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Come, Darkness Triumphant!

Joe Cirino

The following text was discovered at the bottom of an inkpot in recently uncovered cellars below a library in the Arabian city of Irem. Formally known as Irem of the Thousand Pillars, the city vanished into the Saharan sands without a trace sometime before 500 B.C.E. Carbon dating places the scroll, which was sealed in a thick coating of wax and unidentified blood, at a date circa 2400 B.C.E.

The account, while somewhat difficult to translate, was written very precisely in a well known dialect not common to the general Ubar region in which Irem is found. The following is the excerpt of the account I thought you would find interesting.

From the Accounts of Aram Al-Azif, Personal Scribe of Vizier Jakkam
Day 249 of the 15th Year of the Sultan's Rule:

In the past I have found these writings to be efficient ways of relieving the stress brought on by dealing with the incompetent fools in the Sultan's palace. The matter of stress is no different now, yet its source has somewhat changed. As I have found before, it pays to lay out even the most inauspicious detail of my actions and experiences for later perusal, lest some point of knowledge and importance be omitted. This is one of the reasons I am the Personal Scribe to the Sultan's Vizier.

On that note I shall start somewhat hurriedly on the beginning of my day today, even though it be a trivial thing. I was absorbed in my work in the Sultan's Palatial grounds, sitting aside from the innumerable other scribes who were busy with who knows what, when one of the fools approached me. He failed to notice my busied transliteration of a earlier text to modern tongues, and thrusts a thick, yellowing tome of curious design before my eyes.

"I need help Aram! This book has shown me why my neighbor acts so strangely!" he exclaimed. His name eluded me.

I batted an eye briefly upwards, noting with disdain the tome he carried to be some drivel on the Undead and, specifically, the signs and

habits of the man-eating Ghul of the deep desert. Clearly the fool had been out in the sun for too long.

I stroked my modest beard thoughtfully as I decided what I would have for lunch.

“What is your name, sirrah?” I asked him.

He began to answer but I shushed him with a wave.

“It is no matter. What matters here is that you thought to come to me with this fantasy, while I am clearly very busy with my work.” I gave him a withering stare.

“I am sorry Agha-Azif, I was just so—”

“Ah. Not to worry. I will study the matter fully and advise a course of action. You just leave it to me.” The fool ate it up.

“Thank you Agha-Azif! Thank you! I fear for my life almost every day!”

“Yes, very well, now please leave me to my work.”

Look into it indeed. The only thing I would be looking into soon was a good kabob, and I sealed the matter by leaving that book on a stool in my quarters. Superstitious nonsense serves only to distract the mind from more awesome matters of knowledge.

I left the grounds later that day, my transliterations almost complete for the Vizier’s objectives, to pursue one of Irem’s many famous kabob houses. The smell was intoxicating.

Yet something caught my eye that night in the market, something strange and pallid aside from the grainy dust that covered the city, the streets, and my scholarly white robes. A strange figure, slim and feminine, walked through the throngs in the sectors where I made my culinary rounds.

She would wait for times at certain pillars, pale and still among the many pillars of Irem. I resolved to follow her, and, for a time, the thought of the kabob vanished. I know not what I thought as I traced her steps to the seedier sections of the sprawling city. I was never married to another, as such things are forbidden to men of the scrolls, but neither was I of the rank of eunuch. The woman enchanted me, and with some eerie movement of her silks and flesh I was held in awe and curiosity.

She disappeared abruptly, slipping quietly into a small structure of irredeemable disrepair. I followed her silently, looking about in the gathering dusk as I gently eased the door open. It was curious, to follow a woman to such a place. It is not my business, yet I could not help myself. The innards of the place were of old design, like some closed down inn or tavern. The woman had gone down to the cellar it seemed, and I was unsure if I should follow. A strange smell infused the air. A smell of rot and decay. Obviously, this was an unclean place of mold.

She could be a woman of the night, yet I had a feeling that that was an incorrect assumption. I resolved to wait for her return and quietly, knowing how to move silently from a dozen years in the silent libraries of his Majesty, set myself down behind a rather large jug of liquor or some other type of beverage. The smell was more sweet near it, and what little light coming in from the holes in the ceiling illuminated the room far from my spot, I set myself down to wait.

I remember a spell of silence then, as several pairs of feet trod out from the cellar, and I found myself witness to something bizarre and strange. They all wore cloaks of dark thread, and had apparently brought up from the cellar an altar of stone. On the altar lay that woman of pale beauty, naked and shivering in the cold of night, black tresses flowing down from the stone.

Words were exchanged, and my curiosity and dread grew as I witnessed a passing and mutual drinking of a vessel of clay which contained a dark liquid. My fears conjured an ironic memory of that fool scribes fears on the subject of the supernatural Ghul, and I almost cried out in terror.

Yet I am made of sterner stuff, and I watched with a writer's eye as they all bowed deeply to the woman. I was unsure if this was anything more than a rich woman's fantasy or a small pleasure cult of one of those northern deities.

My thoughts were broken as the woman began convulsing, yet I know not if it was in ecstasy or pain or fear. One of the four or so figures raised up a knife of gold then, carved with a line of text I could not make out. He brought the knife down as they all, except the woman, whispered a quick phrase. I heard a sound like a quick slicing, and he stepped back to allow me, the watcher unseen, to see. With the fading sun's rays

catching the last areas of the house, a river of crimson flowed forth from the sighing female's form. The man had cut her arm, and she bled as the other figures bowed deeply whilst eagerly moving back and forth on the floor. I heard the sounds of slurping and licking, and the images of the Ghul in that fool scribe's book came back to haunt me.

I was stunned. Numb in mind and body, I could barely process the scene before me. I believe I passed out in horror.

I awoke with a start, noting it to be deep night. All was silent. I peered around the jug with dread, and noted a form laid in the stiffness of death on the altar. I approached it after noticing that the room was for the most part empty once more. The body was pale and empty of fluid. I dared not touch it. Yet, the knife lay on top of her breasts, almost alluringly, and I deigned to reach out for it. I picked it gingerly off of her chest, hefting it and noticing the writing on the blade. I could not make it out very well, and so I looked about for some brighter light from Sin (Translator's note: Sin was the pre-Islamic God of the Moon).

I brought it up to the light shining down from the hole in the ceiling, and I wondered now what I was thinking, to follow that woman, to be here. Perhaps life had gotten too dull. Too ordered and boring.

I studied the carving, deciding to steal the knife for further study after a quiet escape. Yet as I shifted my grip on the pommel, a sharp barb built into its design pricked me deeply. I gasped with pain and surprise, dropping the knife with a thud to the planked floor. The silence had been shattered. I stood still, hoping not to have aroused the cloaked figures who were surely asleep below.

I could probably talk my way out of any theft by calling the guard on the corpse before me, whom I could claim to have spied from the street. Yet the sound I was expecting came not from the stairs nearby but from the pallid corpse on the altar. A rustling, raspy sound echoed forth from her dead throat, culling the rest of my courage. The dread word of "Ghul" and the scared fool scribe's face drowned any thoughts of ordered sanity.

I ran then, fleeing into the night through a window, as I found the door to be locked rather well. I noted with panting breath that it was not as late as I had earlier surmised. After a time I found myself amongst the nocturnal market stalls that Irem is known for, the unsleeping merchants

hawking their wares in low voices to the drifters and shaded figures that traversed the streets. I calmed myself as I realized that I was once more surrounded by normal folk. I decided to purchase a kabob at one of the many stalls before hurrying to the palace. Surely the Vizier, if not the Sultan himself, would wish to hear of the terrible things I witnessed.

The kabob was rather juicy, laid out lengthwise on a dowel of wood for my enjoyment. Pepper and pork glistened in repeating rows, glazed in a watery sauce of butter and juice. Yet my first bite of meat would not go down, and I began to choke rather violently. I supposed the food to be tainted in some way, and made a formal complaint to the merchant I had bought it from. Rather troubled, I continued along my way back to the palace.

Yet along the way a thirst struck me unlike any I had ever felt before, and as I looked about for a water vendor I began to hear a rhythm. It was a curious, all pervading, sound. As I put my ear to the ground I could still hear it with the same intensity. As a pair of cowed men walked past me the sound grew in intensity, and it dawned on me that I heard now the beating of the many hearts of the city, alive and fresh and pure. So full of life.

My mind was foggy and estranged from its normal feeling. I recalled once more that poor scribe's face, and the words he spoke I heard once again. The kabob did not work to sate my hunger, would water slake my thirst?

I was a man of logic and pattern, yet I was learned enough to know when a man needs a physician. I started off in the direction of the palace at a run; surely the healing arts were what I required.

I never got even halfway, doubling over in a sudden stab of pain in my belly. The heartbeats grew louder and louder and the thirst grew greater and greater. Logic! Reason! Order! These were the watchwords of the scribe. Attention to details. The barb. The knife. The blood. Oh, the blood!

I understood my dread condition, yet my pacifistic nature overruled the realization of what I may have to do. Why me, why does misfortune befall the Vizier's scribe!

The body was found the next day by a guard in an alleyway near the kabob house. My thirst was put to rest. Like those figures in the

house, I used a weapon for the deed, falling away from the tradition of the flesh eating Ghul's. I could not bring myself to actually bite the flesh of the man I had killed. The knife entered his neck too easily to be real. He must have been an illusion in this horrid nightmare of phantasms. I must still be asleep in my study, yet I am not waking up.

And now I face the thought of how long will I live with this new addition to my life's account. I must do more research. I fear discovery; my new goal is akin to a secret and taboo hobby. Shall I go to those figures in the house? Shall I turn myself over to the executioner's block? Shall I wither and die of thirst among the wet ink of a thousand blackened and bloody tomes?!

Perhaps not. But why did I follow that doomed woman, that dread agent of what was to come? Why did I have to inspect the weapon? Why must the scribe's curiosity overtake his conscious fear? I do not know.

All the world is shadows, and in the black I am alone. The words on the page grow blurry, and I thirst once more for an ambrosia that is dreadful to think on, but needed forevermore. It is needed like water for the dying man, and soon desired like the sweet kiss of a merciful death.

I fear not the unknown future now nor the eternal march of the ages. I am at one with my fate and it is with laughter that I say come, darkness triumphant!