

# **SANDS OF AGES PAST**

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COLLECTIVE STUDIO PACK 10**



"King Amon the terrible reigned over the deserts of Al'Jabal for centuries. With his followers, he built the great labyrinth of Dhimat, a place where the last golden dragon is said to hide. His fury turned the mountains into sand, the sphinxes of the Styx arose from his tears, the griffins were creations of his own voice, and it is said that the very phenomenon of death began when his own blood was spilled on the earth."

All the winds carry sands on which he once walked, and all the birds are his eyes.

Ah, so you know the passage? - asked the woman, balancing herself on top of the camel, while protecting her head with a handkerchief.

I do. Every man knows the legend of Amon, dear. - Answered the guide, stifling a chuckle in his voice. - Is this why you come to Ta'greb?

Of course! There are few stories that would take me out of the comfort of my home to come here in the middle of nowhere.

He simply shrugged.

She'll win your heart, darling, I'm sure. Sure, the sand is not at all convenient, but the city...

I've heard. I hope it's everything they say.

Ayne, they don't call it The Jewel of the Desert for nothing.

And days later, she saw with her own eyes the town the people of Ta'greb called home. High on a cliff, the great fortress citadel of Ta'greb stood amidst the sands and mountains, as if watching over the desert.

Walking through the city streets, she was almost lost in the cacophony of voices, merchants trying to overcome one another, enticing passersby to buy their wares. Dates, nuts, grains, fruits she had never seen before even in her own hometown. The raknid language confused her at times, but there were enough foreigners there that many also spoke the common language of the peoples.

But after weeks and weeks of researching dozens of libraries and bazaars, ancient bookstores and secret scrolls of the sultanate, she came up with no useful information - no more than one would find in an encyclopedia. Valuable, sure, but nothing that could assert that for sure this was where Amon had reigned for centuries millennia before.

During an unassuming stroll through the great bazaar, she saw a scene that caught her attention - from the sands accumulating in a corner of the street, a bandaged corpse rose, walking heavily through the alleys. At first, in the middle of the night, no one paid any attention to the approaching ragged man, but when he leaned over the counter of one of the merchants, it caused a stir.

You thrash, what do you think you are doing?

The merchant, wearing colorful silk clothes, hurriedly tried to rescue some of his wares from falling to the floor, and only then managed to look at the man who stumbled there. Two skeletal hands grabbed his collar, which pulled him over the counter to face him.

His bandaged eyes, the rotten nose showing two cracks in his skull, and a row of yellowed teeth stood a palm's width from his face, drawing a desperate scream from the man. But as soon as he opened his mouth, dozens of locusts spewed from the mummy's body, quickly covering the poor merchant.

Stunned, she ran to the small store, and drew her dagger, trying to disentangle the mummy that was prostrate between the counter, with a well-placed blow between chin and throat, although she didn't quite feel the resistance, she thought a body should have. The body struggled, throwing its arms over her, who hurriedly retreated backwards, running over a passing woman, knocking them both to the ground.

The creature opened its mouth again, trying to regurgitate again, but she hurriedly reached for a vial of potion she carried around her waist, and desperately threw it at the mummy.

As it hit against the putrid body the vial burst into flames, engulfing it completely, and all that could be heard was a long whimper coming out of the creature.

Living fire? How barbaric - cried the merchant, still frightened by the situation, soaking wet after having tried to drown the locusts with a jug of water.

She got up from the ground, helping the girl who fell with her.

I don't see you thanking me for saving your life.





Lah, lah, forgive me. Sit down, come have some tea, and let me thank you properly.

The merchant pulled her into the store and asked one of his employees to serve her tea and almonds. She quickly learned everything about the man's life, down to the smallest detail, since the man was talking her ear off.

Then she blurted out that she had been in town for a few weeks but had had no success at all. Everyone seemed to have dozens of legends on the tip of their tongue for such an ancient city, but nothing that could be successfully correlated back to Amon millennia ago.

My dear, then I have something interesting for you.

Taking her hand and leading further into the store, they came to a dining room where rugs were spread over every inch of the floor, small tables with little bowls containing dates, peanuts, toasted sunflower seeds were scattered all over the corner.

Drawing her attention to one tapestry, hanging on the wall, showed a map of the desert woven into the wool. There, where Ta'greb should have been, a giant tower grew over the sands.

So, the tower was destroyed?

No, dear. The tower is underground.

Dozens of meters below the sewers of Ta'greb ran an endless maze of stone and sand that could confuse even the rats that lived there.

A body lying in the middle of the corridors was a common sight. Men or women, dressed in ordinary explorer's attire, with suitcases, canteens, maps and books lying on the floor. She had counted eighteen by the time she reached a huge room that had several signs of long-deleted campsites. On the other side was an ajar door with sand spilling out of it.

Her curiosity had already been satisfied - that maze had various forms of traps. Pressure plates, pull ropes, deep holes with thorns. Her experience said that she would surely get out of all those traps, but she knew that if so, many had not died there, only the gods would know what would have happened to her. Taking a deep breath, she opened the door to find a room filled to the brim with sand, she could see dying faces almost mummified due to the temperature of the place struggling to breathe without success. Climbing up the sand and almost squeezed against the ceiling, she crawled quickly to what seemed to be the other side, where she could somehow find a framed doorway emerging from the sands.

With the help of her torch, she went about trying to dig her way through the sand until she managed to get through the doorway, where she quickly rolled down along with the cascade of sand.

There, in a small anteroom, two unlit braziers adorned a blackened wooden door that was three times its height. A man was drawn on the



door, holding a scepter as long as himself, a great scimitar blade at its tip - in his other hand, lifting it high, a book glowing above his head, illuminating all the men who prostrated themselves before him.

As she reached for the huge gold one in the door, a skewer quickly pierced her hand, causing her blood to run down the cold metal, drawing a howl of pain from her, bitterly regretting that decision. But the door slowly opened, with a characteristic creaking, a view opened into a huge room lined with stone chairs, where skeletons were lying on the arms of the chairs. In the background, a stone statue sat on a throne, three times her size, and the sculpture was masterfully made as if it had been taken out of the rock that way. She could see specific muscles captured in stone, just as impressive as the gold ornament.

A gold crown rested on the statue's head, with a single gold leaf holding a ruby that was almost the size of her fist, framed by hand-detailed filigree.

"Power" and "destiny", were words that took hold of her. The idea that the crown would bring its wearer unimaginable power was clear. However, she knew of the dangers - rare jewels like that trapped in far-off dungeons were hardly good auspices.

Climbing up the throne, she came face to face with Amon's sculpted eyes, which seemed empty even though his other features seemed to have been captured so life-like. Her hands ran over the shoulder of the rough stone as if trying to figure out what material the sculpture was made of. Soapstone? Marble certainly wasn't, and sandstone would hardly make such a detailed work.

Moving up her neck, her hand lightly touched the crown, curiously warm, but not hot enough to burn. Small gold plates outlined the outline of the head throughout. She could see her own reflection in the jewel with the help of her torch.

Curiously, a piece of dry skin hung from her chin, and she quickly tried to pull it off, praying that it was something from her imagination.

But it wasn't.

Her hand took the piece of skin with it, and it seemed as if her own face was opening, falling

away piece by piece until only her blood-colored skull was reflected in the jewel - she screamed, but her despair didn't seem to want to leave her throat

And then she fell, nestled in the arms of the unknown.





When she had come to her senses, she saw only bodies strewn about the bazaar she had been in only a few days before.

The bodies lying on the ground sucked in the miasma left by the destruction of their black fire like a drain, enveloping them and lifting them in the air like puppets. She knew the spell, though she didn't know how. But she was sure of what must be done, though part of her fought against it.

Black hair was enveloping the soldiers, giving bestial characteristics to their ordinary bodies. Claws, sharp teeth, a long snout, and huge, muscular arms.

All, with a ruby gleam in their eyes. As soon as they woke up, they quickly ran towards the people fleeing or the warriors who dared to get close to her, increasing the number of bodies her magic took down.

In a matter of minutes, she was in front of the sultan's palace, but made no mention of entering. From the top of the stairs, she could see almost all Ta'greb, the one that had been her home long ago, and this gave her comfort. It was not the same one he knew, but the sight of the sand dunes and mountains on the horizon was burned into his mind.

Moments later, the jackals dragged the sultan to his feet, and she could hear the whimpering of the other sacrifices.

You disgusting sorcerer! What do you want from me?

Nothing from you. - His voice carried a sepulchral tone that frightened her, but she no longer had a face to show blushing.

A ghostly hand wrapped around the man's neck, bringing his body to her. With her left hand, she ripped off the ruby the man carried around his neck and threw the body away. Looking around, the jackals were kneeling solemnly toward her, ignoring everything else.

The stone glowed brightly, covering the entire central square, before turning to dust in the Lich's hands.

Raising his head to the starry night sky of Ta'greb, a sepulchral laughter echoes through the city.

My loyal subjects, I, Amon I, walk upon the sands again!

Prepare yourselves! For a new era will begin!

