speed her up, I was beginning to feel encased in the library. Eventually they clasped hands and Alice jumped through the stream, keeping balance with Mary's hand. I followed after, much more easily, and were all both at least out of the path of the water.

Then another figure burst from the entrance. But this one slid down with the water, thudding into the middle shelf. It was Samuel, but something was wrong. He had smacked hard into the shelf, but wasn't getting up. Mary and I exchanged worried glances. As he remained motionless, the water around him began to show slivers of red. A deep cut opened in his neck.

And then I saw it again, the moon. It was just outside the entrance, but larger now. A thin hand flicked beneath and something long and yellow flew in and draped itself around Samuel's body. It was the rope that had moored our boat. It was cut cleanly at the end. I looked up and the moon was gone again.

The others hadn't seen it. Alice was still wailing at the sight of Samuel, and Mary was trying to calm her down. I kept silent, our main problem was escaping. Mary and I encouraged Alice to walk up the hall and grab the beam. Mary followed, but there was no space for me, I had to wait. Mary swung around and out. Reaching through, she pulled Alice through the stream.

It seemed like we had a chance. We even had a sack left to pay for our way home.

I saw Mary leaning over, encouraging me to climb. And I saw Alice, stepping behind. With a quick shove, Alice sent Mary stumbling into the stream, where she was swept straight down. She fell headfirst into the shelf, crumpling. The current dragged her sideways and past the shelf, she flowed further and further along and down the hall.

Alice smiled at me and waved. She leant down and grabbed the sack before disappearing into the night. I guess the El-Jeeth weren't so foolish after all.

I stepped into the stream and flowed down the hall feet first. I couldn't see Mary, and the hall grew darker and darker the deeper I went. There was no sign of our candles, which must have burnt out or slipped from the shelves.

The hall seemed to go on forever. It really was a wonder. It was to be my tomb, but it was going to be a tomb fit for a queen.

I finally reached a pool of water at the bottom. Once my legs splashed in I heard a groan from nearby. I walked along the edge, and bumped into something.

It was Mary, half submerged. She groaned again. I felt her head, it was warm from what could only have been blood. She whispered to me. Muttering about the entrance. But there was no way we were walking all the way back and fighting through the stream.

I pulled her out of the water. She groaned again. Her hand slapped across my arm, she seemed to be waving around.

I sunk my head. Resigned.

Mary clapped. I didn't know what she was doing. She clapped again. Then I heard it, an

echo. The hallway kept going. Somewhere above the water, it could only be on the side, but which side.

Mary reached up and slapped me across my left cheek, forcing my face to the right. I got the message.

I sat beside her and let her hold onto my neck before hoisting her up and making my way over to the right-hand wall. I felt around finding a corridor branching out from the hall on a slight incline.

The corridor was even longer than the hall, and rose at a shallow angle. My legs grew tired as I walked for hours upon hours. But I kept carrying my sister with me. I wouldn't leave her behind, she had come back for me.

The tunnel ended at a ladder. So I laid Mary down and climbed up. Sunlight streamed in, it was already day again. I popped my head out and found myself in a well. It was the village. This had been the real entrance all along. The little girl had sent us all to a trap.

I could make a run for it, but how was Mary going to escape? She was stuck at the bottom and would be unable to climb. The villagers wouldn't help us, they had sent us to our doom.

I saw the villagers appear, and I ducked low, peering out of the edge.

Many of them came into sight. So did the king and queen. And someone else was being dragged behind them, gagged and bound.

It was Alice.

They came closer and closer to the well, so I ducked below.

The villagers were talking loudly, but the king spoke and they all went quiet. Alice was making a muffled scream the entire time the king spoke until there was a ring of metal and she went silent.

Something appeared over the well, I ducked and something flew by me and down the well. I looked up and found myself face to face with the queen. She was stunned at the sight of me, and I saw a dagger in her hand. So in panic I did all I could think of. Her long hair was dangling into the well, I grabbed it with one hand and then let go of the ladder to hold it with both. With all my weight pulling down, she folded over the lip and we both fell down the shaft together.

I had a good sense of where the ladder was, and managed to grab a hold again. My body yanked on my arms and I screamed in pain, but I held on. The queen, meanwhile, sailed deeper and deeper down. I heard a thud at the bottom, and then moments later another one.

I began to climb down. Yells came down from above, but nothing was thrown.

At the body, along with Mary who was conscious but still weak, there were two bodys. Alice, who had evidently been killed and thrown over me by the queen, and the queen herself. Both were dead. I turned over the queen, her makeup had smudged, some of it stuck to the ground as a sticky goo. I ran my finger along the ground and it coated my finger, still the darkest of blacks.

I now only had one idea, and I was going to go for it. I wiped as much of the makeup off the queen's face as I could and began to smear it on my own. First My nose, then my ears and then half of my face.

Once I finished I showed my face to Mary. She looked me up and down and let out a laugh. I explained to her the passage I had read from the book. She was wary, at first, but eventually she nodded in agreement.

I walked back to the ladder and grabbed hold. I looked up, the sun was directly overhead, shining straight down through the shaft.

It was time for my coronation.