

Wall of Tet

“You and your *ridiculous* ideas,” Alice’s voice lilted as the carriage rumbled across the rough, unpaved roads. Magnavius ignored her and instead concentrated on the other sounds: the way the carriage groaned and creaked around them as it struggled to absorb the impacts of the road.

The carriage rocked and all three passengers were forced to lean in the opposite direction so as to stay upright on their seats. This forced Chisholm to glance up from the book he was reading and he glanced between his travelling companions with a wry smile.

“The ruin forms part of a larger structure in honour of Asmeph,” said Alice. She didn’t add *hmmph* to the end of her sentence because it was—indisputably—inferred. Asmeph was a fertility goddess worshipped long ago in the Nacreev.

For years, the Nacreev had been closed off to foreign visitors, but thanks to a gradual thawing in tensions between the location and its surrounding nation-states (all of which were in thrall to the Great and Glorious Empire of Her Royal Highness) these restrictions had begun to lessen. In response, universities from Caladon had started sending students in battered carriages across unpaved roads in order to study archaeological sites in the area.

In only three years there had been several major discoveries. A stone monkey (no monkeys lived in the Nacreev now), dozens of rusted metal mechanisms (utility unknown) and at least one shrine in honour of Asmeph.

The first photographs of the fertility goddess had caused quite a stir when they had appeared in the newspapers; for even in blurry half-shadow on grey paper, the image of the hitherto-unseen Goddess was certainly provoking: her broad shoulders, enormous breasts and erect nipples spoke of a fierce, independent sexuality.

Although neither Magnavius or Chisholm could not wholly understand why the statue had become a sort of feminist icon back in Caladon, such that Her Majesty’s government was already in talks to “procure” the statue for the state museum. Of course, several politicians from the Nacreev would be handsomely compensated.

Alice was writing her thesis on Asmeph, which was why she was determined that the ruins they were heading to investigate were dedicated to the goddess. Should her wishful thinking prove accurate, she would be almost guaranteed grant money in order to continue her research.

The lads, however, were of a different mind.

Magnavius believed the newly-unearthed structure was, perhaps, a greater temple devoted to a plurality of deities. Chisholm, on the other hand, well... nobody ever really knew what Chisholm thought. He spoke little and his face was usually hidden by the cover of some obscure book.

In truth, none of them were certain what to expect from the ruins. Only a few muddy photographs had made it out from the dig site and even the descriptions had been vague: the one thing they had in common was that they referred to the ancient structure as a wall: the Wall of Tet they called it, for Tet was the name of the village above the ruin.

Magnavius thought back to Professor Emlin's notes:

A brick wall buried beneath the ground, each brick inscribed with numerous letters of a runic alphabet that is yet to be identified.

The façade of the wall itself is said to be impressive, granting as it does a vision of a completed structure from another time, but your investigations are to focus not only on the wall and its construction, but also to seek out such signs of habitation, ritual devices, or other inscriptions within the vicinity.

Magnavius knew at least three additional sites had been excavated so far—all of them some distance from the wall. Any attempt to dig in the areas alongside the wall had yet removed only more engraved bricks; indicating that the Wall of Tet was a structure of considerable size.

At last, the carriage stopped and they were ushered out by men wearing rifles on their backs and ceremonial swords at their waists. A plump woman beamed at them as they exited the carriage.

“Yes, yes,” she said. “And here are the fine students from Caladon.”

Her accent betrayed her as being from Bessame. Magnavius repressed a snort at that, he had never been a fan of the place. Although Caladon and Bessame had been at peace for centuries, for some, that old enmity remained.

A short distance away a small crowd of locals were causing a disturbance. One of them was wailing and there was a sound of breaking crockery. Magnavius looked away as a uniformed man knocked an old woman to the ground and started striking her with the butt of his gun.

“What’s going on?” Alice asked, always in fear.

“Oh, don’t worry about that,” said the woman from Bessame. “Please, allow me to introduce myself. I am Professor DuCroix from the Bessame Institute of Relics and Mystery,” she extended her hand to Alice who shook it enthusiastically.

Chisholm smiled at the woman, keeping place in the book he was reading with his thumb.

“This way, this way,” said DuCroix. “I assume you will want to see it, of course.”

“That is, after all, what we travelled all this way for,” said Magnavius. There was no humour in his voice.

“Leave your bags,” DuCroix told them. “This is to be the site of our new office,” she went on. “Foreign relations you see, to help the people.”

They deposited their bags by a pile of others and then, hemmed in on all sides by armed guards, DuCroix lead them towards a huge rectangular pit that had been cut into the earth. Somewhere down there, below an overhanging lip of dark soil, was the Wall of Tet.

Suddenly one of the locals broke through the guards and rushed towards them. “Ptjar!” the old man yelled. “Ptjar! Ptjar!” he seemed to be looking directly at Magnavius. *Through* him.

The armed men dragged the man away across the dirt. Order was restored and DuCroix directed them down a sturdy wooden staircase that descended down into the base of the pit.

“There are new tunnels,” said DuCroix when they reached the bottom. “We are still expanding outwards, but the going is slow.”

“How are you digging?” Magnavius asked. “Are you using explosives?”

DuCroix looked at him as though he was mad. “Explosives? No! Of course not. Some of the locals—the ones who are not superstitious, at least—are helping. We are excavating the tunnels by hand, mostly. The site is much too precious to risk blowing it up with dynamite, Mister...”

“Magnavius,” he said sternly.

“Mister Magnavius,” Alice whispered and Chisholm chuckled.

“Well, *Mister Magnavius*, step right this way,” said Professor DuCroix.

A depression in one side of the pit lead down a short distance. The densely-packed dirt was supported with beams and cross-beams, some of which were noticeably bowing under the weight. Once again Magnavius thought of the physics of the carriage that had brought them here as it had bumped and rattled over roads not built for carriages.

And then even Magnavius was forced to forget everything else, as DuCroix hit a switch and a cord of electric bulbs flooded the area with light. This was DuCroix’s favourite part. All three students were blinded so that it took several moments for them to adjust to what they were seeing.

What they were seeing, of course, was the Wall of Tet.

“My God,” as usual, Alice was the first to speak. Crowded by dirt on all sides was an exposed section of old yellow bricks. The runic inscriptions on each brick appeared to have been painted in gold. The inscriptions *glowed* under the electric lights, such that the symbols almost appeared to float in the air. “It’s so beautiful,” said Alice. “It’s...”

She narrowed her eyes as she concentrated on the symbols. “Chisholm?” she asked. “Is that... Taurean?”

“Yes,” said Chisholm, finally placing his paperback book in his coat pocket and taking out a pad and pencil from another, with which he begin transcribing. “It certainly appears to be!”

DuCroix beamed. “Why, when Caladon said they were sending three of their finest students I’ll confess I had my doubts, but you’ve already laid those to rest. That sigil is,

indeed, Taurean,” she said, pointing at one of the characters. “But there are also letters here of Urgic, Thuristianian and Mneunomic writing systems.”

“So... you’re saying whatever is written on the wall is written in *multiple* languages?” Magnavius asked.

“We’ve identified six or seven so far,” said DuCroix. “And we have theories about at least fifteen others.”

“So... what does it say?” said Magnavius, unable to hide his impatience.

DuCroix laughed uncertainly. “That... will take a little longer to ascertain,” she said. “It seems that each sentence—each *word*—cycles through a number of languages as it goes.”

“But that’s ridiculous,” said Magnavius.

“It certainly makes it harder to decipher,” said Alice, frowning. “Many of those alphabets use entirely different methods of composition. There would be no consistency of meaning at all; it would simply be gibberish.”

“Indeed,” said DaCroix, her hands resting at her waist. “Which leads us to believe that despite the apparent similarities with known languages, the writing on the wall is actually something else altogether. A sort of composite. We call it One-Tongue.”

Chisholm, meanwhile, stepped closer to the bricks. Each brick was larger than both of his spread palms. They were set in a perfect alignment. He could see no cracks upon the bricks, nor gaps between them. The mortar was smooth and flush with the heavy stones—there were no gaps.

“This brickwork is... *incredible*,” said Chisholm, pausing for a moment to find the right word. In the end, *incredible* had to suffice.

“Yes,” said DuCroix. “If it were not for the detailed inscriptions, we would have assumed that it formed part of a fortification of some sort. An outer wall around a fortress or a food store, perhaps.”

All three students, and Professor DuCroix, stood and looked at the wall for a while longer without speaking. The largest exposed area of bricks was about as tall as Magnavius over a metre wide. To each side smaller excavations had begun, confirming that the wall continued in both directions.

Looking at the gleaming bricks that had been exposed was like looking through a portal into the past, such that even Magnavius was momentarily taken aback by the sensation.

“That’s enough,” said DuCroix suddenly and pulled on the cord that disabled the lights. The Wall of Tet vanished into the darkness but the symbols writ upon the bricks seemed to linger for a moment in their vision: strange warnings that threatened to break through, held at bay only by the barriers of language.

Ptjar, the old man had yelled. *Ptjar*.

Before they knew it, DuCroix had hustled them out of the excavation site and back up the wooden staircase that lead to the surface. Most of the locals had been moved further back, armed guards still stood at several locations around the site. Others, better behaved, worked with wheelbarrows and shovels, clearing the way for the building that was to be built alongside the pit. There were several large machines—earth-movers, a cement-mixer among them, all dormant.

A small man stepped forward and DuCroix introduced him to the others as Emilio. “He will show you to your accommodation,” she told them.

They collected their luggage and followed Emilio. The locals barely looked up as they passed. On every street corner stood an armed guard in faded green. Two blocks away they reached a dirty stone building stained by age and neglect. Chisholm groaned as he lowered one of his bags to the dirt; no doubt it was packed full of books.

“It might be nicer on the inside?” said Alice. Emilio grinned.

It was not nicer on the inside. Blue paint was peeling from the walls. The blankets were rough. Two of the beds were in the same room and the third (which Alice claimed) was in another room down the hall. There were square-shaped spaces on the wall where the paint was not peeling, revealing places where pictures been removed. Magnavius wondered what the pictures had been of. There was only one bathroom, at the end of the hall and the water from the taps was the colour of rust.

“Are you hungry?” Emilio asked them. “Of course, of course,” he said when they nodded and went off to find them something to eat. The travellers remained in the men’s bedroom while they waited, Alice and Chisholm on one bed and Magnavius sitting across from them.

“Well?” Chisholm asked Magnavius. “What do you think?”

Magnavius only snorted.

“What do you think the pictures were of?” asked Alice, noticing for the first time the bright squares of blue paint on the walls.

“Do you really buy into this One-Tongue nonsense?” Magnavius asked Chisholm. Chisholm shrugged.

Emilio returned a short time later carrying several packages. The first of was a loaf of dense brown bread with nuts baked into the crust. There was also a thick wedge of cheese wrapped in waxy paper and three citrus fruits.

“Every day we get a hot lunch at the site,” said Emilio apologetically. “I hope this will do until then.”

“And that?” asked Chisholm, raising an eyebrow at the bottle tucked beneath Emilio’s arm.

“Oh, of course,” Emilio grinned. “The local drink. They call it *ya*. It is... don’t drink it all at once.”

“Will you have a drink with us, Emilio?” asked Alice, opening a series of old cupboards in the corner of the room in the hope of finding something for them to drink from. She succeeded, in the form of old, chipped teacups.

“I shouldn’t, I mean, I guess... just one wouldn’t hurt.”

Chisholm unstopped the bottle and poured some of the cloudy spirit into the cups. They raised a toast and drank. Alice, Emilio and Chisholm spluttered as they forced the drink down. Magnavius winced and then poured himself another.

They sat and chatted for a while with Emilio about their lives outside of the Nacreev, but quickly felt exhausted from their journey and decided it was time to rest. Magnavius walked Emilio to the front door of the building and onto the street outside.

“What is this place?” Magnavius asked him.

Emilio shrugged. “Empty building, running water.”

“So... we are the only ones staying here?”

“I think, perhaps, there is another foreigner staying on the second floor?” Emilio shrugged and Magnavius glanced upwards just in time to see a light flicker off in one of the upstairs windows.

“One other thing,” said Magnavius as Emilio turned to leave. “In the local tongue: do you know what *Ptjar* means?”

Emilio squinted and swayed on his feet. He had only had one teacup full of the the *ya*, but the spirit was very, very strong indeed. “I um... *Ptjar*?” he said, eyebrows twitching. “Look, it means. Look. Or, *watch* or... something like... *look here!* The locals yell it at market when they are trying to sell you things. I recommend not going to the market. There is nothing at all worth buying,” Emilio grinned again and Magnavius snorted, because the answer wasn’t any help at all.

When he returned to the room Chisholm was already sound asleep and Alice had retired to her own room. Magnavius was pleased with this. He undressed and climbed beneath the rough blanket. The room was not cold exactly, but there was a sort of coldness to it. And there was a sort of coldness to Magnavius as he lay there, awake and wondering how exactly he was going to break the Wall of Tet.