Curse of the Blue Nile

Edited by

C.A. Suleiman

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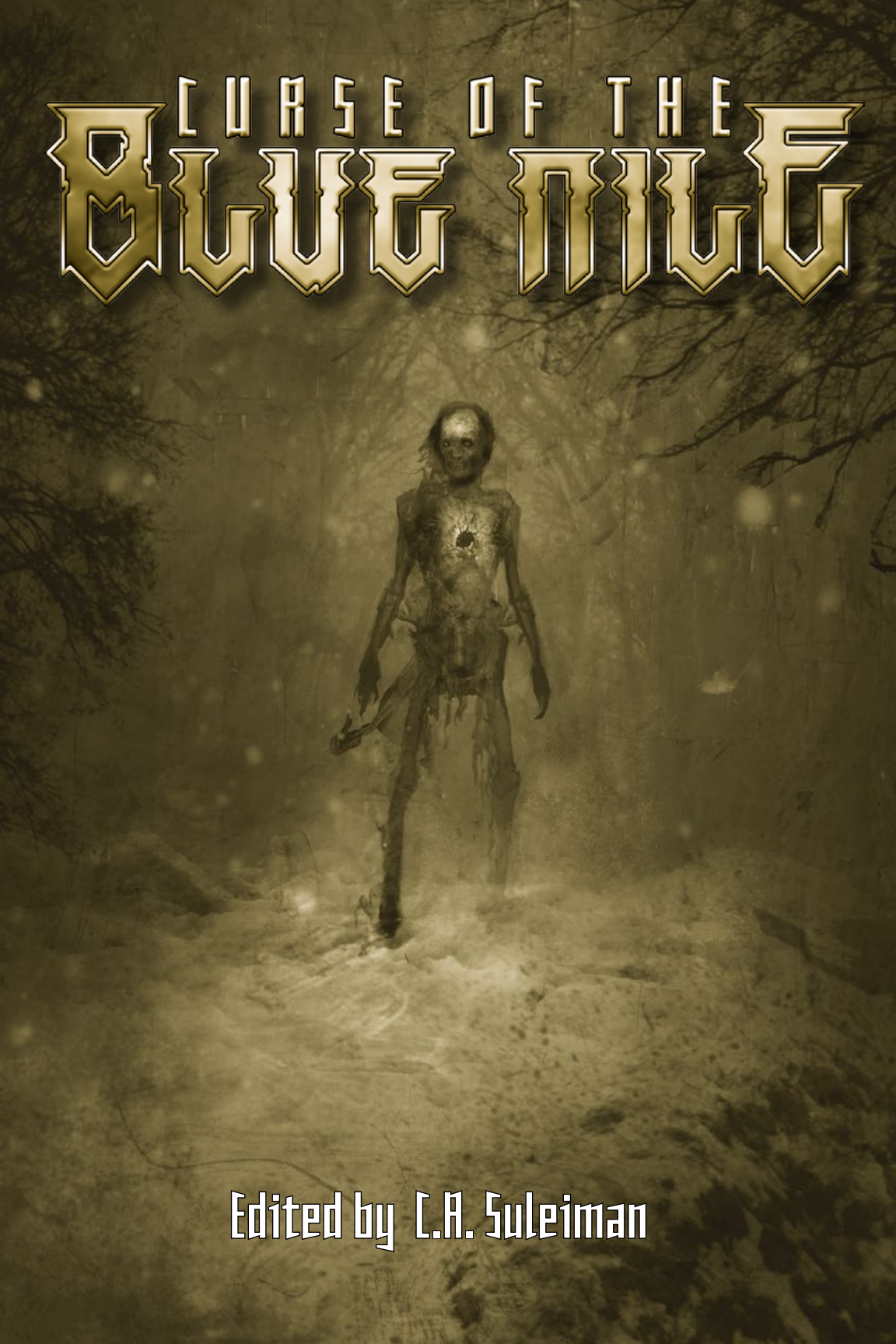

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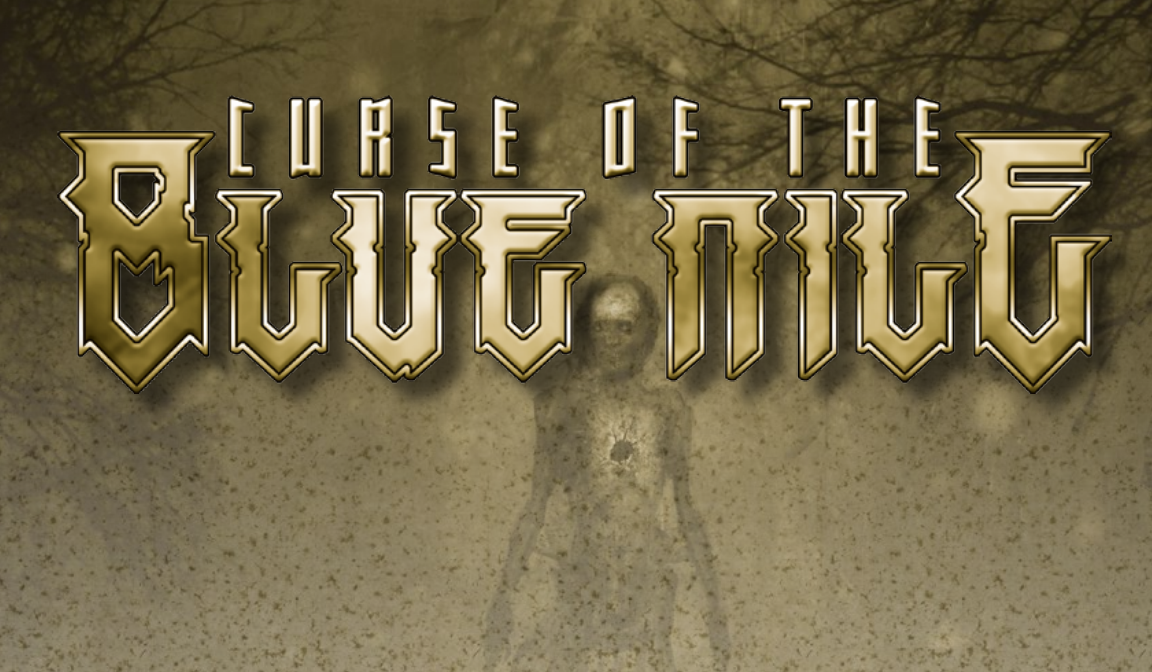

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I am a tree grown in the shade,
And today I stretched my branches
To tremble for a while in the daylight.

— Khalil Gibran

THE COLOR OF BLOOD

Malcolm Sheppard

They called him the Nicene instead of the Nazarene, to mark his return. He looked his part to excess, to make historians scowl, but he stayed away from them. He stuck to people who thought they knew exactly what Jesus looked like: him. Long hair, tan skin, and chestnut eyes clad a face with features made exceptional by a combination of bland, expected elements. He was a messiah who couldn't have been born, but only imagined. He was slender, tall but overpoweringly so, and could have been painted on a wall anywhere from North Africa to India without looking alien.

Resurrecting the dead gave his flock a final measure of conviction.

Getting the body was the hardest part. Europeans were as good at tracking their own corpses as they had been at reducing foreigners to that state a century ago (and they still knew a thing or two about killing their former subjects, if he could believe their chatter). He didn't want the old, who he said were destined for angelic forms in the kingdom of heaven, or the young, who he said had immediately vaulted to the side of his Father. He needed adults in their prime, physically intact. Many of these were suicides, who his flock were particularly interested in wrestling from damnation. Their theology helped, even when he defied it. It took some tortured reasoning to limit his miracles to the recently dead and straight of limb, but they accepted it. As a result of this filtration process, most of the recipients were women. Young men tended to die in messy, unsuitable ways.

In fact, his current body had once been female. Now it was simply a wall with a fresh, undetailed fresco.

The second hardest part was convincing the flock to operate through rumor and code. The Second Coming excited them. They wanted him to defeat the Antichrist (in the form of this or that politician), slay old dragons, or kill an unrighteous third

of the earth. In his sanctuary, he kept a heavily bookmarked Bible to keep up. In the end he used a free will argument to declare that if he revealed himself, nobody could freely choose his salvation. They'd be using evidence, not faith. It didn't make sense to the Nicene, but it worked.

So, in a Saint-Malo basement he shook the cuffs of an undyed wool robe (another difficult thing to acquire) and looked at the body of Maria DeWalt. He smiled, close-mouthed, with reserved compassion. He nodded slightly at his rich Breton patron; the man collapsed in ecstasy, so seized by the spirit that bespoke loafers tumbled off his feet.

"I returned to Earth at the place where you perfected your knowledge of Me," he said. "Through salvation, I will perfect you." The Nicene had indeed come from his namesake — a cult in the ruins — but also from a German tourist, who provided the raw material for his manifestation.

He took an ancient nail from his robe. The congregation knew it was a relic, but it was older than they guessed, though not as famous. He drove it through his wrist and placed that hand on Maria DeWalt's forehead. The substance that dripped from his wound was thick and blue. Rivulets entered her pupils. He had yet to explain why his blood was blue, and tried not to draw attention to it.

Maria DeWalt gasped and twitched. More of the flock fell in awe, joining the rich Breton. After three wheezing breaths she sat up. His blue blood was inside her now, leaving no drops — it slid in like a worm. Maria's mother and girlfriend rushed to embrace her.

They reached her, held her close, and the Nicene spoke. This was the third and most difficult part of the procedure. He said Maria's soul had spent some time in darkness, and would have trouble remembering her old life. (Last time, someone had asked if the darkness was Purgatory and he'd furrowed his brow noncommittally.) He reminded them of the need for secrecy, and that she must be kept hidden as well, until he called for her to fulfil her special purpose.

They crawled to him and wiped their eyes with the fringes of his robe. He suppressed a ragged slash of anger in his consciousness, and managed to let a vision of killing them all pass quietly. They were ugly, small and predictable, but he needed them. He was weaker than ever: a drop fallen from a mighty ocean, limited to these tricks instead of the great arts of his true life.

He smelled new rot in his breath. The fresco was cracking; he'd need a new one soon. The Nicene resolved to speak to Cesar, the rich Breton, about the Cypriot Wall. He'd probably beg for forgiveness, because he owned stolen antiquities. The Nicene would place a compassionate hand on his forehead, take that piece of the Wall as an offering, and move on. It would be best if the man didn't notice his saviour's growing pallor, or the acid stench that would accompany it. Cesar was really too powerful to murder, unless it was time to make a statement to the enemy. Maria DeWalt would soon slip from her family's care and keep an eye on

his Cesar, as his other slaves watched influential people from various branches of the flock. Once it was time to go to the New World, they'd remove these connections, and the faith would disintegrate. Nobody would believe the poor, half-mad remnants until he was whole again, and like their creed said, he would return in glory, to judge the quick and especially, the dead.

• • •

Merew-Tjaw knew they were going to kill her, but how often and how badly? *Deceived*. That's what the old scrolls called them. She let one of them into her inner circle to lay a trap, and assumed their guild was as rivalry-wracked as her own. They were Aziza, who betrayed her, and Khephermenes, their intended victim — Aziza's soldier, now. The Painter and the Dancer.

The Dancer brought a slave: some magically-distorted mortal, rebuilt for combat and sick with with imbalanced energy that laid wounds along acupuncture meridians. Covered in a slick of blood and pus, the mortal ran across rows of concert hall seating faster than ordinary men could cover level ground. He hit the stage, slid to her and thrust his right hand's fingertips into her throat. Merew-Tjaw's chin dropped as he retracted, because he'd ripped out rigid cartilage. There was no supporting structure to keep her from nodding. Light caught the blood as it turned to swirling dust. She was an old corpse, like all Arisen, but she was armored in gold, like a walking sarcophagus from the unplundered pharaohs. The thing that was once a man had been strong enough to penetrate metal joined to her by Deathless alchemy.

She caressed the man's face as his left fist dented her skull. She staggered back, but he didn't follow. His face was turning gold. Merew-Tjaw whispered the Utterance: *Let the divine flesh take form.*

It spread from his left cheek to his right. When it reached his brow he closed his eyes, then snapped them open again, revealing blank pearls, all white. He jumped ten feet back and tore at this involuntary metal mask. Screams turned to hisses through immobile lips.

He grabbed the edges of the spreading metal and pulled. The Dancer's servant was too strong; he tore his own face off. It hit the marble floor of the concert hall like a tin bucket, though the sound was a bit wetter. He could scream again, and did, but skull fragments adhered to the fallen mask. Blood streamed from the opening.

He collapsed with no particular grace, and fell silent.

There had been another mortal there, part of her scheme with Aziza, but when Merew-Tjaw glanced up (even now, she could feel her soul congeal into the repairs her flesh needed) there was just that Painter and Khephermenes, the Dancer.

She hit the panic button on her phone, reached into the long, secret pocket next to it, and drew the short blade she always carried. It was made of what mortal

alchemists called *pyropus*, when they attempted to duplicate Irem's Blood Bronze. The metal shifted to fit her hand better and tugged forward a bit, eager to cut.

"The knife's a little pedestrian, isn't it?" Aziza smiled as she talked, hopping into the orchestra pit. "No high Utterances?"

Four minute response time for the tactical team, Merew-Tjaw thought. She stood out of her fighting stance and lowered the knife. *Slow down, talk.* "I thought I'd give you a chance to explain yourself before we cut you to bits and let Duat shit you back whole."

Aziza climbed the pit stairs. "I don't think so. You've been out in the world for too long. You squandered your Sekhem and risked the displeasure of the Unspeakable Ones by consorting with me. Your inner fire's gone to ember and ash, because you wasted your time at my side."

It was true. Nearly a year ago, Aziza had revealed she was one of the Lost Guild: the Empire's holy artists, rarely seen and almost always inimical to the Arisen. The other guilds learned magic bound to matter and structure, but the Lost dealt in creative transformation, based on contemplating the true names of things. They attended Irem's Pharaoh, designing hymns, artwork, and dances to glorify that mortal, ceremonial head of state. Yet these empty rituals were born of true knowledge, reaching beyond the material arts of other guilds.

She was looking for answers to forgotten questions.

When Aziza said she was one of them, Merew-Tjaw's face had tensed with contempt, but she didn't know why — another memory gap, as part of Deathless nature as the Sekhem that animated her. But the Painter said it was possible to surpass these limits, to climb the Ladder of Set. It was heresy, but Merew-Tjaw feared the winnowing flame of Sekhem and the ever-dying memory that made Duat's tortures easier to recall than her childhood.

Aziza offered knowledge of the Ladder of Set that conquered these curses, in return for resources and the plan to trap the other one, the Dancer Khephermenes — the supposed "enemy" who now leaped across the pit to join her. Merew-Tjaw gave the Painter shelter and cult power in exchange for secrets Scribes refused to write, and Masons struck from carved walls. Through this planning her Sekhem burned, particularly after she agreed to the pact — the Judge's rage felt like a lion ripping out her intestines. Now she was weak, and knew Aziza had timed her betrayal for this moment. *And where was the tactical team?*

The Dancer advanced. He shuffled forward, quick as his mortal protégé. She wasn't so skilled, and missed a slash at his advancing arm. His fist cracked golden skin and broke dead bones in her right arm. The knife fell from her hand. He ducked under, wrenched that arm and stepped behind her back. She turned around, but he added to her momentum, hurling her twenty feet. A concrete pillar cracked on impact.

"You're weak," Aziza said, "not him. We just dug him up, didn't we?" She drew a long brush from her coat — she always had it with her.

Khephermenes reached her in the blink of an eye, so Merew-Tjaw never saw him pick up her fallen knife. She heard the sound of metal puncturing metal. Fiery pain: He buried it in her forehead. He grabbed the handle with both hands and started to pull down. Merew-Tjaw grabbed his wrists to resist, channelling the heart's anger to repair her right arm and strengthen her left.

His strength won him half an inch; blood and dust showered her face. Through it, she saw Aziza kneel and paint a black, jagged line on the floor, though no paint appeared on the brush.

The Painter glanced up. "Your bodyguards aren't coming, by the way." And to Khephermenes: "End it." The Dancer cut Merew-Tjaw's face in two.

I can survive this. Merew-Tjaw's field of vision split with the sides of her face. Her eyes lolled in opposite directions. *My flesh is the sahu, solid spirit, not mortal. My mind resides in my heart. Sekhem circulates; blood is a memory.* But she'd been wounded by a relic; its magic defeated her healing efforts.

If I can crawl away. It was hard to see, with blood and corpse rot (she must have blue, leathery skin now, she thought) in her eyes and mortal instinct screaming in her head, unable to process what should be a fatal wound. Should couldn't stand.

Khephermenes saw Merew-Tjaw plant a foot and claw at the air. She was trying to rise. It took no effort to kick her leg straight and send her sprawling back. Her cloven face was a blackened obscenity. Her bone-thin arms were more tarnish than gold.

"Time to go," said Aziza. Khephermenes stomped on the mutilated thing twice, snapping each femur, and followed the Painter out, passing the black line the she'd put on the floor. It turned into a real crack in the marble, and others burst from it in jagged black rivulets. The building started to shake. As they reached the glass-walled lobby, panels popped out and shattered.

Aziza broke into a run for appearance's sake, and the Dancer followed. He looked like a slender Chinese man, and she looked just like Merew-Tjaw: slender and sharp-faced, with a white teardrop of a scar under her left eye. The tactical team waited in three black SUVs. Aziza had worn Merew-Tjaw's face before, when she told the guards to ignore the panic button and wait for an alternate code.

Wheels screeched; the building shuddered behind them. Glass balconies cracked; their shards lashed the fallen, true Merew-Tjaw. Metal groaned and concrete bellowed. She couldn't look up to see tons of ceiling follow the glass, but as she heard, she knew the last of her Sekhem was due to depart. *A quick dying*, she thought, *but a long death.*

• • •

He called them the Order of the Blackened Host. The enemy used pretentious names because they imparted a sense of ominous duty. Mekaw kept it up, but he didn't have much patience for the rest of it. He ruled without theatrics or formal liturgies.

"Did you awaken the Male Offering?"

"Yes. It killed Clevon." The woman looked like she was only playing at fear. Trauma blunted affect. Like most of the Order's inner circle her long, dull stare made a stronger impression than yells and cringing. They'd seen too much, and knew they'd eventually be sacrificed.

"Has anyone been seized by the Spirit?"

"Johnny, Master. My nephew. He was always a little strange, growing up here."

"Bring him."

He heard hollering around the compound as they searched for him. He knew the boy, a frightened, frail type who'd never try to escape through the Nevada desert. Sure enough, they found him in an old tin-roofed shed, and dragged him back to the bunker.

Once the yelling stopped, Mekaw heard a low, rhythmic noise. The Male Offering banged on the walls, trying to escape.

They strapped Johnny to the skeleton of an old dentist's chair. Mekaw went to the basement, and locked the first of three steel doors behind him. The drumming got louder after the first door. He locked the second and walked down a corridor. Dust danced in time to his prisoner's punches and kicks.

The third opened to an old panic room made of thick concrete. Under the advice of his predecessors, the original cult had built it to withstand the apocalypse. Naked and caked in dirt, the Male Offering sat in the middle, holding the mess he'd made of Clevon. The Offering's collar held, but bolts on the wall looked a bit loose. The chain had enough slack to let the prisoner batter the walls (he always wasted his power this way), but left a few feet of clearance.

"That was your servant, you know?" Mekaw pointed at Clevon's corpse and grinned with long white teeth. He spoke Iremite. "Or should I say 'slave?' 'Attendant-lover?' So many words for service in the old language."

The Male Offering put the corpse to one side. He spoke Iremite as well. "Who am I? Who —"

"— brought you to this place? Why? Will I free you? You always ask these, like some — there's a new word for it — *automaton.* It's their word for a clever device with no free will." Mekaw imagined his shadow caressing his body, quickening it, because he knew exactly what would happen next. He stepped forward out of the safe zone, as usual.

The Male Offering scrambled at him, pulling the chain taut, as he reached with hands torn down to the to bone. Mekaw stepped back and opened his jaws a foot

wide. Crocodile teeth sprouted from them. It happened fast; he bit an outstretched arm before it retracted and took everything from mid-radius to fingertip.

The prisoner fell, clutching his blue, dry stump. Mekaw swallowed and laughed. Sekhem made him giddy. He tasted a citric sweetness in Arisen flesh. His mouth returned to a human shape, and he wiped a bit of drool from his chin.

"Your name is Wepakure. You inspected the mines, but you don't remember that either. I do. They brought you back and like many of you do, you started a religion. You feel so lost without your slaves — and this is where I come in."

The whip-scars on Mekaw's back itched.

"I took your cult and made it my own. It was easy. You were asleep, and I killed the ones you taught to bring you back. They have a fascinating religion here where they eat their god, but I suppose that isn't so foreign to us, really. I've changed your rituals slightly. Now whenever they resurrect you, *I feast*."

The thought of feeding again sent pinpricks of anticipatory pleasure from lips to throat. Mekaw nearly finished him then and there but this was the last time, special, and he wanted to savor it.

"Perhaps you'd feel better to know you weren't alone. There was a Female Offering locked up down the hall, but I used her up. She'll come back of course, but then she'll be too strong. It's better this way. Torturing two Arisen was too much effort, even if it was necessary to make you squander your power on recovering, and even if it was just.

"You've reached the same point, Wepakure. You know, that's the first time I've ever used your name! Your Sekhem is so weak that when I eat you, it'll be the Long Death. Then I'll kill everyone here, ending the thousand year tradition you started."

Mekaw put on the monster's mouth and feasted on the scraps of this mummy while upstairs, Johnny screamed a prophecy.

• • •

TORONTO CONCERT HALL COLLAPSES — CAUSE UNKNOWN. It floated across the middle of nine televisions. This one was turned to CNN Europe, and usually occupied the smallest part of Victor's attention. He raised a hand to freeze the feed, then swiped his fingers left. Semantic software superimposed a search link, and the gesture interface read that he wanted relevant news. It populated the center screen until he snapped his fingers, spreading it to all nine.

He adjusted his investments, instructed an algorithm to go it alone for the rest of the NYSE trading day, and wiped his desk display clean. Beneath the newly transparent sheet of glass, carved stone from Karnak showed him sand-scarred gods and warring kings.

Victor Alexiou wasn't the richest person in the world. He stuck to 95th place, between beverage and agribusiness magnates. It was a usefully boring position: third string in fossil fuels and renewables, with side portfolios in mining, electronics, and pharmaceuticals. Most of his investments were about access, not money. The Anointed One trusted him as much as she did anyone, so he stood at the apex of the Limitless Pillar, a society where wealthier men than Victor bowed deeply to him, made offerings, and begged for an audience with the ruling goddess.

Most of the Pillar didn't know the goddess had built a new stronghold in Toronto. She had temples everywhere, of course — one of Victor's trivial duties was to keep them clean and ready — but this was her primary home.

When forced to admit they existed, the Anointed One said the world's other immortals were spiritually fallen. Magic was a spiritual journey capable of projecting the soul into dangerous places, where the unprepared risked sanity and self-will. But Victor was an intelligent man with certain resources. He cross-referenced urban legends with social indicators and Fortean phenomena: Big Data tricks on a secret world he wanted to quantify and in time, dominate.

The glass on his desk glowed, obscuring processions in stone. He dragged an array of news articles across the screen. *CONCERT HALL DISASTER "INEXPLICABLE:" CITY* was obvious. *SUICIDE PACT CLAIMS FOUR* and *KILLERS BELONGED TO "DEATH CULT"* matched his social research. So did *CAT SPEAKS ANCIENT GREEK, SAYS OWNER* though of course, that was from a less reputable source. He trusted intuition backed by a Bayesian analysis of the topics. Other gods were in Toronto, and they'd been busy.

He was surrounded by intuitive software, so a VOIP connection to Toronto appeared unbidden. He watched the encryption load and tapped to connect.

Westin answered, smoothing his hair as he gave the camera a slight adjustment. He was a capable young man, and Victor was glad he'd been entrusted with new duties. *Everything for the deserving*, said Limitless Pillar doctrine. *Gods begin with small acts.* "Hail, Priest of the Ogdoad," said Westin. Our connection's as secure as we can make it." He smiled like a waiter. It annoyed Victor.

"Hail, Flame Keeper. I've called to check on her."

"Her?"

"The Anointed One. Forgive my informality. It's an urgent call."

Victor's desk chimed to tell him two deliveries had passed security. One came from the Limitless Pillar's usual service. The other was listed with Katrina Gold. He tapped an icon.

"She — I mean, the Anointed One, arrived at the mansion an hour ago. She contemplates the Mysteries, sir. I can't interrupt her."

A robot cart entered the office, carrying two sealed packages (as was necessary — he never let his staff in here) to his right side. He waved at the camera. "Wait Westin, perhaps these will answer my questions. Back in a moment."

He turned off his camera and opened the first package with a 14th century rondel dagger. It contained a gray plastic slab with a nonstandard port. He plugged it into his desk. As expected, it contained new security protocols.

Katrina Gold was the fictitious owner of the P.O. box, and a set of shipping instructions that took effect under certain circumstances. He tore through her name to open the box. It had a wooden frame, and another box inside. Victor wrestled with wood, cardboard, and packing material. At one point a robotic cleaner entered the room in response to bubble wrap strewn across the floor, but he waved it away.

The inner box contained a long clay jar. Recognizing it, he shoved it under his desk with a quick prayer for forgiveness.

He turned the camera back on. It was *her*.

Victor kissed a gold ring with a woman's face. He kneeled and said, "Anointed One, forgive me if I kept you waiting."

"You're one of my greatest servants, Victor. I can indulge your small errors." Her smile was unlike that of any mortal, as if she'd learned a new way to configure the muscles. It was beautiful and unsettling. "I've made some changes; I expect you to carry them out with typical competence."

"Yes, Anointed One."

"Ah, you've erred already. You didn't call about these policies, but for some other reason. You failed to tell me."

"Forgive me, Anointed One. I was awed by your sudden presence, and failed to properly order my thoughts. There was some sort of disaster in Toronto, and its strangeness suggested…unnatural forces."

"What?" She laughed. "Now you're wasting my time with excessive care. Young things aren't built things to last. Should you be surprised when they fall?"

"No, Anointed One." *But suicides and murders. Hallucinations. News keywords took particular shapes.*

"I appreciate your care nonetheless, so I charge you with this duty. I placed certain artifacts in your care. Ancient objects. I would see them brought to me, safely and secretly. I especially desire certain jars, painted with a secret mark I showed you when I revealed the Penultimate Mystery. You will attend these tasks personally. Clear your schedule."

"Thus I serve, Anointed One."

"You serve."

Victor inhaled slowly, gazing at the floor. A red flash closed the VOIP window.

He slid the urn out from under his desk. The symbol was there.

He exhaled. The Limitless Pillar was full of formality not only to set its hierarchy, but maintain security. She had dismissed him the wrong way. It was a small error. She might have been impatient.

And someone had mailed the jar to him, without her knowledge, even though "Katrina Gold" was supposed to never act without her leave.

He went to a mahogany table and selected the red briefcase. His software functioned; the choice signalled four bodyguards to join him in the armored limousine. They'd drive him to a fuelled, crewed plane. They were leaving for an ancient place.

• • •

Aziza surveyed the enormous hall, frowning at its various forgeries. Some were concessions to modern technology: torches with LED bulbs, furnishings made from the wrong wood, and the excessive smoothness and symmetry machines gave things. The Tef-Aahbi, makers of effigies, revealed the lathe — the "Sun-Turning Knife" — to journeymen after they learned to carve a circle by hand, for convenience should never dull the skill of a worker. Of course, they kept the ancient lathe so secret that once the Empire fell, the people of the Nile forgot its use for centuries. It was a pity, but now, in a world that never forgot its innovations, everything seemed to be built with a contempt for human hands. They were *assembled*, not *crafted*. Merew-Tjaw never appreciated the distinction, and had proudly told her how the walls were exact reproductions of her oldest temple, built from high-resolution photographs and 3D scans of every relief. So crude and for all its technical sophistication, inaccurate.

We painted the old walls. She remembered mortal life, squatting by a sputtering lamp, barely able to see the colors she applied to every figure and symbol. Merew-Tjaw had left the reproductions tan and lifeless. Of course, Aziza wore the Anointed One's face now, and ruled her cult. She could change anything she wished.

Khephermenes arranged a discreet bloodbath, eradicating cultists capable of uncovering the deception. This produced a number of openings in the Limitless Pillar's higher echelons, so Aziza sped through the dull theatre of its initiation rites. Fortunately, Merew-Tjaw had written it all down, and the assembled CEOs, elite engineers, and sundry worthies were too blinded by awe to notice when she stumbled over cult doggerel.

Over months of ingratiating herself with Merew-Tjaw, she'd learned the Limitless Pillar was a wealthy international conspiracy, but even the Alchemist's boasts fell short of the truth. Through various proxies she controlled about a fifth of the world's copper supply outside of China, much of it hoarded in various warehouses. Limitless Pillar members commanded enough wealth, soldiers, and cities to constitute a small nation, but the connections were tenuous in places,

relying on the Anointed One's regular intervention to get anything done. Like any tyrant, Merew-Tjaw didn't trust systems that worked well enough to function without her.

These gaps included connections to a few key people, like this Victor Alexiou, one of the Limitless Pillar's "high priests." Merew-Tjaw kept the sparsest notes about him, but he controlled much of the cult. Aziza hated the man on sight, from his insincere, ritual obsequiousness to the surgically mutilated face that so many of the modern rich seemed to have. He wouldn't fly to his own slaughter as easily as the others. She had Westin book Khephermenes a flight to Athens. He'd end up making Alexiou disappear in a week or so, after seeing if the priest would obey instructions.

Before sending the Dancer forth, she bade him to join her in an inspection of the Alchemist's physical assets, stored in a second basement under the mansion. The doors opened by voice and facial recognition; Aziza was relieved at the sound of clicking steel, indicating that her mask passed muster. Beyond the vault door, the hall looked like a prison corridor. Four thick doors stood on either side, and a ninth lay at the end.

These doors obeyed ordinary keys. She let the Dancer open them for her. One contained fifty gold kilobars stacked neatly in a cage, but the statue outside it would have been worth at least as much. It was solid gold with inlaid turquoise, pearl and jet to capture hair, irises and pupils. It was remarkably lifelike, because it used to be alive. This had been Fei, Merew-Tjaw's household chief of staff. She'd learned too much to continue in that role but the Alchemist respected her, and had her "ennobled" through an Utterance. Aziza had dismissed her successor with less ceremony, consigning him to the furnace under the east wing.

One room contained weapons, food, and an independent air supply. Another held various currencies. Doors opened on an armored sarcophagus, a room filled with Twelfth Dynasty furniture, and a metallurgy lab. Greed, curiosity, paranoia — it was a trip through Merew-Tjaw's materialized thoughts. Yet only two rooms concerned Aziza.

One contained three canopic jars. Only three. She'd send them to the furnace later.

The other, made of red stone, had been imported from Egypt; it had the property of concealing magical energies hidden within it. The Alchemist had kept a prisoner here — a mortal they used to lure Khephermenes — but Aziza suspected that the room was too potent an artifact for this simple use.

She nodded to the Dancer. He ran a two fingers along each wall — a simple gesture made beautiful by his inhuman grace. After trying each one, he dropped to the floor, placing a palm as if feeling for a heartbeat. "The stone's only half as thick here. I feel metal and wood underneath," he said. "Get me a lever."

Twenty minutes later, Westin produced a crowbar from the garage. They found a worn hole in the corner where someone had done this before. Reaching from the hall, the Dancer inserted the bar and pulled. Not only did the false floor turn, but it lifted up and out of the way, on a pneumatic track designed for the task.

The room continued on beneath. The floor was the same red stone, but with jagged marks from a chisel — someone had cut it in half, depth-wise, to use one layer as the false floor. This secret section contained a squat metal cabinet; Aziza detested its ugly functionality. She took the keys and unlocked it, while the Dancer banished Westin from the room with a wave and glare.

It contained exactly what she expected: two slabs of gray marble, three feet long and two and a half high. On one of them, two smooth edges intersected in a corner. The other one possessed a single straight edge, but fit almost perfectly into the first, as if a chisel had separated them yesterday. But together, they left ragged edges to the left and bottom.

They were parts of a bas relief. Like the temple walls Merew-Tjaw had garishly reproduced, it had once been painted, but for now the river it depicted was an empty, dark vein. It flowed into negative constellations: dark stars bored into the stone. (*Aaru*, primordial, black and burning night, where she would return, abjuring imprisonment in flesh and ash.)

Figures stood on each side — fourteen here, though she knew the complete relief contained all forty-two. They were accurate depictions. If Westin had remained, he would have gone mad. (She remembered the last stroke, and bringing the sacrifices to view it — unseen art is no art at all — and how they mutilated themselves in accord with their sins. Red wine in the earth.)

"The Blue Nile." She breathed deep with excitement, then banished a quick spike of self-loathing, brought on by the animal act.

"It doesn't look blue." The Dancer stared at it through splayed fingers, as if building the courage to touch it.

"The ordinary pigment wore away long ago. But the 'Nile,'" she reverently said the River's True Name afterward, to draw away the impurity of its mortal title, "It was the unbound part of me. No amount of weathering could have defeated it.

"I suspected it was here because I captured one of the Shuankhsen, and he told me Merew-Tjaw had once possessed some rare form of Acherusian wine, but lost it. She must have used a fear-oracle to discover its connection to the stones. The Eater said this 'wine' was blue."

"The painting needs the paint," said Kephermenes. "If the paint resembles the demon-wine, it circulates like blood within its host."

"Yes."

"What did you do with the Shuankhsen?"

"Freed him. Let him prey on Arisen. We are incorruptible."

Later, Aziza surveyed the rest of her new possessions. The fourth jar was gone, and Victor Alexiou's sat-phone went unanswered, but she stumbled on an informant the Alchemist had placed in his office who told her he'd flown to Genoa. Westin updated Khephemenes' itinerary. He would leave immediately after all. So would she, but she was headed for Cyprus.

• • •

She let black sand drift from her palm. It joined the screaming winds of Duat. Death was bright and sharp, not the dull crush she expected from a collapsing building. Merew-Tjaw put her palms to her cheeks and felt that her face was whole again. It felt like statuary, not flesh. Her Affinity's golden armor was warm and solid instead: living metal, not the shell beneath her hands, which felt like the hollowed out wood of an idol one would set adrift at sea, or down the great River. She was made of ghost-flesh. She was in the Underworld.

She inhaled the smoky atmosphere of Duat, though it wasn't air and gave no nourishment. She ran. You were never alone here, and demons could tease pain from your ghost-form as if it lived and breathed and bled. Merew-Tjaw noted intelligent patterns in the sand, made by things stalking beneath it.

Three parallel lines in the sand raced toward her. *Wings of my Ba, I call you forth. I am the Anointed One, doer of excellent deeds.* Her wilful soul was slow to answer; its energies dripped into ghost-legs slow as cold blood, but arrived in time to save her heel from the taloned hand, that burst from the line at the far left. She climbed a dune and dared to look back. Two demons had already broken to the surface. A second later, the third erupted from a geyser of black sand.

At first, Merew-Tjaw saw them as a mortal's ghost might. Limbs and jaws emerged from the red smoke human ghosts saw instead of their true forms. They were flesh-cutting demons, and carried obsidian knives as badges of office.

Her immortal gaze perceived their Sekhem and thus, their true shapes. She saw scaled and furred bodies coiled through angles foreign to the mortal plane. They rotated through the weird angles contained by Duat, and the rhythm hypnotized her. Her steps faltered as her mind screamed *Fool, this is one of their powers! Move!* But her ghost-body relaxed and stopped, except to sway to the rhythm of demons' steps.

She stumbled like a drunk, and felt her palm press against smooth stone. It was a *djed*, one of the pillars of Azar. This one was waist high, only a boundary marker. Iremite glyphs said, *The House of the Wine-Maker.* She overcame the weight of entrancement, put both hands to the djed and pulled herself to the side opposite the onrushing demons.

One knife clashed against the pillar and evoked a shriek with its friction, but it remained unmarked. The demons stopped and paced an invisible line. On the

other side, Merew-Tjaw walked backwards for a dozen yards before daring to turn and walk down the dune. There was another demon in the hall that she could never outrun and had, in all likelihood, shifted the protean lands of Duat to bring her within its demesne.

Green light flickered out of the hall's entrance. She walked between its stone pillars. A hot blood stink hit her nostrils. Twin flames floating a dozen feet above the floor, covering hundreds of urns in bilious illumination.

"Shezmu!" She looked across the urns for movement in the shadows as she called its name. "Winemaker, Crushing Hand of Azar! Why have you brought me here!"

If a crocodile could speak, it would have been with the voice that rumbled from the urns: a predator's whisper.

"I appreciate your formality," said the voice from the urns, "but there's no protocol for this. You've strayed from the Twilight Land, woman Born of Gold. Your kind are not usually permitted to visit me a second time."

Thin blood flowed from a hundred urns — or wine did, for these were the same in Duat. Streams wrapped around each other, forming bones and flesh until a man stood before her. He was eight feet tall but otherwise normal: scarred, with brown flesh like Merew-Tjaw's.

"You didn't do this?" She was unsure whether to prostrate herself or stand, to put on a show of wilfulness, but as black hair sprouted from Shezmu's freshly-formed scalp, she stayed up, yet refused to look at him directly.

"Your desire brought you here. I sensed you wished to see me and made the path a short one. I may be a demon, but I appreciate novelty. I find it especially interesting that you have no knowledge of your desire, though it's plain enough to me."

"Tell me."

"Hah! I'm a craftsman. Look for profound answers somewhere else — the Ibis-Headed One, for example. He leaves clues for your kind throughout the bright lands. But I think I'm permitted to tell you that you're here for the wisdom of a laborer, not writings from the Endless Scroll. Do you recognize this body? Look — don't be maiden-shy, Merew-Tjaw."

The demon's form *was* familiar, but her memory summoned up a place, not a name.

"Your shape makes me think of Liguria — Luni." She remembered killing swordsmen by the sea, and ordering peasants to rebuild with Roman stone.

"I'm sorry, I don't keep track of every living place. Azar gave you that privilege." The demon chuckled to itself in a chaotic tone, poorly simulating the human habit.

"It's north of the Empire, across the sea. I remember. My soldiers found a woman carrying your wine in her veins there. I should have been able sense it for as you know, oh Demon, in the world above they call your creation Acherusian Wine, and we Alchemists are attuned to it as one of the Great Substances. This version was undetectable. When we opened veins for it, they bled blue."

"I don't make blue wine. You must be mistaken. Gods and Pharaohs drink mortal Sekhem or nothing at all, and it only comes from one color of blood." Shezmu folded its arms and looked at her expectantly.

It plays at humanity again. She waited for him to speak. *Is it trying to make me feel comfortable?* "Well?" *And failing.*

"What?" said the demon.

"Do you know *what it is*, Winemaker?"

He laughed his false laugh again. "I'll answer your question with one of my own, then send you away — the Jackal will start looking for you, has looked, will always look. What happened after you tried to harvest this false wine?"

Disaster. Battle. A black curtain in her mind fell, and images raced out. *A man.* "You were there!"

"Was I?"

"Yes! No, the shape you wear." He was no giant in her memories, but blood ran down his face, and he crushed iron with his bare hands. "That man was there. He killed the witch. He killed me! When I was born again, I questioned a Sybaris-mad seer and he told me that its true vessel wasn't a person, but an ancient image, graven on a wall. I've sought it out over many lives, but had forgotten why."

"So you have an answer, Alchemist, though not the unimaginative one you were looking for. Go forth!"

"Wait! I haven't been able to sense my body. I suspect enemies have seized the fours jars, and silenced the servants who would summon me. Winemaker, I beg of you: Do you know what has transpired? Will I wander through the Long Death, until the stars are right again?"

The demon's face — the familiar face — exploded in a red shower. A bloody lion's head replaced it, keeping the old flesh as a gory collar. "I thought you Mesen-Nebu enjoyed such challenges. You displayed fearlessness in ancient days, when you stole my wine from Duat."

"Crushing Hand of Azar, hear my prayer!"

"Humble again — and falsely! I've seen the thick unmixed drops of your desire, and tasted the bitter resolve of your soul's Decree! I blessed you with new knowledge, so I must curse you with an ignorance of your fate."

The lion-headed one pounced.

• • •

Glorious color. Regret. The Nicene looked at the liquids spreading across Cesar's floor — fluid that had once been the man. But all men were made of elemental shades and textures. With a touch and a remembrance of True Names, the Nicene had rendered Cesar down into them: rivulets of bile and blood, even blue and orange from certain trace elements. Cesar's bones were white ash, floating in the puddle.

This would complicate things. Cesar de Rennes was a brash rich man who pawed at power in the kind of loud, bumbling way men did when they wanted influence but lacked the tact to negotiate. People would notice his disappearance. The Nicene never planned to kill him, but he never planned for his face to fall off in mid-confession, either.

Cesar had been doing the confessing, and that had proved useful, at least. De Rennes collected art and antiquities with no patience for legal niceties. He had at least six mistresses, two of whom lived nearby. His family had a habit of hoarding valuables — "to save the family during the next war," Cesar had said, straightening himself a bit with pride. Some of this information was immediately useful, while others could be called on when the Nicene was whole again, and ready to reclaim his dominion.

As planned, they'd sat together, his hand on Cesar's forehead. He'd said, "I wash away all your sins and wickedness" while thinking ahead, to how to extract the Cypriot Wall without suggesting its special importance. Cesar had sobbed. Stroking the man's hair, the Nazarene had noticed his hand was purple and green with lividity, but its veins were bright blue with his immortal essence.

He'd bowed down then, ready to suggest that Cesar de Rennes prove he was repentant by giving up a tenth of his possessions, when his borrowed face sloughed off, dragged down by the weight of his beard. Seams of rot had built up, and they formed a ragged line. Thick blue liquid poured after it. Cesar had looked up after feeling the Nicene's face brush his head, and had swallowed a mouthful of it before emitting a coughing scream.

There were no cameras in de Rennes' private gallery but there were guards on outside, and Cesar could summon them with his phone. There had been nothing to do but kill him immediately.

The Nicene fetched the phone out of Cesar's sodden jacket and stared at it for a moment. Mistress Number Two was Cecilia Berg, an American expat. Cesar used to fuck her on top of a 500 year-old Indian temple door. He'd confessed it in detail.

He crouched, almost touching Cesar's…puddle. Blue streams flowed from beneath each fingernail to touch the liquid remains. They cloudily spread across the puddle. When all of what had been Cesar de Rennes mixed with the Nicene's immortal substance, he reversed the flow, drawing the puddle into him. Only a sheen of moisture remained on the floor. A ripple passed beneath the skin of his

forearm and a few chunks of thin, blackened flesh tore free. He kicked them under a chair.

Meanwhile, he tapped Cecilia's name and in Cesar's voice said, "Darling, I need to see you now. I can't think of anything else. Come through the back, directly into the gallery."

He didn't need to wait more than twenty minutes. She had her own key. He was hidden behind an amphora on the other side of the room, but he could be swift. She didn't have time to make a sound as he pinned her to the ancient door, poured out of his bloody-blue skull-face and took her body.

Nicene no longer, she (no shapeshifting this time, to keep the new host for as long as possible) pushed the bloody husk of her predecessor away. She crossed her legs and breathed. Going through the motions of human concentration helped — fluid took the shape of its vessel, after all.

She imagined a vast, starry space: multicolored fires in the dark, arranged in alien constellations. Some of the stars were parts of her, trapped within a lattice of sorcery: Deathless, severed from her by the traitors' spell. Only she had escaped, into the Painting.

One part of her moved, and in the light shed by that star she could see two gray fragments.

She concentrated on them and saw they were parts of her "Cypriot Wall." And the last corner stood ten feet away, in a display case.

The former Nicene, temakh of the Painter, was relieved that at least this part remained loyal. They would all remember they were her, in the end, once she was rebuilt, the Painting remade, and wholeness restored. Then she would rebuild the Empire.

• • •

"So, it's finally time to die." The old man put both hands on his cane and leaned right into Victor's face, frowning. A guard stepped forward but he waved her away.

"Hail, Priest of the Shadow. Or Uncle Nick. Whichever you prefer." He straightened his tie and checked his lapels for dirt. Uncle Nick was covered in it.

"This is your idea of being inconspicuous?" Nick waved at the ruins around him. "I'm an old Greek living in a hut, subjected to Genoese gawkers whenever I come out. And tourists, Victor. Tourists!"

"I made arrangements. The Italian authorities don't bother you, correct? Nobody's allowed to come to Luni either. It's supposed to be structurally unsound."

"Backpackers. They don't care. The Australians are the worst. What am I supposed to do, beat them with a stick?"

He helped his uncle over a ridge of cracked Roman marble. “I seem to recall you’re pretty good at that.” The security detail spread out. If any backpackers came, they wouldn’t be leaving.

“We were all raised that way. Being an Alexiou is deadly serious business. Would you have made the effort without my encouragement, or would the Anointed One have blessed you with her golden hand, like she did your brother? I’m sure he’s a fine looking statue standing in some vault. But look at you now. You’ve ascended to the peak of the Pillar, where I once stood.”

“Where you still stand. We needed someone who knew the rites to stay off the grid and keep watch.”

“And die. The madness of her resurrection. I know it from the scrolls.” They took the old steps one at a time. Uncle Nick trembled when he walked. It might have been fear.

“Yes. If you didn’t want this, you should have taken a student.” Victor checked his watch despite himself, hating to reveal his impatience. He could see the old arch and its new steel door.

“That would have been cowardly. Besides, I knew if it came to this it would be because you failed her. You should feel that failure by losing someone close. That’s how the Anointed One would want it.”

“I’d feel that way, if you hadn’t beaten me, Uncle.”

Uncle Nick laughed, coughed and eventually spit on the ground.

They continued in silence. Once they reached the arch, Victor passed Nick the bag and put his palm to the door. There were no visible sensors — those could be hacked — but the system recognized him and with a metallic rattle, the door unlocked and swung in an inch.

Nick dragged the bag forward. “It’s heavy,” he said. “I don’t know if I can take it all the way to the chamber by myself.”

“Well, think of it this way —”

“— I don’t have to save any strength for the return trip?” Nick said, smiling at him. “I’ve reaped what I sowed, haven’t I? We made you a perfect servant of the family, of her. You might be the one to become a god, the first of any of us. You certainly don’t seem especially human anymore.”

They faced each other, listening to the wind together. It was salty and warm in the ruins of Luni.

“It’s curious that she hasn’t simply come forth from her jar, Victor. I believe I can stitch together some of the older rites to help her find it, in case she’s gotten lost between the worlds.” He opened the door the rest of the way and shuffled in.

“Uncle?”

“Victor.”

Victor stepped and hugged Nick gently, counting out three seconds. That seemed to be an appropriate amount of time. “I will praise you before the Anointed One.”

“Fuck the Anointed One. Go see Father Fabrizio in town and tell him I’m dead. I converted to Catholicism three years ago. All the damn Italians.”

He closed the steel door behind him. It locked automatically.

• • •

The demon dissolved into Duat’s black sand. It surrounded Merew-Tjaw, howling, tearing at her skin. Her feet left the ground. Wind tossed her aloft in a flesh-grinding shroud. After that, time and direction lost meaning. Thoughts escaped into the storm. She wondered if her tattered flesh would tumble in the dark for over a thousand years, until the stars summoned her back from Long Death.

She saw a pinprick of golden light and heard singing between the storm’s grinding wail. She swam the flying sand toward the light, and though it had seemed as distant as a star it suddenly loomed, a golden portal filled with shadows. The wind hurled her through.

Women sang in crude Iremite. Men whispered in Lombard. She reached to her side and clutched the arm of her throne. The flickering gold came from braziers and torches.

“Goddess?” Thurmin dropped to one knee to get her attention. “I would not draw your divine gaze from invisible places.” The man smelled of earth and blood. He smoothed his kilt and straightened the dagger in his belt.

“You honor me as you should, but true honor comes from works, not mere speech, which is a promise of effort. What was this place when I arrived?” She stood slowly so the others would have time to bow, as was the custom.

“A ruin, Goddess.”

“And who were you?”

“Warriors.”

“Losers. Bloodied warbands and camp followers. Oathbreakers who wandered here in search of shelter. You didn’t know how to build, but I taught you. When the raiders came, following your camp spoor and ashes, I ensured that none survived to return to their tribes and reveal our location. Your smith died from a shit-smeared arrow, but I taught your son his trade.”

“It is as you say.”

“Your swords and spears were useless. Now you have nails and plowshares. I provided these gifts through tutelage, so you could remake your weapons into things of value. Who then, does it all belong to?”

As one they chanted, “the Goddess!”

She raised her hands. “Yet you finally made something of your old trade. You captured a witch with your old swords. This is your achievement, not mine. Thurmin, bring the four who captured her. You’ll stand guard while I harvest her magic, and I’ll transform it into your reward. And when we expand beyond Luni, you five will be chieftains, clad in gold. Perhaps one of you will father a new Caesar in the West.”

She looked across the hall and frowned. “I only see two of them. Where are the others?”

Thurmin blushed, but the woman Anamund stood and stepped forward, shifting her daughter from breast to hip. She was wife to both missing men. “They’re scared of her, Goddess,” she said.

“Why would that be?”

“The blue blood. Gepides said it burned his blade, ate it up even though it was good iron. When he cut her, she didn’t show pain. That makes a man sweat through his shirt, when he thinks he’s best at killing and meets a thing that can’t be killed. Lado isn’t as scared but you know they’re brothers. They like to drink together. That’s what they’re doing.”

“Thurmin, find a wet-nurse and give Anamund a spear. She’s about to earn a double share of the reward.”

Once assembled, they walked to the makeshift prison: a hole dug out of the rock in their quarry, covered with a massive boulder set on logs to make it roll. Alo and Berin had been in the hall. They set their shoulders to the stone and pushed it aside. Once they finished the task they ran to their spears, joining Thurmin and Anamund. Merew-Tjaw carried no weapons, for she felt strong — barely a season had passed since her Descent began, and Sekhem felt honey-sweet in her dead veins.

The witch was naked and looked like a roughly-sculpted man, half complete. Berin babbled that she looked different than when they’d caught her. Its face looked vaguely like Alo’s, minus the forehead scars the real man wore, from old blows that drove his ill-fitting helmet into his flesh. And the witch’s skin was pus-colored, not olive like the original. *I’ve caught it in mid-transformation*, thought Merew-Tjaw. *It wanted to replace him and blend in with us.*

Hands and feet bound by good rope, it rolled and folded like a grub on an overturned rock until it found purchase enough to sit up and regard her with very blue eyes. They weren’t the sea-shade of northerners, but darker.

Merew-Tjaw stepped forward and with a wave, released the others from the obligation to keep pace. In Iremite, she said, “You seem to be lost and sick. You drank something brewed for the oldest gods. They listen to me. Let me speak to them and I may be able to heal you.”

It planted its feet and stood up, no hands to help it, defying the flaccidity in its legs. It smiled at Merew-Tjaw. The blue shade in its eyes dripped from the corners of its mouth, too. It hopped toward her.

"Drive it back!" she said, and four spears did her bidding, pinning shoulders and torso, forcing it away and into the hollow. Thick blue ichor erupted from its wounds to wrap around spear blades and shafts, like anemone tentacles. Bitter-smelling smoke rose from these points of contact.

Merew-Tjaw called her golden armor and considered her Utterances. High magic often drove mortal witnesses mad, and she didn't want to waste loyal, brave service, so after a moment's pause she drove her metal fist into the witch's chest. *Let my will be flesh,* she thought, and laced her muscles with soul-stuff to strengthen them.

It was like punching through a rotting log. Her fist drove right through and erupted from its back, but something tightened around her submerged forearm. It locked blue eyes with her.

"Gods?" it said in Iremite. "Speak not to them except through me. Do you not recognize your master?"

Merew-Tjaw's golden skin vibrated as pressure crushed her forearm. Blue rivulets crawled out of its chest, surrounding the point of impact. She couldn't pull away; it spun her into the hollow. Its rope bindings broke with the sound of dry leaves tearing. Over the witch's shoulder she saw the others drop their smoking, ruined weapons. Anamund and Thurmin groped for belt daggers to replace them, but Berin and Alo stood white-faced and shaking.

She threw her mind into remembrance of Duat, and constellations that appeared in no living land. She mouthed the Utterance: *Let the dead stars enter my flesh. Let me be the instrument of silence. Let my Sekhem drown all power.* This was the art of Rebuking the Vizier, said to extinguish all displeasing magic.

Nothing happened.

It acknowledged her attempt with an arrogant smirk, blue blood gushing from between its clenched teeth. The substance spread from its chest to covered Merew-Tjaw's trapped arm, and though she felt heat and saw smoke issue from it, golden skin prevented it from burning her — for now. She could free herself by severing the arm but pain aside, doing so would force her to heal, using power that might fuel another Utterance.

She chose magic instead. She chanted an Utterance to summon a divine Ka-body, clicked and hissed in the hymn of the corpse beetles, and recited the formula to turn enemy flesh into gold and lapis lazuli. Three Utterances — three failures. The witch-thing spun a shell around her Sekhem blocking the greater powers. *Was this truly Acherusian Wine*? The witch's ichor was more powerful and it didn't *feel* like an alchemical regium. Merew-Tjaw was Mesen-Nebu, and knew

the secret auras of mystic substances. She was deaf to its vibrations, but it moved and even seemed to think.

It finally bored through golden skin into her sahu's flesh. She felt its acid touch. Beyond, Thurmin's shins dissolved under a spatter of agate blue. He fell. Streams like three snakes pursued Anamund. The thing tossed The Anointed One right and left, still crushing her forearm in its torso.

Something passed in front of her face and she flew back, free and in weightless agony. Her trapped arm was a stump. It sprayed dust and black fluid; Merew-Tjaw smelled the bitter herbs used by Irem's embalmers. She banished the bleeding with a thought but the pain remained. It was a cold wound, and whatever had done it had severed Sekhem with flesh. Her inner flame faltered.

She heard the sound of torn leather. The "witch's" body succumbed to rot and weakness, and blue ichor erupted from its opened gut, making viscera look like wet, moldy vines and diseased fruit. It heaved forward, unable to maintain a human shape, but the blue substance still streamed into Anamund, who convulsed to the beat of an alien heart.

She looked to the others. Alo was gone; Berin was down, and another man crouched over him. Its distorted mouth swallowed Berin's head and bit with the sound of snapping green wood. The great-mawed one looked as if his human skin had stretched over a crocodile's skull. It shook Berin like a wild dog. It tossed him aside by the head — or the shredded remnants that slid out.

With a hiss, the thing's face compacted into a blood-soaked, human shape. It was a man now, with Shezmu's face, from the death cycle, but it was not Shezmu.

"Your blood tastes like mine," he said. "You're mine to take. Mine alone. Do you know me?"

Shuankhsen. Lifeless one. "Mekaw." She knew it was his name, but not why she knew. But this was wrong. She met Shezmu in his guise over a thousand years from now. *This is a memory. I am Arising.* The black storm rolled in, bearing her aloft to the sun, life, and her power.

• • •

He dreamed without sleeping. It was the only way; he never tired as mortals do, but without still time to order his thoughts he'd lose his sanity faster than usual. Mekaw closed his eyes and let his heart stop — no need for his body to pretend it was alive — and summoned recent memories first. The rocking boat distracted him, so he allowed himself enough of a corpse's numbness to banish it. Perfect, silent blackness sent him back to the compound, days ago.

Johnny had scream-sung prophecy in that dirty concrete room. After eating the mummy in the basement Mekaw had questioned the boy with encouraging whispers, then threats. He'd shown Johnny his *sharp* teeth, but the boy had just pissed his pants and yelled his oracular nonsense:

The Nile in the middle of the sea

The sea in the middle of the stars

Forty-two stars beside the Nile

Forty-two judgments for forty-one

All but the missing blue of the Nile

All the false gods seen by false gods

And their eyes see three four five five nine ten, three four one nine three eleven

Three four five five nine ten, three four one nine three eleven

And those numbers again, and again, no matter what Mekaw said, and no matter how he hit or cut the boy.

In Alexandria, after Christians came but before they drove the Manicheans out, his Arisen enemies had called the power of holy fear *Sybaris*. It had always existed, around strong wills bound to shining Sekhem. It infested mortals with terror and reverence, though in Alexandria these things were so common that few noticed. Egypt's spirit was corrupt with age: an old statue so covered with grime and vandalism it could never be returned to its pure, true form. Nevertheless, layers of errant faith and desire deposited themselves in patterns, and a mortal maddened by Sybaris uncovered them in dreams and hallucinations.

The whole world was old now, and just as corrupt. *Even the oceans die*, he thought. *And She may let me die soon.* For a moment he banished all memory, returned to pure darkness, and savored the idea of dissolving in it, utterly extinguished. *But not yet*.

Some mortals were especially sensitive, like flies who, struggling in the spider's web, could sense its vibrations, and felt spiders and fellow prey in its distant corners. They knew the future, the location of magical vessels — things disturbed by Sekhem, bound to the Web of Life. The boy had been one of these. In the Empire, they would have taken him from his family into one of the guilds, to build the palaces and arsenals for Irem — to sing their songs, and prepare corpses for sorcerous obscenities. If a sensitive had no skill for practical crafts, his parents might hide him, or send him to the desert to make his way as a witch or fortune teller. Failing that, his betters would keep him for choir or oracles, to sing under torture until the leftover scrap could be used to throw the bones or divine by haruspicy. The body might go to adepts of the Shell instead, because they used body parts to create relics.

Or the alchemists could use their arts to crystallize its intrinsic value as gold and precious stones, carved off dead bones like petrified meat.

Where is my sister! He'd wanted to scream it at Johnny, but that must have strayed too close to revealing his nature, because when he opened his mouth he could only release a strangled hiss. She who had returned him to life with a threadbare soul prevented his kind from revealing their origins.

After interrogating Johnny, Mekaw had attacked the Blackened Host with his jaws wide. Not even he could eat them all, so he saved his belly for Johnny's aunt (really, his mother, but in this degenerate community, family relations had become a little convoluted) and a few of the cult's tough men, who kept the compound together with beatings and threats. This system had been part of the cult before he took it over and even though he'd never stopped it, he hated the ones who carried it out. He tore the rest to shreds, and spat out their useless bullets.

He had untied Johnny from the chair and had given him a drink of water. They'd collected wallets from the dead. He wasn't so frail after all, and had stood without shaking. He was a tall 12 years old, like Mekaw when first he worked the mines. (Of course they were all taller now, and fatter.) Perhaps, Johnny had found strength in appalling circumstances. After filling up the car, they'd sprayed the rest of the gas on compound walls and bodies. The boy had set the fire. Even though he could barely see above the steering wheel, he had driven them to Reno, where Mekaw had given him most of the money, before they parted ways.

Forty-two stars beside the Nile

Forty-two judgments for forty-one

All but the missing blue of the Nile

All the false gods seen by false gods

…and then the numbers.

Mekaw had guessed the significance of the Blue Nile, but not the numbers. There were forty-two Judges of Duat, of course, but the rest had defeated him. He'd put on fresh clothes and wandered Reno until he'd found a public library. Twenty minutes of variations of Johnny's numbers had eventually revealed them to be GPS coordinates — according to Wikipedia, codes for "a space-based satellite navigation system that provides location and time information in all weather conditions, anywhere on or near the Earth where there is an unobstructed line of sight to four or more GPS satellites."

This dying world is full of wonders, he'd thought. He'd wanted to read on but if he wasted his time with too much human business, She would punish him with pain and a fine in Sekhem. He'd fought Her to learn to read English, wasting a whole Descent on tapes and books, studying through the agony She'd sent, until he could read it better than he could Iremite hieroglyphs — nobody had ever taught him those, after all.

It had taken another hour or so to pin the coordinates to the Mediterranean, about 40 miles away from Cyprus.

Mekaw knew how to travel without being seen. It was easy when you used spaces that would kill normal stowaways. He'd waited in landing gear wheel wells, depressurized compartments and bilge tanks until he had dropped off the

side of a cargo ship bound for Turkey. He'd swum the rest of the way, casting off disgusting rags, and had made landfall beside his future charter, where he now dreamed.

He returned his awareness to the present. Topside, Deniz piloted with the lights out and a cardboard shield to hide the glow of the GPS screen. He was a practiced smuggler who kept the engines low, afraid of anything that might reveal his little boat to patrols.

Although he'd insisted there was no island at 34.55910, 34.19311, Deniz took his cash: US dollars Mekaw had transported in a plastic bag, all the way from Reno. Mekaw had seen the gun in his waistband and knew the sailor probably planned to kill him, and take the rest of his money. As he lay below, he wondered if the sea outside was wine-dark, as the Greeks used to say. Yet some of their tribes used the same word for red and blue, so perhaps they only meant it was shimmering and richly colored, but still and blue as the deep Nile.

The Blue Nile.

• • •

Servants of the cult led Khephermenes past customs and drove him part of the way, but after an hour he tired of machines, their dead rhythms, the equally senseless noises of the woman driving, and the man with the gun who sucked his teeth. He ordered them to let him out by some dry Italian hill, gestured and speaking the Putonghua he knew from his time in Shanghai, and whether they understood his speech or not, they opened the door for him, bowed and left. He could make out earth-caked stone: a minor ruin, and an excellent place to begin. Dead places were never lonely.

The Dancer imagined his Sekhem was a thick fluid coating his eyes, and looking through it he saw Neter-Khertet, that place between where ghosts dwelled. He made gestures he learned from a Taoist necromancer a thousand years ago. That man had looked at the stars, meditating on their shapes and movements as if they were parts of his own body. Inspiration had come from the skies and the Judges who ruled them, but the man never knew this, or that Khephermenes would rip it from his soul.

He spun, pausing to make the proper signs in eight directions. In Neter-Khertet, he saw the silent winds move ectoplasmic dust in an extension of his movements. The first ghosts rose minutes later. They were old dead, used to their drowsy repose in buried corpses and wreckage, so they took slow, shaky steps after rising from the earth. Newer, swifter dead rose later, from farther away. Some of them were soldiers, dragging arms merged with the memories of their rifles.

They circled him, swaying in time to his movements, until he made a great circle with his hands and stepped forward. To the living, he vanished; he'd cut a barrier between life and half-life, and stepped through. Terror gnawed at him as

he crossed the threshold. He remembered the frail, human half of him running through these twilight precincts, hunted by his divine temakh. Separated from him, it was a thundercloud of hate and want. *Shan'iatu.*

The Dancer knew secret ways through Neter-Khertet. It was a fragile realm — a state of being, really, drawing on life and Duat in fluctuating measures. It was full of flawed, crumpled spaces, where the skilled could move a thousand feet with a step. He was a true adept, able to stride in nameless directions, but blaze a trail for his mob.

Wearing Merew-Tjaw's face, Aziza had cajoled, terrified, and tempted enough information to locate Victor Alexiou, and presumably the Anointed One's missing canopic jar. They'd burned the rest and cursed the ashes. Khephermenes had suggested that the fourth jar was already destroyed, but Aziza assumed the errant "priest" of Merew-Tjaw's cult had somehow acquired it.

Khephermenes was a master of movement, not a navigator. Aziza had given him a smartphone with the site's GPS coordinates. It didn't work in Neter-Khertet, so he stepped back to the living world five times and despite dead eyes staring impatiently, checked his progress under the sun. He felt faintly embarrassed but part of him relished the humanity of it, persisting against his temakh's grandiose rage.

After an hour, he deemed himself close enough. The landscape resembled pictures from the smartphone and he saw people patrolling in jackets thick with weapons and some kind of modern linen armor. There were dozens of men and women, as wary and thick-necked as professional soldiers always were.

He turned to his modest horde of ghosts, behind the curtain of Neter-Khertet. He used the universal language of gesture that the dead know from mourning faces and hands wringing in ancestor worship. He danced the beautiful sign for murder and ripped open the veil.

• • •

Victor heard nothing past the door, but the secret tomb ran deep. He breathed deeply, attempting to exhale away visions of his uncle, but he failed, and took refuge in the dull sound of the guards' radios squawking with check-ins and other dull, paramilitary business.

After about twenty minutes they came alive in rapid German, with short, pained screams. He heard short reports of automatic fire, and static growls from explosions — some of them had grenades, he remembered. Greta, head of his personal detail, nodded, and the team took their places. She crouched in a firing stance and put her eye to the sight of an XM8 rifle. (She had requested the gun, but Victor thought it looked like a plastic toy.) Georg grabbed his arm to pull him toward escape. Martin stepped in front, machine pistol ready, but Victor shook them off as his armored SUV popped over the ridge.

"No, no. We're going to wait," he put a hand on the XM8's green polycarbonate barrel to get Greta's attention. "We can't run from what's coming."

She frowned, held up a palm to the approaching vehicle and made a quick twisting gesture. The SUV screeched in a quick turn, showering them with rocks until it stopped, engine humming, between them and the approaching threat. Twin doors popped open on the back roof and Yannick — one of the two assigned to this truck — heaved the minigun up and out.

Greta tapped her earpiece. "Lot of nonsense coming in, like you told us to expect," she said. "Just one visible hostile. Bullets aren't stopping him and he's dropping us with his bare hands. There are others, but I don't think we can see or touch them."

Another SUV came over the ridge — on its side. Metal screamed and sparked on dirty marble. A black boot kicked its sunroof out; its owner tumbled out, carrying an AK-74. Two others crawled out doors on the top side as eleven more guards scrambled over the hill — less than half the force assigned to the site. Six dropped for cover. *Fools*, Victor thought. *I doubt these are snipers. Gods and their monsters do their bloody business up close.*

He fumbled under his shirt, found the brass chain around his neck and snatched its hanging pendant. He'd commissioned it from a jeweller who made pieces based on alleged visions — who in another time, might have been called a witch. The Anointed One (the real one, at any rate) searched for mad, gifted artisans with special zeal. Through a network of trusted detectives, Victor sought them out, but saved access to a few for himself. He'd given this one gold, copper, tin and heroin to fuel her work. When she'd finished, he had paid for the pendant with a luxury flat in Weimar and all the opiates she could consume. It would have been safer to have her killed, but that wasn't the way of the Infinite Pillar. Wherever she was, she might earn her life by surviving temptation.

The pendant was a twisted, sharp-edged star. Victor ripped open his left pinky on it, yanked it off his head and tossed to the ground. In clattered on ancient flagstones but he barely heard the sound over screams and gunfire. He looked up. Something invisible tossed a man ten feet in the air and when it caught him, twisted his spine. The guard fell limp in two sickeningly different directions. Victor saw a human-shaped pearlescent fog stand over the corpse. The pendant was starting to work; he looked right and left to see other misty forms appear as it united "spiritual vibrations" with matter.

They solidified. Victor saw they were ghosts. The Anointed One had shown them to him during his initiation into the high priesthood. The unblinking things were washed-out men and women, bearing signs of their death and sometimes, strangely shaped flesh reflecting their obsessions in life. One looked like a child's drawing of a bodybuilder. It smashed a woman's head into the ground, tottering on legs too small for a huge, rippling upper body. Her blood speckled its arms, and Victor felt a sting of shame as he saw it and rejoiced. *We can touch them now*, he thought.

Yannick trained the minigun on it. With a hiss and rattle, bullets cut the ghost in two.

The dead had already killed anyone too frightened to fight. The last four from over the hill rallied at the fallen SUV, firing behind them, until they covered the field together, directing tight bursts at approaching ghosts, but the fallen ghosts never stopped. They crawled or drag themselves forward on bullet-wracked limbs, but at least they slowed down. Greta shouted commands into her headset, and after shooting two ghosts in the head to no particular effect, switched to targeting their legs and abdomens.

She fell back beside him. "I don't know what your plan was before, but we are getting in the fucking truck now! G, Marty, drag his ass there! He can fire us after!" She pointed her chin at Yannick's SUV and the other two grabbed his arms.

Georg slid open the door; 7.62 casings spilled out. Victor could see clear through the top hatch and minigun, but Yannick was gone. He assumed Martin pushed him inside the vehicle but when he turned around, the guard was gone. So was Georg. The guns were going quiet, one by one.

Victor crouched at the minigun turret. He grabbed the barrel without thinking, to pull himself up, and swore as its heat bit into its palm. Gunfire ceased; he dared to peer out of the hatch.

The ghosts were gone. Everyone but Greta was dead. She held her rifle at waist level, circling a small, muscular man in a dirt-streaked, cream-colored suit. The man smiled, pivoting to constantly face her.

"Fix your bayonet, please," said the man, in slow English. The accent sounded Chinese corrupted by years of travel. "Your bullets did nothing. Why not show me? Or at least draw your knife?"

Greta shuffled back, dropped her rifle and pulled the knife she kept under her left shoulder. She spun it in her hand once to set her grip, then crouched, pointing it at him.

"Pity. The bayonet is based on the art of the spear, you see? A long time ago they called a spear the 'king of weapons.' I wanted to see how the art had changed. But a knife is interesting, too. Come!"

He beckoned with both arms. Greta stood her ground. Victor could see her shaking. He'd hired her with a decade in GSG-9 behind her, and she'd never shown fear before.

"Come now! Cut me once and I'll let you live."

She lunged like a fencer slashing high and low, but the man stepped aside, avoiding each blow with a casual pivot. He seemed to move slowly but slipped behind her nonetheless. He pushed lightly, but sent her off her feet, skidding across the ground.

"Get up! I'll give you another chance."

Greta picked herself up slowly, using only her legs. Something was in her other hand. She circled him again and when he smiled faintly, nodding at her, she flipped her knife to an icepick grip and ran in with a big, wide blow.

He spun and pushed again, but this time Greta turned her fall into a roll.

"You failed. I'm sorry."

She threw her arms around her head. It muffled her voice, but Victor still heard her say, "Look down, fucking *schwien*!"

The man did. Victor saw the gray grenade at his feet at the same time, and ducked into the SUV before the metallic crack of its explosion. Steel hit the side of the truck with the sound of a heavy hailstorm.

Victor spilled out of the sliding door and ran for the tomb. He looked over his shoulder, at smoke and dust. There was an enemy god out there, and he was sure it would rise again. His feet slipped on crooked stone; he fell by the door. He placed his palm on it but remembered that once it closed, it could only be opened from the inside — a feature designed to keep foolish initiates from blundering into the Anointed One's resurrection. He made one fist, and another, and battered them both against the door. He heard crunching steps — feet on pebbles — and curiously, the sound of falling coins. He smelled something like a rotting wound, growing ever stronger.

Nothing behind the door answered him; Victor turned to face the enemy. The grenade had ripped off his clothes, revealing dusty purple, corded flesh. Though it had severed muscles in his legs, they twitched and wove together again around black bones, like angry snakes or thin rags in a strong wind. The falling coin sound had sound came from fragments it expelled like a sharp, solid sweat while it healed.

"I am Khephermenes," said the corpse-man. "Give me the urn as your god commands."

Victor hammered on the door again with the back of his hand, faster. He'd seen the Anointed One in this immortal flesh, unliving but Deathless, and knew the god-fear was seizing him. He clenched his teeth to avoid screaming. He felt a molar crack and tasted blood.

"Ah, you know the truth, don't you. Is it behind there? I admire loyalty, and you're a weak, clumsy man — no worthy challenge. I'll make it painless, yes?"

Victor spat out tooth fragments and surrendered to a hoarse wail. Behind him, with a heavy, muffled clang, the door opened.

• • •

She knew she was covered in blood by feel, but Merew-Tjaw only saw it when she opened the door, and light struck her red hands. Victor lay before her, writhing and screaming. *My servant lives. It wasn't the Long Death after all.* She

threw him behind her as if he was as light as dried rushes, but didn't glance back. The Dancer had come.

They watched each other for a silent moment. His sahu repaired itself, fitting muscle to flesh with some speed, she noted, but hardly enough to mark one of the Deathless at the peak of power, as he had been before. *You've been busy, and as Aziza sends you as her agent, your own soul rages against you.*

In Toronto, they'd killed her when her Sekhem was at its lowest but now she was fully renewed: Arisen again.

Power simmered in her new body, fresh-grown from the hidden canopic jar. Merew-Tjaw whispered to it, urging particles of divine essence suffuse her sahu. *I call forth the bull horns, the Ka, the ever-enduring one. Grant me the scepter of my Decree!* Newborn flesh rippled, and she knew was growing taller, stronger. She rejected the head of her sacred animal but allowed its black horns to crown her.

She let Kephermenes strike first. He obliged with the Utterance called the Ebon Wheel — she remembered it now, as she now remembered *many* things from ancient days. Irem's dancing masters used to step along the paths of constellations to channel celestial power. Thus, the Dancer became a starlit shadow, invisible to mortal eyes. He spun and clawed at her face, and she felt the chill of the outer dark burn, but it was only a passing sensation, banished by the warmth of her Sekhem.

Her divine aspect gave her the power to see and touch Neter-Khertet, where the Dancer's animate darkness was as solid as flesh. She grabbed his arm and hurled him away. He landed near the black scar of the grenade blast, surrounded by enslaved ghosts. (She noted some of them had fresh bullet wounds — she would ask Victor later, when he came to his senses.) She strode out of her tomb at seven feet tall, the sun casting a horned shadow before her. Weaker ghosts fell to their knees, weeping without tears.

"I know your power from another age," said Merew-Tjaw. "Perhaps I even knew you, once. How much of your fivefold soul did you waste to get here, call dead servants, and even become as insubstantial as night? How much Sekhem remains after serving Aziza, instead of your true Decree? Your power is the darkening coal one clutches in the desert, to ward off cold before the dawn.

"But now, I *am* the sun. And you're the darkness that hides, lest it be banished." She felt warm wind on her bloody nakedness, and stretched like a woman awakening.

Khephermenes slipped behind his ghosts and pointed at Merew-Tjaw. The dead charged and battered her golden skin. She felt nothing, but commanded her god-body to provide a weapon. Her ulnar grew and turned to bronze, erupting from her left wrist until it was three feet long.

She snapped it off and with a gesture, wreathed it in fire. She cleared a path with the burning rod. Ghosts melted into death-ash and ectoplasm, until none barred the way to the Dancer.

In god-form, Merew-Tjaw could touch his shadow body, but Khephermenes was still the Dancer, more agile than any mortal. He slipped to one side of her rod, then the other. He slipped, spun, and struck with hands as cold as the darkness between the stars, but couldn't penetrate her golden armor — it was a stalemate.

She concentrated on a certain spot in the base of her neck. Inside her empty carotid artery, she felt a small, hard bead, and an itch. She knew it well, for it had been her constant companion since the first Deathless days. The embalmers had let an insect enter her corpse, and when the Rite of Return conferred her immortal Sekhem, it entered *it*, as well. Over centuries she spoke to it, tamed and changed it by altering the humors in her sahu. She made it part of her so as she was reborn, it shared her resurrection.

She spoke to it in subvocal Iremite. The bead grew, sprouted six legs and walked from artery to windpipe, digging its way. The mummified scarab left a trail of gray, wet marbles as it walked: eggs. These hatched into its children so quickly that in seconds, an army walked through empty veins, organs and cavities.

She pursued the Dancer a little longer. Khephermenes dropped the Ebon Wheel Utterance and returned to solid flesh. She sent away her golden skin and lowered her guard. When he struck, she let his hand rip through her abdomen like a spear, but grabbed him around the waist. Face to face, she opened her mouth.

Beetles erupted from it — too many to fit within her body, growing as they spewed forth, covering his face, then his body. Mandibles of tempered, sharpened bronze bit and sliced. Khephermenes wrenched out of Merew-Tjaw's grasp but the swarm followed, and none of his skill sufficed. Covered in scarabs, he dropped to his knees. The insects shat ribbons of blue flesh and gray bone fragments until the swarm appeared to have shrank, though in truth, they simply surrounded less meat, and occupied less space.

Merew-Tjaw waved them away to gaze at the torn thing that had been Khephermenes the Dancer. He saw ribbons of gristle return to his body like maggots, repairing his flesh, but too slowly.

She raised the burning rod. "You tried to send me to the Long Death, where I would wander until the stars came right again. What would that be like for one of you Deceived? What happens to a soul that refuses the Judges of Duat? You'll find out, because I'll destroy everyone who could call you, burn your canopic jars and desecrate your tombs. You'll become dust and a wandering soul for a thousand years.

You tried to do the same to me, but I was ready. Are you?"

Khephermenes uneaten eye widened, but so much of his face had been destroyed that it was impossible to see fear in it with any certainty.

She drove burning bronze through his eye and dashed the body to burning bits, before she banished the god-weapon and her terrifying form, and searched for surviving followers.

• • •

They'd gathered there, hiding among beggars to stalk Arisen. The enemy had come here intending to found a successor to Irem now that Rome was a decrepit state, protected by the whims of mercenaries who marched its broken roads.

We're the slaves that destroy slavery. Mekaw had said it in a dusty old house, after rolling the bodies of its previous occupants into the courtyard, but he knew *She* compelled them, and he'd only spoke to justify what they must to do avoid torture. Besides, the streets smelled sweet with Arisen Sekhem. They hungered.

It was a fool's fight. The Arisen raised up talismans, warrior-ghosts and the powers of earth and flame, obliterating their band. He was last to die because he saw her there, in her body of gold: Merew-Tjaw. He hesitated when the others charged. From the far rank, he screamed her name. She never noticed him. A hawk-headed mummy laid him open with a sword blackened by scorpion venom.

She always punished them after death, but he barely remembered that — some things could not be understood by minds dwelling in the living world, where such torments were impossible.

He rode bodies across the sea in search of Merew-Tjaw. Mekaw took a Bedu herdswoman, a Visigoth mercenary and others for two centuries, until the Christians said more than 600 years had passed since the birth of their god (the exact year was left for their priests to decide). He missed her in Rome but stayed for a time, haunting its depopulated estates until the day the witch came.

The witch made camp in an abandoned estate, with six companions who never ate or spoke. They were bound together by Sekhem, as chill and heavy as waves from storm-cursed, dark water. The witch fed her flock with blue blood and tears. *Shezmu's wine*, he thought, and knew that Merew-Tjaw would seek it out. Alchemists laid claim to such substances.

He followed the witch north and east to Liguria. She lost followers on the way. After that, one fell in its tracks every fortnight to month, leaving a bloodless corpse.

In Liguria, Lombards accosted her. The witch tried to walk through the throng and bled blue when one stabbed her: a clumsy warrior who had intended to warn her with a small prick of the spear. He witnessed the fight from afar, and saw the witch's blood bite their weapons like acid until at last they threw a net over her and dragged her back to their settlement.

Merew-Tjaw was there. He heard her followers chanting the old language and then the woman herself, in the stern tone he remembered from his family, and the mines. But when they looked upon the witch and the blue ichor poured out, he

remembered the alchemist reeling in surprise, under attack. This wasn't Shezmu's wine then, or anything Merew-Tjaw understood, and it was too strong for her.

No. No. He'd thought it might kill her then and there, and steal his chance to confront her. The settlement looked crude, and perhaps so new its inhabitants lacked the skill to resurrect their Arisen master. He brought forth the Jaws of the Devourer and bit her free from the witch's grasp.

Mine to take. Mine to eat. Mine to make suffer. Mine alone.

He'd worn the body of a Roman for long enough that it had his true face, from Irem, once he withdrew the jaws. His skin was just a little lighter.

"Unclean," she said, flatly, cradling her severed arm.

"Is that what I was, when you sent me below? When you repudiated —" and he stopped and only thought *our mother*, because *She* stole his voice.

"Shuankhsen have no voice before the Judges. You are nothing."

He said "Do you remember me?" growing hoarser with each syllable, as skirted the curse.

"No. It's another stolen body. After I destroy it, I'll burn the dead so you have no place to alight."

"The Judges demand it, Merew-Tjaw — and when have you even questioned before obeying? I'm your enemy, bound to eat flesh and Sekhem for my revenge, but if you don't know me it means nothing."

At this, *She* sent him images of his rotting body, burning and pierced by her teeth.

No, he thought. *Not even you will silence me Ammut, Devourer, corruptor. No.* He felt a *tearing* sensation from his heart, as one might feel after being bitten in half by a predator. The pain-spasm seized him. *She* had eaten his Sekhem as punishment for hesitating.

Merew-Tjaw flexed her regrown hand and stepped forward. "I'll make it quick, since you know you're cursed. But tell me how you know my name."

He'd opened his mouth, but no sound answered. The cold crushing sensation struck again. Ammut consumed him, or Merew-Tjaw struck. Mekaw only knew that after that, he returned to the Devourer, who inflicted punishments that defeat language to describe.

I remember. I remember.

Mekaw screamed, but his hands found long ribbing from the hull. *I'm in the boat.* He'd fallen too far into memory. He opened his eyes. The engine had stopped. Deniz had either arrived, or decided to dispose of him. Mekaw planned for the latter, and a suitably theatrical way to demonstrate his immunity to bullets, to persuade the man to take him the rest of the way.

• • •

The *Whisper* lived up to her name once the electric motor cut in. It only slowed slightly, even though they had almost 100 nautical miles to go. The technology was ready for consumers but Victor made a mental note to hold it for another five years to let his oil and gas ventures play out. He shot back Bulgarian rakia from an old teacup, wiped white foam from his lips and climbed topside.

Merew-Tjaw stood at the prow, her sarong a blue flag caught on a slim, strong body. She held his pendant between two fingers. "You never told me about this trinket," she said, and slipped it into her purse. She smiled. When she turned to the sea, Victor saw her black hair slither in the Mediterranean wind.

He dropped to one knee. "Anointed One, I kept certain things in reserve for emergencies. You taught us to be loyal but seek our own power, so I have."

"I did…and of course, you somehow discovered that my senses are less refined with respect for certain occult vessels. You're starting to become entirely too resourceful for my comfort, aren't you?"

"Anointed One?"

She laughed. "You also could have sold me out to the imposter. In this case, your loyalty banishes this small deceit." Then she shouted back: "Change course, fifteen degrees port!"

The pilot adjusted the wheel but glared at Victor, who shuffled up beside Merew-Tjaw. "Anointed One? They might be able to get us there faster with coordinates. The woman is a historian too, familiar with older nautical terms. She __"

"Our faith owes its long life to contingency plans. One plan sent my canopic jar to you, because my imposter failed to perform part of my daily routine. Another guides us to an island that probably remains unmapped, as many of the ancient sites do. It's hidden from me until now, so I can only use the mysteries to guide us.

"The old magic is a living thing, Victor. Anything made of it has instincts. Like an animal, it hides, fights and even thinks, though never as a mortal would. The island's magic defeats surveyors, and even your satellite cameras. But it once allowed three English knights to find it. They'd been cast adrift in a little boat, far from their master, that barbarian Richard. They probably prayed thanks to their god when they pierced the fog and landed on that little rock, where they found an ancient wall, carved with the unspeakable images of true gods. They might have seen flecks of old paint, because it used to be covered with color. It was a work of art surpassing all mortal works. They would have noticed one piece was missing.

"Remember what I have taught you: A soul animates more than flesh, but all of our creations. Your accomplishments are as much part of you as your right hand. The wall's Painter *was* its work, and tried to hide within it. The old gods must have sent servants to destroy it, and send the rogue power to be judged. By

breaking off part of it they deemed themselves successful, but part of the Painter slipped away into the sea, in flecks of ancient dye, until it was just another blue current in the Mediterranean. The Painter is paint *and* wall, you see?

"The knights just saw an old pagan relic. They broke off two more pieces and called themselves righteous men for smashing an idol — but they also knew that certain scholars would pay for these artifacts and instead of casting these fragments into the sea, took them to Cyprus when the storms cleared. The islands would have made it impossible to find again, until it was ready for visitors.

"I encountered part of the Painter before the knights found the island and its wall. It was a fluid blue thing that crawled from body to body. I suppose it was searching for the third fragment — the one taken by some divine agent, in the erased years after the Empire fell. I never found it, but I consulted prophets, who told me to gather parts of this 'Blue Nile's' wall. That led me to those shipwrecked knights, who had settled in Antioch. They produced the other two, and offered to sell them for next to nothing. They kept them under sackcloth, having discovered that if they looked too closely, the fragments inspired fits of madness.

I was one of the scholars they had heard of, but I didn't want to touch them — I knew they'd been allowed to leave for a reason. I met one part of the Painter, so it might have arranged for me to gather the rest and complete itself. No, I watched their treasure pass down the generations, waited until I found a relic capable of concealing them. My scrolls tell me that about a hundred years ago, I purchased them from a Scottish aristocrat."

Frost grew on the black gunwale. A wall of mist loomed in front of them, defying the wind. Victor buttoned his jacket against the cold. "What is the Painter, Anointed One? Is he like you?"

"He is one of an old order. They rebelled against the gods and were locked into bodies as punishment — and yes, those bodies resemble mine, carrying an immortal spark through many lives. They were like gods once, and wish to be so again. That's why they collect certain secrets that would interest anyone who wished to become a god. I think this Painter made his great work to escape that fate. So I lured another one of his kind, who did not escape the body prison: Aziza, who stole my face."

"So she killed and replaced you," said Victor. He blushed at his own words.

"I miscalculated. Your tone is entirely too familiar, my priest."

She glared at him until they plunged through the mist. He bowed his head, saying nothing.

"In any event, I hid a slug of the old bronze inside each fragment long ago — and I always know where the products of my art lie, for as I said, our works are a part of us. Aziza must have brought the fragments here, to rebuild the wall — and that means someone has found the third, lost piece."

She turned and held up a hand. The pilot glared again and started to slow the *Whisper*.

"I go on alone," said the Merew-Tjaw. "It's customary to swim in a 'wetsuit,' correct?"

"Yes, though your immortal form may have no need," said Victor. He glanced past her. The island was a black spearpoint against mottled purple clouds.

"I don't want to go naked, or wearing a soaking dress. I trust you have something suitable?"

"I'll get it myself. Anything else?"

"Wake your soldier up. Be ready."

• • •

The Anointed One's face dissolved. Aziza opened and closed her mouth as if releasing tension from an uncomfortable grimace. *My own face.* But when she looked into a tidal pool she was repulsed at the meaty, animal thing that stared back at her. *Human. My trap.*

She strode up the rocks again. The carved wall wasn't at the island's highest point but it was close, sheltered on a smooth ledge below the peak. He Who Escaped (who shared her temakh, and *was* her, though unbound by the curse of flesh) had cut the wall out of the rock, and room to walk around it so he could, if he wished, paint in human form.

She inspected it under white LED light. Hours earlier she'd brought two strong stonemasons to help her set each fragment in place, and if necessary, cement them using ancient techniques. The pieces had wrenched out of their hands as if pulled by a magnet and had snapped in place. Even the seams where the stone had fractured had vanished. Thus, she had shot both useless artisans. The woman had tumbled into the sea, but the man had crumpled against the wall. She saw that his blood had crawled up the blank base on to the carved reliefs, to outline the Judges along the Nile shore. Their impossible shapes now flickered red.

She heard her ship's engines cough and rumble, as it left the shore. She chose not to pursue it. The crew must have broken radio silence and discovered her deception. Victor Alexiou had called away security forces, rousing their suspicion.

It was better to be alone now, to meditate before she escaped the flesh.

So she breathed, and summoned what she could of the first days. *I grew wings with a thought. I smelled smoking meat, laid out for me in sacrifice.*

I saw Azar's face. Yet her mind's eye could not remember the god's true features.

She heard a scraping sound from the base of the wall.

The male mason stood, staring with two eyes and the red-lidded wound in his temple. In the lamp's light, she saw the liquid blue umbilicus drip from his foot

and down the rocks, an ancient river twisting. Aziza looked further and she saw the woman, pink with diluted blood, clambering out of the sea, top left quadrant of her head dented and ripped.

"Sister," they said together. "No. Myself," and a third voice joined them, speaking Iremite with dulled consonants. Beyond them, a bloated body heaved itself up. Save for the lack of predation, it looked like it had been drowned for days, losing every mark of identity to swelling and bleaching. Blue rivulets poured from a diagonal wound in its abdomen, connecting it to the others.

Aziza dropped to both knees, trembling. "I dreamed of you. Between lives, as I wandered Neter-Khertet I dreamed of you, Blue Nile. Free One. Can you liberate us?"

"I can," said the corpses. The stonemasons turned to the drowned one, grabbed the lips of its wound and tore it open. Fetid water and gray intestines spilled out. They dug in again; the masons stood wide and pulled hard, ripping the final fragment out of its abdomen. The drowned one collapsed; the Blue Nile erupted from mouth and wound, each gout flowing to a dead mason.

They handed the slab to her together, with four hands. "Put it in its place. It was made by our art, and will be remade by it. Do you have your brush?"

"Always." She cradled the corner piece in one arm and drew her brush from her pocket. Aziza ran her index finger along the bone handle and looked at the black ox-hair at its end. She put it behind her ear and climbed the rock face behind the carved wall.

"Not yet," growled something from the shadows between. Aziza looked down. White, sharp teeth glistened.

• • •

Leaping from the water with soul-born strength, she donned her full panoply of gold, crushing stones under metal weight as she moved ten feet or more with every step. In mid-flight, Merew-Tjaw pressed a button on the radio and said "five minutes." *That should be enough time, even limited to line of sight.* In less than one minute, she crashed to the ground before the carved Painter's wall. A headless old corpse lay before it, wearing her clothes. *Aziza.* The witch's blue fluid crawled over two dead mortals as they did upon Mekaw. He held the last fragment and stood on the rock face, behind the carved wall.

"Merew-Tjaw," he said, twisted, great-mawed face lolling. "Do you know me?" He twitched as he said it. "Do you *know* me?" He doubled over in pain, and caught himself on the wall.

"Mekaw! What are you about to do?"

"I serve the Shan'iatu! I am their slave, as you made me — as they made you! That's what this contains: one of the old masters. It can free us both!"

"I'm not a slave, Mekaw. The Deceived are liars."

"I ate enough of her to know. Her flesh whispered its secrets to me. These ones confirmed it." He gestured to the corpses with Aziza's severed hand. It was holding her brush. "It's a small thing to pay for our freedom — cheaper than the price you paid at the gate."

At the gate. Shapes swam at the edge of her mind. Twilight and fire.

At the gate. It was an old memory. Merew-Tjaw saw pillars and smoke: the forest of *djeds*, spines of Azar. Irem. Every night she could, she smelted tin and copper scrap together from what they traded with the mine slaves, who were always eager for wine and drugs — they were going to die soon, and valued such pleasures highly. She was busy with these experiments when her mother died by the rod for being too slow to serve one of *them.*

At the gate. She sat before House of Gold and Bronze, home of the Mesen-Nebu. Two of their slaves placed wet, herb-packed leaves on her burned hands. Merew-Tjaw saw her spike on the gate. She had made the bronze herself, and hammered it to the gate. Her father had carried her on his back because she was too short to outrun guards at the slaves' huts. He'd come with her brother to see her attempt the alchemists' test.

At the gate. Her name was Nira. She placed a scarred hand on Merew-Tjaw's shoulder. *We would accept you into Those Born of Gold*, said the journeywoman. *But you are a slave, and our mysteries demand a price. What will you pay?* The alchemists were Born of Gold. They operated the mines, drawing forth shining metal for the Empire. Merew-Tjaw knew what she must do, and pointed at her father and brother. *Nur and Mekaw.* She walked inside before the guild chained them.

Merew-Tjaw looked at her hands, ashamed. They were only flesh, and she was weak. Beyond them, the Blue Nile crawled up its wall, into Aziza's stolen brush. Mekaw painted the river in. He had replaced the missing piece.

"I forgive you!" he shouted. "I forgive you! The Shan'iatu's going to save us, my sister! He's going to rip all the imprisoned parts of himself out of Deceived bodies. He'll ruin the earth and shit on the Judges!"

Thunder rumbled on the horizon, without a storm.

The Blue Nile rippled upon its carved pathway. Judges of blood cavorted on its shores, over Merew-Tjaw and the masons' still bodies, and Aziza's mummified corpse. The stone drooped like melting metal before it shuddered and threw Mekaw down. He tumbled across the stones to Merew-Tjaw's side.

The roaring in the sky grew louder. She lifted him up by his wrists and looked him in the eye. Behind him, blue smoke spilled out of the wall, groping at the air. Merew-Tjaw identified a face in the rippling thing, with eyes like Duat's negative stars.

"Mekaw," she said. "My brother."

She realized what she must do, but there was no time. The thunder arrived and ripped them to pieces.

• • •

Greta looked up from the sight. She was very pale.

"Direct hit." She dropped the tube. "I made an unguided shot with a stinger missile from a rocking ship."

"I know." Victor finished putting out fire its back-blast caused, tossed the extinguisher, and frowned at the charred deck.

"Yesterday I saved you from some kind of zombie aikido master. And ghosts."

"What is your point exactly?"

"I want a raise. And a higher rank in the Limitless Pillar."

"All things to the deserving. What did you see?"

"It was something. I—" and then she started to thrash, screaming. He held her arms down so she wouldn't claw her eyes out, but when the screaming stopped, he knew it was too late to save her tongue.

He stayed by her side even after the pilot fetched a sedative.

• • •

Merew-Tjaw drew an outline in pain to describe what remained of her: a torso, one arm, and half a face. *Recoverable*. She was still strong from her new Descent.

The blast had obliterated the wall. She couldn't see anyone else with her good eye — just smoke and broken rock. But the rock shifted, pushed by the thing that was the Blue Nile.

Temakh. She'd studied it. *The magical spirit.* The Egyptians said it was part of the soul but before them, the Empire knew it belonged to the Shan'iatu alone, given to them to practice the gods' Art, to raise civilization.

Smoke and mad shapes assembled into a humanoid silhouette twenty feet tall. She couldn't count the number of eyes. *This is only part of it. The rest are imprisoned within the Deceived.* She'd hoped the Blue Nile had been anchoring the renegade Painter to the world, but it had only been its hiding place, as she'd feared in an instant before the blast.

Merew-Tjaw reached out, feeling with her hand until she felt the metal cut her. *I hope it's the amulet, not shrapnel,* she thought. She forced Ka into it. *By the Soul That Endures, I invoke thee. Unite Neter-Khertet with this breathing world.*

Yellow haze poured out. It felt sticky on her skin because it was ghost weather, made of ash and mourners' tears. She propped herself up and saw slicks of red in a purple-black sea. *Wine dark.* And suddenly she floated above the rubble.

It held her in a thing like a hand, and pulled her close to its face.

It assembled a mouth out of a hundred teeth, produced a forked tongue and said, "**What have you done**?"

"You don't recognize this place, Mighty One?"

"**Before you knew language I walked Neter-Khertet. I ground ghosts into dyes to paint the sorrows of their passing. I bound your ancestors' fleeing souls to their rotting shells, that they might dance and fuck in our palaces**."

"Yes, in your time…in your glorious time! This is the place of ghosts, but it's where the god who banishes those unworthy of the living world dwells."

"**Wait**."

"Even immortals."

"**Please**."

"Anpu!" she screamed. "Come! See who has strayed from the Judges' path! Come, lord of the borderland! Send this errant one on his way!"

At that, twin red moons blazed in the death-fog. The tapered ears rose first, black sails, with red veins for masts. The renegade Painter released Merew-Tjaw, and she tumbled into the blast crater. The night was filled with a jackal's face. Its fangs were an afterimage of lightning. Its body blocked out the sky, and clouds glided across its muscles. A seven-fingered hand closed around the thing that had been the Blue Nile, the escaped Painter.

"Please," it cried. "**Why do they refuse to Judge us**?"

Anpu closed his fist.

She went blind, for the god's voice filled her mind and she could do nothing but listen.

I have sent that one to its proper place. Animals and humans, gods and demons, mortals and immortals, and things which I am not permitted to describe to you belong to an order of things, Merew-Tjaw. We whisper it to you in falling stars and oracular babble. Creation is wounded but abides, though not without effort.

"Mekaw." She knew not whether she thought or spoke the name. "My brother. What will happen? Can I free him?"

You have served, and will be rewarded. I will lessen your burdens after the fashion of your kind.

• • •

"Rise, Victor Alexiou." Merew-Tjaw gripped the gilt arms of her throne and leaned forward as he stood. The throne room was empty, shorn of all decoration except the throne, as her Limitless Pillar searched for any bugs and booby traps the usurpers might have left behind.

"Anointed One." He looked at his feet as usual, and saw white dust on his knees. *These renovations*, he thought, and stopped himself from brushing it off in her presence.

"You will never kneel to me again," she said. "You will never avert your eyes. Excellence is the coin of godhood, and you have paid."

"Thank you, Anointed One."

"Listen: I make you *Sadikh* high priest: my immortal companion. You have arduous rites ahead. Prepare yourself."

With that, Victor met her gaze. He had always seen her eyes through sidelong glances, where they shone in oblique light — blazing, judgmental, and always seeing beyond, to some horizon. Yet in direct view, they looked perfectly human.

"Only fools enter into such a covenant blindly, Victor. I give you until the next sunrise to ask any question, and I will answer it."

He blinked in thought and brushed the dust off his knees, but returned to her eyes.

"We might be here awhile then, Anointed One. May I have a chair?"

She pressed a button on her throne, and it was done.

"Well, I'd like to know more about the reason you're honoring me: the incidents that led some of us astray, and killed others. Who were our enemies?"

"Two of them were Deathless like me, but they serve spiritual corruption."

"What do you mean?"

"That is a difficult thing. Beyond those who become gods, there are eternal gods, who watch and judge us."

Sounds Catholic, he thought. That brought his Uncle Nick to mind. "And the third?"

"A thing called a Shuankhsen. They're like the 'zombies' you showed me in the television, but perhaps more intelligent? They hunt those who possess divine essence. I'll teach you to guard against them."

"How did it find you?"

"That particular one?" I don't know," said Merew-Tjaw. "They hunt like jackals."

Victor could not think of anything more, but he stayed in his chair and regarded the woman he had once worshipped. They talked about small matters, until the retreating sun cut shadows across the bare walls.

THE BROKEN BOY WITH AZURE EYES

Mercedes M. Yardley

"Chaciutique is angry again."

"Chaciutique is always angry."

"Yes, Barros, but it's more than that this time. I can hear her screams coming from inside the volcano. It roars down the mountainside. She's crying for sacrifice. Don't tell me that you aren't hearing it as well. I know you better."

He smiled at her, the way he always did. The way he always had, since they had been children running through the jungle, chasing howler monkeys and birds through the trees. Back when they had thought things were simple.

"What of this outraged screaming you speak of? I cannot hear it. Not a word."

"Oh, you," Violante said, and pushed against her lover's chest. "You tease. Always you tease."

Barros shrugged.

"I tease because you worry. But yes," he said, and his eyes grew dark, like the moon when it is covered by clouds. "I hear her. The fire goddess is shrieking to be appeased."

"She asks for it more and more. Soon there will be no one left."

"If her cult is so eager to keep her satisfied, they should sacrifice their people, not ours."

"Barros."

"You know I'm right. Why do you act as if I could be wrong?"

She sighed, and he watched the way she ran her hands through her dark hair. Hair as dark as hearts, as dark as passion.

"I've been trying to create the Blue Nile," she said under her breath, and Barros stopped. The sounds of the animals, of the insects, seemed heavy and dense

and too close around his ears. The very earth itself leaned in to hear what Violante had to say.

"Trying?" he asked.

"Trying," she said, and stood from their bed. The fire outside glinted against her naked skin, throwing shadows against the bronze of her body. *So beautiful,* thought Barros, although the priests wanted it covered up all of the time. They wanted everything tucked away, held back from its true nature. Women covered, children baptized, volcanoes exorcised. It made no sense.

But what Violante was saying here? That made sense.

"Trying," she said again, and frustration made her voice grow rough. "Time and time again I have used the words. I have sat down with the others and I have *tried,* Barros! Tried everything to create the relic."

"You can't force it, love. You know that."

"What good is it to have the ability to create the relic if we can't do it when necessary? I keep thinking that if I could focus enough, or work harder…."

He stood and put his arms around her.

"You know that isn't how it works. It isn't work such as laying brick. It's art. It's arcana. It needs the spark, Violante. Otherwise, you'll just end up with…."

"Useless bits of trash. You're not telling me anything I don't already know."

She stepped away from him, peered out into the night.

"A bowl of sky blue. I thought perhaps it could save us. But it cracked. Then a stone that shone like the water. It, too, cracked."

She began to pace, and the small anklet of bone and shell rattled and chimed with her steps.

"A feather, a bit of cloth. A tiny doll. All of these things I hoped would be the relic, would be the Blue Nile. But no. None of it. Nothing more than wasted hope and energy."

"Violante."

She spun to face him, her face mighty like a hawk, her eyes burning like the very volcanoes themselves.

"We are to die, Barros. The Goddess of Fire and her cult are insatiable. And while a sacrifice here and there used to sate her, now we are forbidden to do so by the Christian Spanish. They think that Chaciutique is a demon, and perhaps she is. But will a simple cross erected at the volcano's mouth really keep us safe? Of course not. Of course not!"

Barros took a step backward, giving her the room she needed to pace, to rage, to throw her hands into the air. She'd be screaming into the night next, something she had always done, and it tugged at his heart and made him love her all the more. Madness. Sweet madness in his dear one, somebody caged by rules and their new

religion and all of these social constructs when she was really meant to be free. Running past the waterfalls in the dark, catching fish in the sunlight. Not worrying about sacred rites and angry goddesses and the slaughter that would come to their village if the Spanish learned that human sacrifices still continued.

"The Spanish take away the only way we know how to appease her! I don't understand their reasoning. If we sacrifice a child to the volcano, they murder fifty or a hundred of us in revenge? I thought the goal was to save lives. They do not live by logic. They don't understand how we mourn each and every person we lose to Chaciutique. These are not decisions we make lightly, but the kill us in droves anyway. And these relics…."

"It is not your responsibility alone to create the Blue Nile," he told her soothingly. He touched her skin, hot in the humid night, and fairly flinched at the current running through her veins.

"No, it is not my responsibility alone," she said, and her eyes flashed the lightning that hummed through her body. "Help me."

"You know that I…"

"Help me," she insisted, and then she was pressed against him, her hands in his hair, her white teeth on his throat. "Tell me that we are all worth fighting for. That the life hasn't been pressed out of you. Tell me that inside of that old, dead soul of yours, there's a hint of fight. I pray there's still passion in you."

This surprised him, took him aback.

"There's always passion," he said, and caught his fingers in her black hair. "You know this. I'm fairly created from it. It wounds that you would question."

"You had passion *once,* Barros," she said. Her voice sounded like water on rock, like somebody drowning alone and forgotten, far, far away from everything else. "And yes, it ran you. Consumed you. It was one of the reasons I fell in love with you. But now?"

"What of now?" he asked, and felt danger quicken in his blood. Felt the words fall from his mouth like arrowheads. "Tell me how I seem to you now."

"Distant," she said, and the fight was gone. Her animation. The birdlike fury of her face. She was young, too young, and tired, and he saw the weight of their village pressing upon her thin shoulders.

"You have become distant," she said again. "Preoccupied inside of your head. You say with your mouth that you are discontented to follow the priests, yet you do whatever they say. And you have left me alone."

"I would never leave you alone."

He thought he saw tears, but perhaps it was a trick of the firelight. Surely so. Violante wasn't one for such things. She was one for ferocity, for aggression and action, but nothing so useless as tears.

“Barros.”

The way she said his name. The way she had always said it. He had known even as a young boy that no other creature could say his name in precisely the right way that this small girl could.

“Yes, love?”

She swallowed hard.

“Then why do I feel alone?”

Barros had worked in the quarries. He had hunted for food and fought off the beasts of the jungle. He had stood by as his younger sister had been offered as a sacrifice to Chaciutique.

It was an honor to be chosen, they had said.

She had been pure. A gift to the Goddess of Fire.

What a wonderful gift this one girl child could offer, they had told him. Saving the entire village. Stemming the flow of lava and hell-smoke that would have burned their homes, killed their people.

“Yes, an honor,” his mother had agreed, and thrown herself into the smoking volcano less than a fortnight after her only daughter.

Barros still heard their screaming in his dreams.

But he was a strong man, a good man, and never mentioned these things. He continued to work. Continued to hunt. Continued to shut himself away, leaving the arcana to his Violante. Let her deal with creating the effigy, with murmuring the words to bring forth the Blue Nile.

Barros had already done his part, years ago. He couldn’t be asked to give anything else.

“You can’t save everybody,” he said. His hand lay heavy on her cheek. “That is the nature of people. They take and take and take until there isn’t anything left. Give all that you have and they’ll only ask for more. They’ll drain you until there isn’t anything left, my love.”

She put her hand on top of his.

“Then I will find more to give. Then I will lean on your strength. They can use me until I’m a shell of myself, I don’t care. But I have to try.”

He sighed. He ruffled her hair, and she wrinkled her nose as she had always done.

“Then I will help you,” he said simply, but that was enough. Violante threw her arms around his neck, pressed her mouth to his.

“I knew you would help me. I knew you would,” she whispered against his lips, and she was pulling him down to the blanket.

"It's been so long. I can't remember the arcana. I can't remember how to do it exactly," he said, and then he was laughing and kissing her back.

"I'll teach you, you forgetful old man," she teased. "I'll teach you right now, if you'd like."

She whispered of the magic she had learned, of the Blue Nile that would summon a power to save them, of the happiness of the village when they were completely free of the angry goddess and her militant cult of followers. She also told him of other things that made his heart beat fast and quick. For the first time in a long time, he felt a spark. And there was creation.

• • •

Chaciutique's cries for satiation became louder. The painted warriors of her cult crept into the village one night, spears at the ready. They stole a girl from her bed. She was still young enough to wear her hair short, a doll that she had mostly outgrown lying beside her.

Her father and brothers rushed to defend her. Chaciutique's men made quick work of them and then dragged the girl, still screaming for her dead papa, off into the jungle, up the mountain, toward the volcano.

"Why will it not work?" Violante demanded. She moved slowly lately, her belly huge with the strong child that rippled beneath it. Her body had weakened in these final days, but her eyes were bright and as full of fire as any volcano. "This is what we do. We create. We build things that are useful. Beautiful. And yet when it is most important, we cannot. Refuse. Pieces of broken magic. I am a shame."

Barros didn't know what to say. The spark. The words. He felt the magic humming through him, knew that he was putting his heart and soul into creating the Blue Nile.

"I'm not denying it anymore," he said, and Violante took his hand.

"I know. You have truly been a partner in this. I could never ask for more. But still…."

"Calm yourself. For you and the baby."

Her lips curved, then, and Barros saw love. Saw it personified, saw that it existed, saw that human beings were capable of the most marvelous of things if they only slowed down and ceased that mad struggle of existence for a bit.

"Barros, you're far away. Where did you go?"

He smiled. He would never know how she loved the flash of his white teeth in his skin. She would never tell him that in her darkest of days, she would think of his smile and hold to it as a rope. To him, it was just a smile. Just Barros. He wouldn't know that to her it was everything.

"I was thinking of peace. That you make me think maybe it is possible."

She laughed.

“Maybe it is, but not for us. Oh!”

Her grasp on his hand tightened. Her dark eyes went wide and nearly wild.

“The baby?” he asked. He was suddenly Barros the Boy again, poking at frogs with sticks. He didn’t know the ways of adults. He knew how to play, knew how to carry out his chores. He was simple, far too simple to bring a baby into the world, to become a father.

“I need you,” Violante gasped, and he tasted her fear. Watched her muscles bunch and heard her breath catch in ways that no woman’s breath ought to ever catch.

“I’m here,” he said, and again he was Barros the Man, husband to Violante, sorcerer. He remembered exactly who he was and what he stood for. He recalled all of the things he could do.

“I’ll get you through this,” he promised her, and as she labored for the rest of the day and far into the night, he kept his promise. He used all of his strength, all of his encouragement. When she screamed and cursed and prayed and bled and cried, he fed her as much of himself as he could.

“Remember running down by the river,” he whispered, and this calmed her. “Think how it will be to teach our little one to do the same. There will be so much joy in this child, Violante.”

There was a time where she went far too quiet, her eyelids closed and her breathing so shallow he couldn’t feel it against his cheek.

“Stay with me, lover,” he commanded her, and there was so much surety and power in his voice that her soul, so fleetingly tethered on this plane, paused in its ascension and returned to listen.

The child was born. He was the most beautiful of baby boys, perfect and healthy and…Barros frowned, and gently touched the small stump where the child’s hand was supposed to be.

Broken. Like everything else they had created together, the boy was broken.

He cleaned the child’s face and laid him on Violante’s breast.

“Is he well?” She asked.

Her voice had faded into something ethereal. She had become half a ghost herself during this delivery, and although her body had returned fully to earth, part of her soul seemed swallowed in the starlight.

“He is very well,” Barros said.

“But he isn’t crying.”

“Not all babies cry.”

Violante wrapped her arms around her son.

“There’s something about him. Something heavy. He feels like salvation, Barros. Somehow I think this child will save us.”

He smiled then, smoothing his wife's damp hair back from her face.

"All new parents think that. I do, as well. Look at what a perfect boy. That face. Peace in the midst of all of the chaos. A hand like that used to be a death sentence, but not anymore. We will teach him. He will learn to weave rope and break rock. He will provide. He will scurry up the trees like a spider monkey. He'll find a little girl, a baby Violante, and they will go fishing together. Learn to make fire together. Eventually have a family together. And in all of this —"

"Barros."

His mouth was still open when her words cut him short. Her tone. Seriousness and wonder and awe. But it was the fear that froze his blood like cold sweat, that ceased his dreaming for their child.

"Look at him, Barros."

Curse all of the gods, but he didn't want to. He didn't want to see whatever it was that she needed him to witness. He wanted to turn his face away, or bury it in his wife's hair, and have everything be all right again. Just a simple life with simple pleasures and the simplest of problems. Survival, and that was all. But already with a child, there were complications. Already there were things he didn't want to face.

Barros was no coward. He turned to look at his new, silent son, who was, in turn, studying him with the most direct of gazes.

The bluest of eyes. The color of a feather, or a broken bowl the color of sky, or an aqua stone that shattered into shards in their hands. The color of strange bits of cloth. Of tiny dolls. Of a thousand other things that hadn't worked.

"Have you…ever seen such blue eyes in a child?" She asked quietly. Reverence. Disbelief.

"Not in any child, no. I have never seen blue eyes of any kind in a Mayan child."

They stared at this new being, at this Thing That Could Not Be. A living, breathing effigy.

Their son.

The Blue Nile.

• • •

Raising a child in their small village was difficult enough. Raising a child seen by some as either a god or a devil made it even harder.

Ini-herit was different from the very beginning. He didn't cry when other babies cried. When he suckled at Violante's breast, he watched her with those pale, disturbing eyes so out of place in his dark face. When they sat him on the hard, packed ground to play while they worked, he would often turn his face to Chaciutique's volcano.

"He is waiting," Violante said.

"He'll wait forever," Barros returned. "They'll never have him. Never. Now that we have created a relic, the Arisen will be summoned to protect us."

"If Chaciutique doesn't go out of her mind with wanting, first. She knows he's here. Haven't you heard the fury of the volcano? It's worse than it ever was."

"Have faith, Violante."

She laughed.

"Faith in what? The God of the Spanish? The good nature of Chaciutique's cult? I have faith in you and me, and that is as far as my faith extends in these days."

Barros wanted to sigh, but kept it inside. He, too, was worn thin as threads by the shrieking demands of the Fire Goddess, of the inability of the villagers to keep themselves and each other safe. He built and built, but the walls weren't tall enough or strong enough to keep the warlike cult out.

He wasn't a man used to hiding behind walls. He was used to facing danger with his spear in hand. But with their special, unusual child….

"The Arisen will help us," he said simply. "Put your faith there. Chaciutique wants to devour the Blue Nile, yes. But we know there is another who will walk and claim what is rightfully his."

"Our son?"

Barros turned his dark eyes away from the baby.

"We'll keep him safe for as long as we can. But there may come a day when we have to give him up. You know this, Violante. This comes as no surprise."

Her mouth twisted into something fierce and ugly.

"Anybody who tries to take Ini-herit will have my blood spilled on their hands first. I won't simply hand him over, Blue Nile or no Blue Nile."

Barros smiled at his wife.

"And this is why I love you. There is no use worrying about it today. We'll work. We'll look forward with hope. We'll guard ourselves and our child. This is what we will do, yes? No more can be expected of us at the moment."

Barros returned to the quarries. He used stone and wood lashed together to strike at the stone, carving it from the rock. He made bricks, and bricks made walls. Walls kept the enemies out. He knew this. It was all that he surely knew these days. He cut and carved and hacked, letting all other thoughts fall behind.

• • •

Ebek-Nedjes's eyes opened wide after being closed for years. Something hummed through his body, filled him to the core. It spilled out of his fingertips and eyes and open mouth.

Sekhem.

The name itself didn't flow through his mind, but the taste and power of it lit his dried marrow on fire. Pushing him, prodding him. It was like a light that shone far too bright directly into his eyes.

He moaned. Roared. Pushed out with his old bones, broken limbs of reed and dust. They should have been fragile, tied together with fine cloth that had grown rotted and gnawed at by insects and time, but they pushed against something heavy and unyielding.

He pushed again, using his strength and his voice, and the heavy thing budged. Moved. A sliver of light cut through the darkness, a blade of strangeness. He was trapped. Enclosed. Again, the words meant nothing but the feeling of isolation, of containment was so strong that he fought against it.

He struggled again, one last time, and the heavy door that held him inside the sarcophagus grated against stone as it allowed him freedom.

Air. Stale, yes, but still sweeter than the air he had been bundled up and left to rot in.

Black balls of fur scurried across the stone floor. Something in his mind told him they were nothing to worry about. He was hungry, driven, ready to consume, to stuff power down his maw until there was nothing left.

"You awake."

The creature turned toward the voice.

"It has been many years, Ebek-Nedjes, since you last roamed the earth. I was still a child then. I remember it well."

There stood a man in fine, old robes and a tall headdress. His clothes tugged at the back of Ebek-Nedjes's mind. Something about them was familiar, but he couldn't place exactly what.

He stretched and growled, his dry veins brimming with what felt like fire and rejuvenation.

The old man in the robes smiled.

"Ah, it feels good to come back, I see. That pleases me much."

The creature took a tottering step. Another. Propelling his body took more effort than he would have thought, but soon he was shuffling and moving his arms and legs more smoothly.

"It will take you a while to come to yourself, yes," the old man said. He bowed reverently. "Let me introduce myself. I am Truylos. I have been guarding your tomb since I was a young man of less than twenty. That was many, many years ago. You are Ebek-Nedjes, mummy of the Tef-Aahbi guild. You saved my life when I was a young boy, although you wouldn't remember."

Ebek-Nedjes looked at him, the holes of his eye sockets full of flame.

"It wasn't intentional, I'm sure. My enemies happened to be your enemies, but because of that, I lived when many others died. I witnessed your power, your anger. I watched you fulfill your purpose. And when it was time, you were wrapped and laid here to rest until it was time to be called again. It has been nearly a hundred years since then. Nearly a century since you were last needed so badly."

Truylos sighed and sat on a simple wooden chair that rested in the corner.

"When I was old enough to volunteer, I asked to be stationed here. I am one of many who protect your property. We protect your grave. We watched over you while you slept, and awaited the day you arose. We all do so, but I am the only one who loves you so fully. Thank you," he said, and stood to bow again, "for saving me when I was only a child. Because of you, I have had a good life. I waited all of these years so I could tell you of my gratitude personally."

Ebek-Nedjes felt his arms reaching out toward Truylos. His fingers wanted to grab, his arms wanted to restrain and break this man's weathered bones. His rotted mouth yawned and snapped at the old man's throat. Everything in him cried out to lash out at the man who stood in his tomb, who had dared stand so close by, who had watched him arise and stumble and stagger with an influx of power he couldn't even understand.

But the look in the man's eyes, the peaceful way he bowed his head with such trust and respect held Ebek-Nedjes back.

Truylos straightened his bent spine as far as he could. He stood nose to nose with the mummy, feeling the fetid breath, smelling of bones and leaves, brushing over him.

"Save us once again," he whispered, and bowed even more deeply.

The mummy looked at him, gave a regal nod, and dragged his feet heavily as he worked his way forward, out of the tomb and toward the light of the Nicaraguan jungle.

• • •

They felt him coming. Something in the air changed. It felt heavier, like before Chaciutique rained ash from the sky, gagging them with sulfur and stink. That sense of waiting, like the clouds growing swollen and heavy before they split and soaked the ground.

"I'm afraid," Violante said simply, and her son looked up at her with his peculiar eyes.

"Don't be, Mother," he said, and took her hand.

He was too young to be a comfort to her, just a small boy with sooty skin caked with dirt and blood from the chickens. But he held her hand and stood bravely, and Violante thought briefly how much he reminded her of Barros at the best of times.

“Ah, you,” she whispered, and bent down to kiss his black hair. “You are a wonder. You know that, don’t you.”

He was a boy created by love and passion and arcana, but he was still just a boy. He squirmed away from her kisses and dropped her hand.

“They’re all looking at us, Mother.”

Violante nearly laughed at the boyish thing said by her un-boyish son, but the weight and feel of Something Happening caught her breath. She bent down and picked up her clay pots.

“To the water with us, Ini-herit,” she commanded, and he followed her as any child does on any given day.

The sense of normalcy didn’t last. They filled their pots. They carried them home. They set them in the corner of the hut, but Violante’s face had a sheen of sweat, of sickness and worry that she couldn’t wash away.

She wanted to run to the stone walls and find Barros. She had a strange desire to pick up their son and flee deep into the jungle.

“How long do you think we could live on cocoa and lizards?” she asked him, and he shook his head and smiled at his silly mother.

A tall shadow filled the door of the hut. Violante looked up and stepped in front of her boy.

“Hello, my children.”

“Hello, Father.”

She hated the way that word sounded on her tongue, hated using it on this stern man who preached of a hateful god she didn’t understand, but she knew respect and subordinance went a long way in maintaining the peace as best she could.

The priest was tall. Too tall, and far too thin. His arms were the spindly arms of the weak, of the sickly, of those who were unaccustomed to work. He raked his eyes up and down Violante, judging the length of her hemline, the wildness of her hair. He took in the hut and sighed.

“Aren’t you going to invite me inside?”

Violante tasted something sour.

“Yes, of course, Father. Or we could come out. The air is a bit sweeter there.”

She sidled past him, pulling Ini-herit behind her. The priest moved slightly to let them through, and she breathed in relief when they were outside.

“What can I do for you?” She asked. She held her son’s hand tightly, and he turned his eyes to the ground, as trained. A sweet child. An obedient one. One that nothing whatsoever unusual about him.

“The demon in the volcano is angry. The sky is dark. It’s belching ash and noxious fumes.”

"Yes, Father."

As if she needed this man to tell her what her people have always known. They could read the volcano. They could hear Chaciutique screeching for blood, for sacrifice. Her cult would descend on them soon, if they didn't find a way to appease the undying goddess.

"Do you know why this is happening?" the priest asked. His strange eyes were hard as the rocks they mined from the quarry. "Have you done anything to bring about this activity? Have you sinned against your god?"

A few of the villagers crept closer, watching the conversation. Violante pulled Ini-herit closer to her.

"I do my best to remain clean before the Lord. We all do."

If only she could take this unkind man to the top of the volcano and sacrifice him. Save the village, good priest. Save us all. The irony of thinking this while mouthing platitudes amused her slightly.

The priest's eyes narrowed.

"Surely, you do not mock our great god."

She shook her head.

"I mock nothing, Father. But the volcano Nindiri worries me. It is much angrier than usual, and I fear for our homes. For our village." She waved her hand around her. "I fear for our lives and children. If there is anything I can do to appease Chaciutique — er, the demon inside of Nindiri — I will do so."

The priest nodded, pleased.

"Look to the cross, then," he said, and pointed at the huge wooden cross erected at the top of the volcano. "Pray and be still. Forsake your evil ways and pray for forgiveness."

She bowed her head.

"Yes, Father. Of course. Thank you."

He blessed them in Latin and rested his hand on Ini-herit's head far too heavily. Ini-herit kept his head and eyes down, still grasping tightly to his mother's hand.

Just a little longer, she thought, her head still bowed before the priest. *Just a little longer and he'll walk away. Ini-herit will be safe once again.*

"Father."

Violante jerked her head up at the name. Too high, too earnest. It was Olall's name, a lazy, silly woman who did nothing but cause trouble all day long.

No, Violante thought at her, and shook her head lightly. Olall paid no heed.

"Father," she said again, and sidled up to the priest. She held a basket of nuts in her hands and slipped it into the priest's fingers. "A gift for the servant of God, and to God Himself," she said, and dipped her head.

“Thank you, my child,” the priest said.

Violante held her breath, her hands trembling. Ini-herit felt it and squeezed her hand back as bravely as he knew how.

Olall blinked her eyes, which were far too beautiful for somebody so vacant.

“I don’t want to get anybody into trouble, Father, but I think…I think I might know why the demon of the volcano is so angry.”

“No,” Violante said out loud, but Olall continued.

“There’s a child here in the village. He isn’t a normal child. They say he was summoned by witchcraft and harbored by the unclean. They say that the demon of the volcano calls for this child at night, that she wants a human sacrifice.”

The priest straightened and held the basket of nuts out disdainfully.

“Human sacrifice is contrary to the ways of our Lord. It is forbidden.”

“Of course it is,” Olall said. “I wouldn’t suggest it. But still, there is the matter of the witch child to deal with. What if he were removed from the village? Would that appease God enough to protect us from the volcano?”

Every muscle in Violante’s body tightened. She was ready to lash out at Olall and the priest, at anybody she had to in order to protect her little one. She made a sound deep in her throat, a growl like an animal, and Olall’s lovely eyes widened a bit. She took a step back.

“Witchcraft is a grievous thing to accuse one of,” the priest said. “Is there proof to what you say?”

Olall nodded too hard, too quickly, and for too long.

“It’s on his face, proof of this magic. It’s in his eyes.”

Violante stepped in front of Ini-herit, holding him behind her.

“Shut your stupid mouth,” she hissed, “or I shall kill you myself.”

“Do you see? See what she says to me? Look at her boy’s eyes. They’re unnatural. There’s a demon inside. Look!”

“Run!” Violante shouted, and pushed Ini-herit away. “Into the jungle, quickly!”

“I order you to stop!” the priest commanded, but Ini-herit saw the fear and determination in his mother’s face, and he turned to flee. He heard a sound, a revolting thump of flesh and something that reminded him of fingernails against skin, and then he heard a strangled scream.

His mother.

He stopped and turned, seeing his mother lying on the ground. A guard stood over her with a sword. His mother moaned, moved, and the sword came down a second time.

• • •

Ini-herit froze. His strong legs couldn't run. His sturdy hands couldn't part the foliage of the jungle to aid his escape. He could just stare at the river of red running from the corpse of his mother, matting her dark hair and coating her bare feet.

The priest looked at the woman crumpled on the ground. Then his eyes locked on the boy. He took a deep breath and said something under his breath.

"Look at me, child," he told the boy, and almost against his will, Ini-herit's eyes flicked up. They stared at each other for a very long time.

Eyes of sapphire. Eyes of river. Eyes of an enchanted blue moon. The Mayan's blue, blue eyes were full of the cosmos and stars. They reflected the sun as if polished silver. Arcana was strong in them, and they seemed to shift and change color even as the priest watched.

"It's true," he whispered to himself, and he dropped the woven basket of nuts from his hand.

"See?" cried Olall. "What did I tell you? Witchcraft! The boy has angered God and brought about the demon! See what evil lies in our village?"

At the sound of her shrill voice, Ini-herit again turned to flight. His sandals scrabbled against the ground as he darted away.

"Stop! Unholy child, stop! Don't let him get away," the priest said, and the guard pushed past him, pursuing the young boy. They disappeared into the Nicaraguan jungle.

The priest looked down at the heap that had once been the glorious and fierce Violante.

"Clean it up," he said to Olall, and then he walked away.

• • •

The guard was fast, but Ini-herit was faster. He knew the jungle in the way that only little boys can, and he dodged and skirted through the trees so quickly that he was a blur.

He climbed up a tall tree as quickly as the monkeys themselves, and crouched out of sight. No sign of the guard. No sign of anybody else, either.

He was smart and he was brave, but he was also just a child, and one who had seen his mother struck down.

A bird landed next to him, something brightly colored and charming under any other circumstances.

"She tried to save me," he whispered to the bird, but birds being the flighty things they are, she was uninterested. She pecked around the fronds for a bit and then she flew away.

Ini-herit knew that he needed to get to his father. He needed to tell him what happened and keep him away from the guards until Barros' anger burned itself out enough that it became a manageable thing. Something he could carry on his back alongside the grief he would surely bear without igniting into flame and making a run on the guards.

But that thought quickly faded, too, and Ini-herit was again a little boy with a dead mother, a frightened child who wanted his father. He needed someone to keep him safe from the men who were chasing him.

He sat high in the tree, pulling his legs up beneath him, until his muscles were cramped and his hands tender from clinging to the rough wood. Perhaps it could be better if he could sleep, he thought, but he knew he couldn't. He was a small boy shivering in the dampness of the jungle, and he clung to the tree all through the night.

• • •

Ebek-Nedjes found that walking grew easier. His dried muscles and husked skin had their own memory, and soon he wasn't staggering and toppling as much as he had been. The sounds and shadows of the jungle nearly pieced themselves together in his mind. He recalled some of this, perhaps. His feet moving swiftly through the brush, stepping nimbly over roots and branches that bowed in his way. Running after something, he thought, but his mind couldn't build together exactly what.

That was all right.

The mummy felt a powerful hunger, a drive that pulled him toward something to the far east of where he was. Monkeys chattered and curled their tails around branches, dropping down to get a look at him. Iguanas climbed trees with a swiftness that turned them into things of beauty. But still Ebek-Nedjes traveled, pulled forward by the sheer want that burned in his brain and bones.

The Sehkem swirled through him, so intense that it felt like it would burn away his useless flesh. He opened his jaws and gasped in the humid jungle air, feeling it crowd its way down his lungs, making the organs balloon and flex in a way that they haven't in such a long time.

It felt like life. He had arisen.

• • •

Barros looked toward the sky. It was full of soot and ash. The smell of destruction wafted over and coated his skin like sweat.

"I stink like that cursed goddess," he said aloud, and he didn't like the way the words tasted.

"Barros!"

He heard his name, shouted with a desperation that struck deep in some primal part of him. It's the part that picks up your children and runs away. It's the part that knows it will be devoured. He remembered his father calling his mother's name as she closed her eyes and fell into the mouth of Nindiri's volcano. The sulfur in the air suddenly seemed too close. Invasive. It pushed its way up his nose and far too deep into his mouth. He set his bricks down and coughed.

"Barros! You must come!"

Barros turned to see Miguel, his neighbor in the village. Miguel was a tiny man, nearly timid, but his reedy arms were surprisingly strong, and when it came down to it, he could be counted on to do the right thing.

"What is it, my friend?"

Barros asked casually, but the second the words passed his lips, he knew. He saw the look in Miguel's eyes, the sorrow and franticness and worry there.

Barros' tools fell uselessly from his hands.

"Violante? My boy?"

"Your wife fell under the sword, protecting your child. He has fled into the jungle. The Spanish. The Blue Nile. They know."

Miguel pushed his hand into his heaving ribs to quell his breathing. He looked up at Barros, saw the color had ran from his face like rainwater from palm fronds.

"I will help you look, Barros. Your son is small and easily hidden away. More than that, he is clever." He looked at the ground. "I am sorry to tell you of your wife. You know how highly we thought of her."

Simple words simply said, but they stole the strength from Barros' body and limbs. His soul escaped his mouth with a single breath of air.

"Her…her body?"

"It is gone. She is gone."

"Which way did my son go?"

"I will show you."

The mountain belched more ash into the sky. The rumbling made the ground shake and vibrated the teeth inside of Barros' skull.

"We will find him," Miguel said. "Do not fret. The gods are on our side."

Not vibrations from the volcano, then. It was Barros growling, trying to keep the howling inside. Grinding his teeth together to keep himself from roaring his hatred and anger and terror to all of the jungle.

Behind him, he heard the shrieks of the mummy Chaciutique from deep inside the volcano. It was almost as if she responded to the sounds he wouldn't allow himself to make.

"Tell me what happened," he commanded, and Miguel dipped his head once. He guided Barros deftly back to the village, navigating away from where Violante had fallen.

"It was the town woman. You know, the one with nothing inside her head but seeds. She told the priest about your boy. About his eyes. She suggested he be removed from the village to calm the demon in the volcano."

Barros snorted.

"As if that would silence Chaciutique? She craves the magic inside of Ini-herit's eyes for herself, to keep her blood running and keep her hunger strong. Stealing my son would not stop a thing. It would only give her more power."

Their feet traveled quickly through leaves and fallen trees. Barros thought about Violante, her husky voice that had always called his name in such a way that made his knees tremble, and he nearly smiled. Then he wondered what she had called last, if it had indeed been his name before the sword rent her apart, and he stopped short, leaning against the rough bark of a palm for support.

"Can you keep going?" Miguel asked. Sweat coated his face and body like Arcana. It was a strangely beautiful thing, a sign of life. Barros watched Miguel breathe in and out, watched the way his muscles bunched under his skin as they were fed with breath and fruit and animals of the forest.

"I need Ini-herit to live," Barros said in way of explanation, and Miguel only looked at him silently. They continued on.

"There is more I must tell you," Miguel said, and Barros set his jaw like stone.

"What more can you possibly say? Violante is dead. My son is running to save himself. What more can there be?"

"I am sorry, my friend."

Barros shook his head.

"It is not you. I know it is not. But I do not understand why the skies have opened today and poured out filth and sorrow. Why I have worked hard with my hands until they are bruised and hardened with sun and stone, and it is not enough. Why take what is most precious? What kind of gods have we been cursed with?"

Miguel listened, his eyebrows pushed together by worry and concern.

"It is not the gods to worry about at this time. It is the people."

"The Spanish? Or Chaciutique's cult?"

"And your own people of the village, yes. There is much confusion going on at this time. Surely you have heard the rumors?"

Barros didn't pay attention to rumors. They were for children and women weaving baskets. They had nothing to do with him.

"Your son. It was only a matter of time."

Barros turned on his friend.

“A matter of time until what?”

Miguel swallowed, and stuttered slightly. Winded by creeping through the forest after a small boy who didn’t want to be found, with a man who was nearly ready to burst into flame with torment.

“There is much division among the village. There are those who want to turn your son in and gain favor with Chaciutique.”

“With Chaciutique? Why?”

“To save themselves from her wrath, of course.”

Barros’ face turned red with anger so hot it nearly evaporated the sweat from his skin.

“We are not of her cult. She is not our Arisen one. We have our own that we serve, Ebek-Nedjes. What foolishness is this?”

Miguel shrugged as best he could while pattering through the foliage.

“There are those who worry that Ebek-Nedjes will not come. They worry that we have failed him somehow, or perhaps he has grown weak.”

“You won’t speak such blasphemy.”

“It is not my thought or belief, my friend. I have heard the tales of what happened before. But it is what people say.”

“How long has this been going on?”

Miguel sighed.

“For years, Barros. You do not listen. Violante, she knew, but you turned back to your work and….”

There was a sound in the trees. Both men crouched even lower and Barros held up his hand for silence.

More rustling. Then a familiar chittering that made Barros’ heart drop.

“It is only a Howler. It is not my boy.”

“I will not leave you until you find him,” Miguel said. He had a boy of his own, once, until the lad had stepped on a serpent. He knew what it was like to lose small children.

“Thank you,” Barros said, but his heart wasn’t in it. His head spun. His thoughts were unclear and full of the most primal of animal feelings. His wife. His child.

Everything he cared about.

Miquel started forward again, and Barros followed behind, his thoughts a blur of cults and angry gods and dead Violante and missing Ini-herit.

• • •

Back in the village, Olall tried to look away as the thirsty dust sucked Violante's blood into itself. It was a greedy thing, putting its mouth to the dead woman's wounds and drinking as heartily as it could.

Everything was hungry in the jungle.

She had no love lost for this woman, the mother of the demon child, but she hadn't wanted her dead. She felt a brief stab of sorrow and something disconcertingly close to shame before practicality had its way.

"You heard the priest. I must clean up. Help me," she said to the man standing beside her. Together they pulled Violante's surprisingly heavy body away from the priest and his guards.

"What are we to do with her?" asked the man. "Bring her to her husband?"

Olall shook her head.

"I don't think that's a good idea. You know Barros. He is calm. Methodical. But don't forget he is a sorcerer and has great power. He and this witch created the demon child, after all. Best just to burn her quickly and forget about it. That is what you do with the unholy."

The man was a good man and this bothered him. But he was also a man with a great sense of self-preservation, and he agreed.

There was a large fire kept burning at the outskirts of the village. It kept wild animals away, their eyes shining in the darkness. The smoke protected the villagers from insects. It helped block out the smoke from the volcano's fury.

The volcano.

Chaciutique.

"Stop," she said. "I have a better idea. Something that may help save us. What if we offer her to the Goddess of Fire? She is the mother of the Blue Nile. Would that not please Chaciutique?"

The man looked frightened.

"Human sacrifices are forbidden! And the priest himself is here!"

"The priest himself is the one who had her killed. If that isn't a sacrifice, I don't know what is. Do you hear the roars of the mountain? Can you taste the ash in the air? Chaciutique will kill us. She will destroy us all. Can you not see it?"

The man stared at the body that had once been Violante. Her beautiful hair ran red. Her face looked tormented under the blood. Her open eyes stared at something he could not see.

"She still looks concerned for her son," he said.

"She has no more concerns. She is dead."

The man stepped back at Olall's coldness.

She quickly changed her ways.

"She died bravely, trying to save her son. She would be a good tribute. And when her son is also found, he will be an even better tribute. Enough to please the goddess and earn us some peace. Violante and the child will be together in the eternities. They will be blessed for saving the village. Don't you see?"

The man was silent. Olall sighed wearily.

"I'll do it myself. Guard her. I will find the members of Chaciutique's cult and tell them we have something special for them."

"They will slay you."

The woman smiled.

"Not when I tell them we have an Al-Atin sorcerer for them, who has a demon son. A small child all alone in the jungle, running for his life. Who do you think will find him first? A bumbling priest or the warriors of Chaciutique's cult? And when she is pleased and well-nourished, who do you think she will remember?"

The man cast his eyes on the corpse at his feet.

Olall glared.

"Me," she said, and started off to the base of the mountain where the Fire Goddess' people resided. "They will remember me."

• • •

Ebek-Nedjes could smell it. Could taste it.

The Blue Nile. He was so close that the Sekhem rattled through his bones and gnarled his flesh like fresh rainfall.

He cracked open his jaws as if to taste it on the wind, but there was no wind. Only the still, heavy humidity that clung to his brown skin and wrappings like sickness.

In the distance, he heard unearthly howls and screams that jolted him with their familiarity. He knew them somehow, and reached a rotted arm toward the sound as though that would help grasp it to his memory. Perhaps he could pluck the cries from the sky and hold them close to his ruined eyes, to his broken bosom and *remember*.

The thought slid away like a serpent on the water. Here was the Blue Nile. So close. The mummy felt it thrumming in his coagulated blood, and everything else fell away.

Satiation. The need to obtain. Keep. Protect.

He continued on.

• • •

Ini-herit clung to the branches, tears cleaning his filthy face.

There was something moving below. Dark shadows carrying torches that burned and spit. The smoke smelled like home, and that made Ini-herit's chest ache in a way that felt like death.

Father? He thought hopefully. Then, even more hopefully but with much less reality, *Mother? Could it be you?*

His arms and legs ached from holding his position so carefully. His hands were scratched by the rough bark. More than anything, he wanted to jump down and be carried off in his father's strong arms. His father would keep him safe.

His mother used to keep him safe.

"Where is that brat? Are we going to be looking for him all night?"

Ini-herit hardly dared breathe. The shadows came closer, muttering and cursing, and Ini-herit whispered a prayer without sound.

"Holy God. Ebek-Nedjes. Mother. Whoever is listening, whoever I should pray to, please save me from these men."

That ought to about cover it. Surely some deity or other would listen to him. Didn't his mother always say he was special? Wasn't that why the village hated him so much?

One of the guards came closer, so close that Ini-herit could see the dark hollows of his eyes in the firelight. The child pressed his cheek against the tree and shivered.

"We're not going to find a kid out here. There's too much area to cover. He's probably been eaten by now, anyway."

"Stop your complaining." The second guard was heavier and carried a sword. Ini-herit wondered if it was the same man who had murdered his mother. His stomach heaved and he forced himself to swallow the bile down. It made him feel even more sick.

"If the priest says to find the boy, then we find the boy," the second guard said. "That's all there is to it."

"Since when did you become a man of such faith?"

The second guard cuffed the first on the shoulder.

"Since the money from the priest's coffers pays my salary. And since he lets me keep my head. You should only be so lucky."

The first guard ambled over and leaned against the very tree the child hid in.

"What's so special about this kid, anyway? Why can't we bring back another and say it's him?"

The second guard spat on the ground.

"This one has demon eyes. They color of sky. Have you ever seen such a thing? Eyes of blue shining from the grubby faces of these people? The priest

thinks it's a desecration of God's true intent. I wouldn't disagree. I think all of these stinking worms are unholy. We should simply destroy the lot."

"Why don't we?"

"They know the land. They can teach us things. They supply us with food and bricks as it is. Perhaps in good time, though, when they are no longer useful."

"I'm weary of their primitive ways."

"Me too, friend. But I hope it won't be long until we can quench our longing for their blood. Eradicate the pestilence. Now come. Let's press on."

They stepped through the underbrush, their torches dancing and turning the familiar into things of twisted shadow.

Ini-herit waited until long after they left. Then, nearly crying out at the way his muscles ached and stretched as the blood flowed back into them, he clambered slowly down the tree.

He wasn't the only one in danger. His entire village was being worked into a dry husk before being wiped out.

Ini-herit wasn't many in years, but he had been bred of flesh and arcana. He was blessed with wisdom and resourcefulness. An understanding that others didn't hold.

It wasn't only Chaciutique that they need fear. It was the Spanish. The ones who held sway.

But how to fight back? They were simply masons. They hunted for food, yes, and were well-versed in the ways of the jungle, but there were too many Spanish. The Spanish had strange skins of armor and carried heavy swords. Even his mother, who was a fast, sparkling woman good with knives hadn't been able to avoid the cruel sword of the guard.

His people wouldn't be able to overthrow their oppressors. This was clear to him, and it was far too heavy a burden for such a young boy. He should be throwing stones and chasing the Iguana from the bushes. He should be running down the rivers with his mother, watching her black hair flow behind her as she laughed. He wasn't ready for such responsibility.

"Your life will be about responsibility," his mother had told him. He remembered sitting at her feet while she pushed his hair out of his strange, broken eyes. "You are something special. You are the Blue Nile, and when the time comes, I believe you will save us."

"Perhaps that time is now," Ini-herit said aloud, and he took a deep breath, trying to control his shaking hands.

Prayers to gods are good things. But sometimes they aren't good enough.

If the villagers weren't enough to kill the Spanish, then he would need to find something more powerful. Give whatever he had to give in order to obtain help. Give this powerful something whatever it wanted.

Again, he heard the hungered cries from the Goddess of Fire. She wanted something to sate her. She wanted the Blue Nile.

Ini-herit prayed again, this time for strength to do what he needed to do. He balled his fists to give himself courage, and began to walk to the volcano.

• • •

"This isn't getting us anywhere."

With each step, Barros became angrier, more incensed. He wasn't himself anymore. He wasn't a patient husband and father. He was a man pulled apart at the seams. A man with revenge on his mind.

"There's too much jungle, and only two of us. It's pointless."

"Don't say that," Miguel said, but there was fatigue and worry in his voice. "We'll find him."

"We won't."

"Barros —"

"We won't!"

Barros' roar startled the animals of midnight. They scattered and scampered and flew into the sky. The abrupt movement in what had been jungle silence made Miguel press himself into the ground.

Barros clenched his fists.

"It is useless, don't you see? They have already caught my son. Or he is lost far within the depths of the trees."

"Violante wouldn't want you to —"

"Violante is dead. And now I have nothing to live for."

"Barros! Certainly you can't mean such a thing."

Barros turned toward his friend, and his face had molded into a mask of brick.

"Do not forget who you speak to. I am a sorcerer. My wife and I created the Blue Nile. I am not some mere peasant of the village."

Miquel sat back on his haunches, studying his friend. Madness shone from Barros' eyes in the moonlight. Grief can display itself as such, sometimes, this he knew.

"What would you have me do, Barros?"

The rage nearly drained away at Miguel's support, but then it was back. It made Barros strong. He needed that strength now, when his limbs and broken heart felt like collapsing onto the wet ground.

“Those who would turn in my child to save themselves. Who are they?”

Miguel hesitated, but Barros grabbed him by his woven shirt.

“Tell me this. If not because you are a friend, tell me because you do not want me for an enemy. I will kill you if you do not do this.”

Miguel pulled on Barros’ hand until he was released. Miguel smoothed out his shirt, not meeting Barros’ eyes.

“I tell you as a friend. And because you are in pain.”

In the middle of the Nicauragua jungle, Miguel whispered the name of a man. A few more men. Men and women and, in some cases, the names of children. It was more than half of the village.

“Could this be true?” Barros asked. “So many people? So many who claim to love us?”

“Fear can make one do strange things,” Miguel said, but Barros was already charging back to the village. He used no stealth but crashed his way through like a wild boar in pain.

Rage blinded him. Agony robbed him of reason.

“My friend, no,” Miguel called, but Barros had already disappeared from sight. Miguel begged the gods for aid and hurried after him.

• • •

Olall stood at the entrance to the tiny village near the volcano.

“Hello,” she called, pleased that her voice didn’t quiver. “My name is Olall from the village nearby. I have a gift for you.”

Rustles in the night. Shadows slipped out and stood before her in the shape of fierce men and women.

“Why do you come here?”

It was a woman who answered, her face painted and leaves adorning her hair. She had a sharp knife held at her side, turning in such a way that the rock glittered in the moonlight.

Olall found that she was addressing the knife, not the woman, but she couldn’t tear her eyes away.

“I have brought you some fruit and seeds in this basket. Do you see my offering? I mean no harm.”

She put the basket down gently and then stepped back.

“Why do you do this?”

Olall cleared her throat.

“I wanted to introduce myself to you. I have another offering back at my village, something worthy of Chaciutique, Goddess of Fire. And after that —“

"You serve Ebek-Nedjes, not our Arisen goddess. Why not offer your precious fruits to him?"

Olall stepped forward, bravely. The spears and knives of the cult shifted slightly, but she gave them no mind.

"I fear for my life," she said simply. "I fear for my village. I hear the cries of your Arisen and see the anger of the volcano. Ebek-Nedjes is not here, and has never been here in my lifetime. But Chaciutique is. Who do I appease? Someone long dead who might not exist, or the hungry goddess in front of me? She has the power to control my fate. Ebek-Nedjes does not."

Gasps from the men with spears. Gasps from the women with bones braided into their hair.

"Oh, please," Olall said. "Do not act as if you are offended. This is practicality. It does me no good to worship as a god somebody who might never return. I am afraid for my life here. Now. Now will you accept my offering?"

The woman with leaves in her hair studied Olall.

"This offering in your village. What is it?"

Olall smiled. Finally. Reason.

"It is a sacrifice. A human sacrifice. A woman killed by the Spanish priest."

Grumbles from the guards.

"Yes, the priest who forbids sacrifices to Chaciutique. Have we not sated her in the past? Offered our women? Our children? Have we not answered her cries with our own blood? My own cousin was a sacrifice. Your Chaciutique supped on her flesh. And yet now, we are not allowed. We are slain for trying to appease the Goddess of Fire who has been here much longer than the Spanish."

"You would go against the Spanish?"

Olall shrugged.

"The Spanish themselves have slain her."

The woman turned her back.

"We have no use for a corpse. You cannot give us refuse and call it a sacrifice."

"She created the Blue Nile."

The woman stopped. Froze. Turned back and stared Olall down.

"She is a sorcerer?"

"As is her husband, surely driven half-mad with grief by now."

"And the Blue Nile? Was it in her possession?"

"It was," Olall said, "but now it belongs to no one. It is free and unguarded."

The guardswoman studied Olall.

“You will be a betrayer to your cult. To your Arisen and to everyone in your village.”

Olall blinked her hauntingly beautiful eyes.

“What does it matter who I am loyal to if I am dead? If the mountain doesn’t kill me, then the Spanish surely will. If the male sorcerer doesn’t do it before then, that is.” She looked demurely at the ground. “You see, I am the reason his wife was killed. I am the reason she lost the artifact. Although I should be a hero for attempting to save the village, I will be an outcast.”

“You sound selfish and loyal to none.”

“I am loyal to life. What could possibly be wrong with that?”

The woman barked the names of two of her guard.

“Take us to your sacrifice,” she said to Olall. “Then we will begin the search for the effigy.”

Olall agreed.

“And do not betray us,” the woman warned. “Your people spend their time building and creating. Ours hunt and collect sacrifices for our Arisen. You have no chance if it comes to war.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it,” Olall promised. She bowed as she backed away, then turned and led the guards to the village.

• • •

Chaciutique. That was her name.

She hadn’t always been a goddess. Once she had been a human, such as Ebek-Nedjes had been human.

The sun was peeping over the horizon. Ebek-Nedjes stared at it with eyes that were becoming more whole and new.

The wails from the volcano stirred his heart in a way that made twisted his stomach. At least it was a pleasure to feel that his bowels and organs were beginning to put themselves back together. Tissue joins. Flesh knits. Blood eventually runs and clears rivulets in the dust.

Chaciutique wanted the Blue Nile. She wanted the effigy, and she wanted it so badly that she was nearly losing her mind. That was a natural desire, certainly, when it came to the Arisen and their relics, but Chaciutique had always wanted more than her share. Lovely and demanding, that was who she had always been.

“You do not get everything you seek, dear one,” Ebek-Nedjes said aloud, and was pleased to hear that his vocal chords hummed and thrummed with his rusty voice. The Sekhem wasn’t as furious as before, the power more refined, and with this, his mind returned back to him in pieces and starts.

He recalled snatches of being a child in the jungle. Eating pineapple so sweet that he licked up every last drop of the juice.

He recalled something about the dark, rich dirt. Having his face pressed to it, breathing it in. What was this memory?

And he remembered Chaciutique. Beautiful and strong, her dark hair always her crowning glory. Her white teeth. The way she always wanted and wanted and wanted.

"That want will destroy you," he had told her once. This was many, many moons and generations ago. "It is stronger than it has need to be."

"You are so funny," she had said, and he still could feel her hand on his cheek, even after all this time. "My love, you have no need to worry about me. There is nothing wrong with want. Desire brings passion and life."

Ebek-Nedjes blinked eyes that made tiny clicking sounds with disuse. He heard the agonizing cries of Chaciutique screaming that she was hungry, that she was unhappy, that she was filled with need.

Some things never change.

But the Blue Nile had summoned him. It was in danger. From Chaciutique? Possibly. It didn't matter. He needed to save it. He needed to wrap his arms around it and carry it back to his tomb and present it to Duat. Keep it safe and sound. Keep it untouched. Even from his former love.

Especially from his former love.

He was so close that he could taste it. Soon the Blue Nile would be his, and his quest would be fulfilled.

And then back to sleep until he was disturbed again.

Ebek-Nedjes didn't want to ponder this. He wanted to concentrate on the way the birds sounded and the swish/crunching sound of his feet through the underbrush. Even Chaciutique's strained voice sounded nearly sweet to him now that his ears were capable of hearing.

He wondered if he would see her. He wondered if he cared.

Then he thought of the Blue Nile again and pressed forward more assuredly. It was what he was created for, why he existed at all. It was all that mattered.

• • •

Ini-herit's golden skin was covered in sweat and grime. He tasted of fear, he knew it. The sun came up over the jungle and the boy wanted to fall to the ground in gratitude. Instead he leaned against the spindly trunk of a stunted tree and took a deep, beautiful breath.

The sun hurt and burned and scorched. It beat down with a viciousness that tanned his skin and sometimes caused blisters. But it kept the creatures of the night away, and for that he was grateful.

"Who are you, boy?"

Ini-herit froze, glued against the tree. He couldn't move his body. He couldn't even move his strange eyes.

"Don't be afraid of me."

A young woman stepped out of the trees. She was dressed differently than the people of his village, her hair tied back in an elaborate way. She came closer to Ini-herit but stopped when she saw the terror crossing his face.

"No, it's all right. Please don't be frightened."

She sat down on the ground and showed him her hands.

"See? I have nothing. No weapons. I'm no threat to you."

Ini-herit trembled like the wind through the leaves, and this made him feel ashamed. He clenched his fists and stood as tall as he could.

"Are you hungry, boy?" The woman asked.

He didn't say a word.

"Ah. I see that you are."

Silence.

The young woman smiled, and her smile was open. Her teeth were crooked and there was something strangely honest about that. Ini-herit thought briefly of his mother and tears crowded his unusual eyes.

"Wait right there. I have something in my basket back here. Please don't leave."

The young woman stood and ducked back into the trees. Ini-herit rocked from foot to foot, not knowing if he should run, not knowing if he should stay.

"Here," she said when she returned, and the simple basket she held reminded him of gold, of seeds, of precious things. "Take as much as you'd like. Little boys aren't meant to be hungry. Not in a place of such bounty."

She stepped closer and Ini-herit pulled away. She nodded and put the basket on the ground, and then backed up several steps.

"Please eat. I won't hurt you. You can trust me."

The boy kept his eyes on her, and crept toward the food. He squatted by the basket, which was filled with fruit and a piece of meat. He stuffed his mouth with food.

"There you go," the woman said, and again showed her beautiful, imperfect teeth. "That's what I like to see."

She knelt on the ground where she was, still safely away, and watched him. Her dark eyes were curious, not scornful. She radiated interest, not anger.

"A man killed my mother. Yesterday. They chased me into the jungle."

He spoke between mouthfuls, and his own voice surprised him.

The woman's face changed.

"Killed? Your mother? Oh, you poor dear!"

She reached out to him briefly before pulling back. He bit into the fruit, realizing he was thirsty.

"I ran and ran. I hid. I'm looking for my father."

"Why would a person do such a horrible thing?"

He turned toward her then, looked her fully in the eyes. She gasped and put her hand over her mouth.

"The Blue Nile," she breathed, and then she couldn't seem to say anything more.

"So you know," Ini-herit said, and shrugged. He turned back to the food in the basket, chewing and sucking and watching this young woman with his strange, strange eyes.

• • •

"I'm going to kill them all."

Barros spoke calmly. He wasn't irate at all, and the collected way he spoke of his anger made Miguel's blood do odd things in his veins. It cooled. It flowed slowly, like cooling lava from the top of the furious mountain after Chaciutique spilled her vitriol.

"You don't mean that," Miguel said. It was an automatic thing; he knew the other man meant it very well.

Barros didn't bother to answer. He turned his face to the unearthly wails coming from the mountain.

Miquel watched him with worry.

"I don't like the look on your face, friend."

Barros turned on him, the hate fire freshly kindled in his eyes again, his mouth twisted into something ugly and sinister, worse than any jaguar from the jungle.

"It's her fault."

"Even if it is, what can you do? She is Arisen. She is so much more than mortal. Demons, the Spanish say. Gods, we say. What can a man do to a god? Or to a demon, for that matter?"

Barros didn't answer but began running. Back to the village, back to his weapons. Back to the people who would fight with him or against him. His boy

was gone, possibly already dead, and it was all because of this *thing,* this monster, that kept screaming and screaming and screaming for something that didn't belong to it.

He heard Miguel crashing through the leaves behind him. He was a good man, but would he take up arms against members of his own village as well as the Spanish in order to protect an outcast boy?

Would anybody?

Ebek-Nedjes, he thought, and it was so very much like a prayer, *please come to us. I have nothing else to offer you, but please save the Blue Nile. He was created for you. My wife…I have nothing left.*

He bared his teeth, a wild thing himself, opened his throat and roared. A sound he had never made before. He screamed again, and he rivaled the Goddess of the Volcano. Such rage. Such want.

Feed me, shrieked the Goddess inside of his brain. *Give me what I crave. Do this or I shall destroy you.*

"You already have," Barros answered back, and screamed and screamed and screamed.

• • •

The young woman passed a clay jug to Ini-herit. He looked inside, saw the water, and drank deeply.

"Thank you."

She nodded, still staring at his eyes.

Embarrassed, he looked down at the ground.

"No, I'm sorry," the woman said. She wrapped her arms around her knees and smiled. "I don't mean to stare. But you just…I mean, you're…you have no idea what you mean to us."

"Mean to you? Why would I mean anything to someone outside my village?"

The girl closed her eyes and shook her head.

"Do you hear that? The volcano? Have you felt the land rumbling beneath your feet?"

"Of course I do. Everyone can."

"You understand what it is that Chaciutique wants?"

Ini-herit sighed deeply. He sounded far more exhausted than his few years should allow.

"She wants the Blue Nile. I know that. She wants me. That's why I came. My mother was killed trying to save me. I can't find my father. I know the priest and his men are after me. I'm all alone, and it seems like there is only one right thing to do."

He looked at the woman, and her kind face made it easier for him to say the words.

"Will you come with me to the volcano? I don't want to go all by myself."

Some people are terrifying when they cry, and some are exquisitely lovely. This girl was the second, and when she swooped in to wrap her arms around Ini-herit, he didn't pull back in fear. He just hugged her back.

"Of course, sweet child," she whispered to him. "You have come to save us. I will stay with you until the very end."

• • •

"Who will join me?" Barros yelled. He stood in the center of the village, holding onto his tools. Tools originally meant to carving and moving stone, but now intended to bash a man's skull in. Several men's. As many men as he could possibly take down before he himself was murdered. "My wife was murdered before your very eyes. My son is missing, chased into the jungle by armed guards. I need help going after them. We must slaughter them before they slaughter my child."

People stared at him. They stared at the ground. They inched back toward their homes.

"No one will stand up? They chase my child now, but perhaps soon it will be yours. Would you fight then? If so, why not fight with me now?"

Miguel stood beside Barros with his knife. A younger man also came and stood alongside. But that was it. The three of them. That was all.

Barros pointed at a man with a large birthmark on his face. He was one of the men Miguel had named earlier as one ready to turn Ini-herit over to Chaciutique.

"What about you?" he asked, pointing at a man Miguel had named earlier. "I hear you are ready to sacrifice my son in order to save your own skin. And you. Also, you. Cowards, all."

The man shrugged.

"Better one to die than the whole village. That is how it has always been. Sacrifice one so the others may live. What makes your son so different?"

"You have no child to sacrifice. It would be different if it was your own flesh and blood. You might not find yourself so willing."

"It isn't my child. But it is my life, and my wife's. My friends and neighbors. One meaningless boy traded for the entire village? It isn't a difficult decision."

Barros took a step toward the man, but Miguel shook his head.

"That isn't important. Finding Ini-herit is."

Barros took a deep breath.

"You're right. Thank you. Now, will no one join me?"

Silence from the rest of the villagers.

"I will remember this," Barros promised, and he took the few men willing to join him into the jungle.

• • •

He was brave for such a small boy. After Ini-herit had eaten his fill, the girl with the strange clothes looked him carefully in his azure eyes.

"Are you certain of this?" she asked him. "I want you to be sure."

The boy lifted his chin.

"If it will save my father? I will do it."

The girl nodded.

"It will certainly save him from Chaciutique's rage. Not only will she be soothed by a sacrifice, but I know exactly what you are. The power she will gain from that? Oh."

The girl's dark eyes lit up in a way that briefly reminded Ini-herit of his mother, and for just a second his lips trembled. Then he pulled himself together.

"Let's do it now, then. There really isn't any reason to wait."

He reached out and took the girl's hand. It was pleasant and warm, dry and strong. Her fingers wrapped around his firmly, and there was something safe about them. There were fingers that wove baskets and used knives and weren't helpless things at all. These were the hands of someone who served a mummy and knew its secrets.

"How badly will it hurt?" he asked her. He felt her fingers jerk momentarily, as if his question surprised her, but then they were calm and still again.

"Honestly, I don't really think it will hurt at all. It will happen fast."

"It's a long way to fall down into the volcano."

She smiled at him, her crooked tooth seeming warm and friendly.

"Not that far. You'll fall quickly. And think of something beautiful so you won't be as frightened. Think of your bravery. How you'll save your father, and the village. You'll save me, too. Thank you for that."

Ini-herit grinned up at her, and she smiled back.

"Also think how you will soon be joined with your mother. That is a good thought, no?"

A good thought, but still terribly horrifying. Ini-herit could only picture himself falling down, down, down, choking on the smoke and ash until his skin burned away.

"Have courage, my boy," the girl said, and held his hand more tightly. Then she dropped to her knees and swooped him up in a hug. "You'll save all of us. I

won't forget. I'll make sure that everybody, your village and mine, know of your sacrifice and what you have done."

Ini-herit swallowed hard. It was a good thing to be remembered. It was a good thing to be brave.

He took her hand again and they continued climbing toward the sound of Chaciutique's incessant screams.

• • •

Chaciutique had been a vivacious thing with an appetite for life. Memories came back like petals on the water. She had been a fine hunter, a fierce warrior, the sweetest of lovers. A thing of passion and beauty. She had been all that Ebek-Nedjes had ever wanted.

But her bright desire grew and grew until it turned into a raging inferno. Her want and need became so vociferous that it consumed her.

"I don't understand how you can be so unhappy," Ebek-Nedjes had told her. He ran his hand down her bronze skin. "You have everything you could dream of. A home. Plenty to eat. Bones and metals with which to adorn yourself. When will you be satisfied?"

"Darling, just a little more is all I need. Just a little more." She kissed him and Ebek-Nedjes returned it, certain that she was right. Just a little more fruit, a little more praise. Just a little more love from him, and when that wasn't enough, from other lovers. Her power grew, her hunger grew, her followers grew. Now she was trapped in the bottom of the volcano with an entire village serving and worshipping her, catering to her every demand.

It still wasn't enough.

He heard the thin edge of pain in her voice as she whined for the Blue Nile. It was so close she could almost taste the Sekhem. She wanted it, pined for it, yearned for it in a way that was horrifyingly indecent in its desperation. She would wrap her hands around the Blue Nile, open her mouth far wider than humanly possible and swallow it whole.

"Destroyer," Ebek-Nedjes said aloud, and his eyes cleared. His voice sounded full and rich and very nearly human.

The Blue Nile wasn't for Chaciutique. It wasn't hers. It was created by his people. He needed to protect it, grab it and carry it back to his tomb where it could be guarded properly. Chaciutique was being driven mad with desire, but it was for a thing that didn't belong to her.

He was getting closer. Sekhem was singing in his veins like molten gold. His thoughts were pieced together nicely now, sewn as animal hide. He recalled his love for Chaciutique, but also his bitter disappointment.

Life flowed through him. It was beautiful and awful and tragic. Feelings both delighted him and stung. He couldn't wait until he found the Blue Nile, the thing for which he had been created, and slipped away with it.

Chaciutique cried out again and the ground shook ferociously.

She should have returned to her own tomb long ago, but she lingered on. A being without a place, a soul without satiation. Her want held her here. She could be sleeping the blessed rest of the dead, with no thoughts to worry or distract her. Instead, she shackled herself.

Ebek-Nedjes stopped suddenly, sniffing and tasting the air. It had changed somehow. Weight. Expectation. Chaciutique's wailing stopped as if she held her breath.

The Blue Nile.

Chaciutique was silent in anticipation. She was certain she was getting her surprise. Ebek-Nedjes could picture her, lips parted, tongue slightly touching her top lip as she leaned toward the thing she sought after.

The Blue Nile was at the base of the volcano, and it was in danger of being stolen, used, *devoured* by the goddess of fire. Ebek-Nedjes couldn't let that happen. He prayed to the gods for speed and started running full-strength toward the volcano.

• • •

The Spanish weren't at all stealthy. They crashed and struggled through the jungle, tripping over roots and falling into the underbrush. Birds and monkeys fled from their clumsy, booted feet. They coughed in the ashy air.

"They haven't found your son yet," Miguel whispered, and Barros closed his eyes briefly in gratitude. "That is why they are in such a foul mood."

Barros nodded. "A Mayan child is a hundred times more graceful in this jungle than the thieving Spanish. The vines do their best to trip them and hold them back. But they allow us to pass through unheeded."

"I can only help the jungle helped Ini-herit along. Are you ready?"

Miguel put his hand on Barros' arm. "My friend, see reason. We are too few and poorly armed. The Spanish guards will slaughter us right away. You know it's true," he said, when Barros opened his mouth. "And then what will your son have to come home to?"

Barros sighed. "A village full of people who would turn him over to Chaciutique's cult."

"I'm sorry," Miguel said, "but it's truth. There are many good people in the village who would care for Ini-herit. But too many who would wish him ill. You and Violante are strong, which is why nobody dared come against you until now."

"Then we follow the Spanish," Barros said to the small handful of men. "We'll let them search for my son, following behind while searching ourselves. They'll exhaust themselves in this unfamiliar terrain, but we'll stay strong. When the time comes, we strike."

The men agreed, and cut through the leaves and trees as easily as a shark cuts through the sea. They examined the ground and listened to the sounds of the insects and animals. They put themselves in the mind of a young, frightened boy and tried to think where they themselves would flee.

"Back to the village?" One man asked.

"To the sea?" Another suggested.

"To flee from one enemy, one might run to a bigger, stronger enemy. One that could crush your foe. Might that be the case?"

Barros turned to the man who made the suggestion, a short, wiry man with dark eyes like rock.

"To a stronger enemy. Chaciutique's cult? Do you think he ran to them? As a trap, perhaps? Lead the Spanish to the wild ones and let them fight each other?"

The man studied him thoughtfully. "I do not know. He is young and fast on his feet. Perhaps he simply fled with no destination. But at the same time, I do wonder if…." He narrowed his eyes, and the rest of Barros' tiny army shifted their feet and readied for battle as they sensed the intense change in the air.

"The fire goddess has fallen silent," Miguel said needlessly. "The ground is no longer shaking."

"She is not crying out for the Blue Nile," Barros whispered, and then he started to run. His feet flew over earth and sticks and vines. The foliage seemed to part for him as she slipped through the debris.

"Barros! Wait!"

He heard the men calling after him, heard them cry out in the excitement of the hunt. They loped behind him, soon catching up.

"The volcano of Nindiri," Barros yelled, and the men split up, each finding their own quickest way there. Nearby, an alarm was raised, and Barros heard the yelling of the Spanish.

"Follow them!" one of them shouted, and soon the Spanish were in hot pursuit.

It didn't matter. None of it mattered. What is a human foe when there is something much more powerful to fear? Barros needed to reach his son before he was led to Chaciutique. That could be the only reason she had ceased her squalling. He only hoped he wasn't too late.

• • •

"Why do you serve Chaciutique?" Ini-herit asked the girl with soft, dark eyes.

She smiled at him.

"What a silly question! I serve her because that is what I am born to do. What we are all born to do. She asks and we obey. If we do not, she becomes very angry with us. Do you remember when the volcano erupted years ago? Perhaps it was before you were even born."

"My parents told me stories of it," he said. "So you serve her because you are afraid?"

She frowned.

"There is more to it than that. But yes, there is fear. Don't you fear the one you serve?"

"We have been taught to honor and revere him. He came once many years ago and saved the village by destroying our enemies. But I have never seen him, and I wonder if he truly exists."

The girl stopped him.

"You mustn't say that. Don't question them. It isn't right."

He looked at her with his strange eyes.

"What, or I'll be punished? I am going to feed myself to your fire goddess. There really isn't much more that can be done to me."

She was silent, but held his hand as they continued walking.

"Ini-herit, are you certain you want to do this?"

He blinked.

"You don't want me to?"

"Oh, I do. I live to serve Chaciutique and she wants you so very badly. Her lust was consuming her. See how she has quieted by simply realizing that you are near and coming? I want her to be happy. I want her wrath quelled. But the expense seems far too great. You're such a dear little boy."

Ini-herit looked at the ground.

"My mother was killed by a sword right in front of me. The Spanish are chasing me. Even my father is afraid of them. The people of my village are afraid of the fire goddess and afraid of the Spanish. They're even afraid of me. Children won't play with me. The elders won't look at me. I hear what they say about me. They call me a witch. They say there must be a demon inside of me. The only person who wants me is your Chaciutique."

"I'm sure that isn't true."

His eyes glittered and he dashed away the tears with one hand.

"It is true. If I can sate your goddess and stop another eruption, then I will. To save my dad. And now to save you. But not to save anybody else. I don't care about them."

The girl was quiet for a while. Then she said, "You are very brave and very old for such a small boy. You speak almost as if you were a man. Perhaps you have seen much in your short time here."

Ini-herit thought for a while. "I have learned much from my parents. Much about the Tef-Aabhi. Much about Ebek-Nedjes and his legends. I learned how to mix mortar and build with stones. I know the names of the fish and birds and fruits in the jungle. I even learned the things the Spanish taught in their strange language and in their one-roomed huts. Things about their malicious god and the demons that we know as the Risen. I had hoped to learn so many more things. Why I was born as the Blue Nile, perhaps. What it was like to grow up and be a man alongside my father. But that is not to be."

The girl didn't say anything more. They walked until Ini-herit's feet ached and he felt a stab of pain in his side, but he didn't slow down, didn't relent. The air became thicker and warmer, the ash falling from the air like small, downed birds. He stared at the volcano which very nearly seemed to pulse with life before him.

"Can you hear her breathing?" The girl asked. Her voice sounded gentle and reassuring, cutting through the terror that was making it difficult for Ini-herit to breathe.

"I think I can. Does she live down there? Inside the mountain?"

The girl shaded her eyes, looking into the sun.

"I don't know if you would call it living. She stays there. She has always been there, for as long as I remember."

"Does she ever come out?"

"No, but she sends the mountain storms. The shaking of the earth, the fumes that make us all ill. Molten rock that has destroyed the village before, although not in my lifetime. I'm sure you heard stories."

"She never goes back to her tomb? After our Arisen battled our enemies and saved our village so many years ago, he went back to sleep. At least, that's what the legends say. That he's sleeping there, still. That's why my parents tried so hard to create the Blue Nile, because it was supposed to wake him up. But it didn't work."

"Ini-herit, please don't lose faith like that."

"My mother always told me that the Blue Nile would save the village. I always hoped it was because Ebek-Nedjes would come. Now I see she's right, and that I will save my people. Just not how I had always hoped."

The girl led him farther on. Ini-herit could see the faint shapes of people through the dusty air. He drew back, hiding behind her skirt, and the girl realized again that for all his courage and heroic desires, he was still a very little boy. She knelt down and faced him.

“These are men from my village. They are here to guard the mountain. Do not let them frighten you.”

I heard your tribe is full of hunters. We’re afraid of you. You come into our homes and take children to throw into the volcano.”

The girl looked down, and her tan cheeks reddened.

“It’s true, and it is a terrible thing. I am indeed sorry.”

“I know,” he said, and fiddled with a stick he found on the ground. “My father told me it is easier to sacrifice strangers than to sacrifice your family.”

“And what did your mother say?”

His smile was a ghost of white before it quickly disappeared. “Mother said to kill you all before you killed us. Or to wait until Ebek-Nedjes killed you for us.”

The girl stood up and dusted off her knees. “Come,” she said.

She called ahead and introduced herself as a priestess to the goddess Chaciutique.

“It is dangerous,” one of the men called back. “She is quiet now, but I don’t know for how long. She has been insatiable. I wouldn’t come closer if I were you.”

“I have something that she wants quite badly,” the girl said, and drew Ini-herit beside her. “This is why she has settled. She knows this boy is coming.”

“A sacrifice?” The second man peered down at Ini-herit, who looked anywhere but at his eyes. “One of ours?”

“No. He is from the mason’s village.”

“I didn’t hear of a raid.”

“No raid. He came on his own.”

The guard raised an eyebrow. He poked Ini-herit with the blunt end of his spear.

“Why would you be so quick to satisfy our goddess, boy? Isn’t life good at your village? Most people fight to stay alive, not wander off to die. Perhaps you are simply a coward.”

The girl drew herself up to full height, and still barely managed to reach the guard’s soldier. “He is no coward! He is extraordinarily brave. He comes to save all of us, not simply his village. He was created for this purpose.” She lifted Ini-herit’s chin and whispered softly, “Show him your eyes.”

Ini-herit took a deep breath and then looked at the guard. The guard’s mouth fell open.

“Come see this,” he commanded the other guard. Together they peered at the small Mayan boy with the impossible blue eyes.

“How can this even be?” The first guard exclaimed.

"He is the Blue Nile, created by sorcerers of the Tef-Aabhi," the girl explained. "This is why Chaciutique has been so enraged lately. She wants this boy and he has been so close all of this time."

The guard eyed Ini-herit. "And you wish to quiet our goddess with your life?"

"I do."

"What about your Arisen?"

Ini-herit's eyes sparkled with tears. "He hasn't come. He won't come. I… don't even think I believe he exists."

The guards looked at each other. Finally the second one spoke.

"If you are to sacrifice yourself to please our goddess, you deserve nothing but respect." He bowed deeply. "Let us take you to the top."

"I will run and tell the village elders," the first guard said, and started down the trail.

"See? You make many people happy this day," the girl told Ini-herit, and smiled her beautifully imperfect smile. "There will be many legends of this day, and you will be a hero in all of them. My children and children's children will never forget you."

Ini-herit took her hand, and thought of his mother.

• • •

Barros and his men were starting to tire, but they pushed on. The Spanish crashed through the jungle behind them.

As they grew nearer to the volcano, Barros saw a crowd gathering at the mountain's base. Their dress was different than his, and he knew immediately that they had stumbled upon the cult of Chaciutique.

"Men," he called, and pointed.

"What do we do?" Miguel asked. "Why are they standing there?"

"I think we know," Barros said, and looked at his companions meaningfully. "There will be a fight. I will battle for my son. Are you willing to do the same?"

"We came this far," another man said, and Barros flashed a quick grin at him.

"Come, then," he said, and they ran until they burst out of the jungle's foliage and into the clearing that surrounded the volcano. The individuals in Chaciutique's cult turned in surprise. Women, children, men with spears, they all stood and gaped at the small party that raced toward them.

"Ini-herit!" Barros screamed at the top of his lungs. "Where is my child? Ini-herit!"

He saw a handful of figures making their way up the volcano. One seemed much smaller than the others.

“Ini-herit!” he yelled again, and his voice sounded like the thundering of the gods. It was carried on the wind, startling birds and cult members alike. He flew over the ground as if he had wings, toward the tiny figures on the mountain.

The figures stopped. Turned.

“Ini-herit!”

“Father?”

The sound of his son’s voice sent shameless tears down Barros’ cheeks. He would never let go of his boy again. Never.

“Come to me, my son!”

“I’m coming!”

Barros watched Ini-herit scramble toward him. One of the men beside him grabbed him up and started pulling the child up the mountain.

“Father!”

Everything happened at the same time. Ini-herit screamed. Barros yelled. His men whooped as they fell upon the fire goddess’ cult, who scattered and grabbed their weapons. The Spanish staggered from the jungle, swords flashing. Chaciutique, who had been holding her breath in anticipation, roared and the ground shook. Her screams were so loud that Barros winced and held his hand to his ear.

“Father!”

Through the noise and chaos, Barros heard the terrified cries of his son. He threw himself into the fray, cutting through anyone who stood in his way as he battled his way closer to Ini-herit.

“Barros! There are too many!”

“Take heart, Miguel.”

Then Miguel was lost in the fray. Barros cut and sliced and stabbed. The feeling of flesh under his weapon made his heart shudder, but he kept his eyes firmly on Ini-herit and struggled forward.

It was difficult to tell friend from enemy. The world narrowed down to bloody, sweaty skin and ear-bursting noise. Something heavy hit Barros in the back of his head and he went down, down, down.

His vision went blurry and everything sounded strange and thick. Ini-herit’s frantic cries blended with everything else, a slow-moving river of crashes and hums. He tried to stand, but only managed to flail his arms and legs in the dirt.

“My son.”

Barros hardly recognized his own voice. It was thick and slurred, racked with a slow-moving desperation that made him feel ill. He needed to move, needed to stand up. Needed to somehow gather the strength necessary to make one last charge up the hill and rescue his child, the only family he had left.

His foot kicked uselessly and stilled.

"Chaciutique."

Barros heard a new voice, deep and commanding, saying the fire goddess' name with such firmness and familiarity that it made him gasp. The squall around him seemed to freeze, and he turned his head to look.

Through the haze of pain, he saw a creature. A man. A god. A being of destruction and salvation. This man/god/demon stood straight and tall, wrapped in ancient bandages that fell from his body like the most triumphant of banners.

"Could it be?" Barros wondered aloud. Dared he hope? Could it possibly be true?

"Chaciutique, I have come," the majestic being said, and Barros nearly wept at the beauty of it. This was the one he had waited for, the one for which he and his beautiful Violente had worked so hard to create the Blue Nile. He had come. He had arrived. He had come to save them all.

It was the Arisen.

• • •

Ebek-Nedjes's body fairly hummed with Sekhem and exhilaration. He took it all in. The war before him, with spears, swords, and rocks. The Blue Nile, which felt so very close. The shrillness of his love Chaciutique's tortured voice told him that she knew exactly what he had come for.

"You can want and lust, but it will not be yours," he said aloud. "It was for this purpose I have arisen."

A man crawled toward him through the dirt and vines. A river of red ran from a terrible wound in the back of his head, sheeting into his eyes and face.

"My lord," he said, and spit out blood. "I am Barros, a humble sorcerer. My wife and I created the Blue Nile. He is a living relic, my son, and he is being sacrificed to the fire goddess. Please save him."

He pointed up the volcano and then collapsed, gasping into the dirt.

Ebek-Nedjes felt briefly moved to pity, but instinct took over quickly. A living relic? It was something unheard of, something that refused to be comprehended, but he did not have time to think of it. First he needed the Blue Nile in his possession; in his hands and as far away from Chaciutique as he could possibly get him.

He tipped his head back and roared, letting the ages of death finally fall away from him in tatters. The horde in front of him all turned and looked, frozen in place with terror.

"It is him! Ebek-Nedjes has arisen!"

Men scattered this way and that, running toward the mummy and from him, chittering in confusion and panic.

A man with long robes and a dour face turned and screamed at the throng of people.

"This cannot be! He is a demon from the depths of Hell! He must be exorcised!"

Ebek-Nedjes paid no attention to the priest. He hurled himself through the crowd, pushing and biting, swiping with his golden knife if necessary as he fought to get through.

It was a mass of panic and blood, and Ebek-Nedjes cut his way through quickly. He ran up the side of the volcano with the otherworldly strength of the Arisen.

The boy was struggling in the arms of a heavily-muscled man.

"Father, father!" the boy howled, but his peculiar eyes went wide when he saw Ebek-Nedjes charging toward him.

A girl in familiar dress stood by, her hands to her mouth. Ebek-Nedjes recognized her costuming immediately.

"A priestess of Chaciutique," Ebek-Nedjes spit out, and his blade arced toward her in a swoop of divine light.

She crumpled to the ground without a sound, her arms reaching toward the mouth of the volcano. Chaciutique's screaming went up in pitch, and her rage swirled around them, a terrible cloud of heat and ash.

"No," the boy cried, and started kicking even harder, fighting even more with his withered limbs. "She was my friend. What have you done?"

The second guard came at Ebek-Nedjes, striking with his spear, but the mummy deftly stepped away. The comforting, familiar flash of gold and the guard fell, shrieking, grabbing at his missing arm.

"The relic," Ebek-Nedjes said to the final guard. "Give it to me."

"I can't," the guard panted. "The fire goddess needs it."

"It belongs to me."

The words were said calmly, but Ebek-Nedjes moved swifter than any snake ever seen in the jungle.

Screams. They mingled in the air. The came from the broken boy, from the two massacred guards, from the villagers down below. They came from the Spanish, from the priest, from Ebek-Nedjes as he bellowed in triumph. He grabbed Ini-herit from the fallen guard, and hoisted the boy into the air.

But one voice soared over the others, so full of rage and hatred and the most intense of longings.

"He's mine," Chaciutique whispered from deep inside her mountain. "So very close. Very nearly here. Lover, Ebek-Nedjes, please give him to me. Please."

Ebek-Nedjes tried not to think of nights wrapped up in Chaciutique's black hair, of how they made each other insane with jealously and the most divine type of love. He held the boy with one arm and studied him.

"How can this be?" he asked the boy.

The boy shrugged. His face was blackened with soot and tears.

"I don't know. It just is."

"Your father is dead."

Ebek-Nedjes didn't mean to say it so coldly, but sometimes there isn't a better way to say things. The boy's lips quivered and he wiped at his eye with his good hand.

"I was…I was trying to save him."

"You can't give this witch what she wants. You weren't created for her."

Ini-herit looked at him with something akin to wonder.

"You came. I didn't think you were going to come. I didn't believe anymore."

"Ebek-Nedjes, please." Chaciutique had ceased screaming, and was addressing him in her throaty voice. "We can share it. Is that what you would like? Share the Blue Nile as we shared everything else? We can feast on its Sekhem, you and I. How would that be?"

Simply holding the Blue Nile made Ebek-Nedjes nearly delirious. It burned through his bandaged fingers like glory. There were few things he wanted more.

"Ebek-Nedjes, it will be like old times. Remember how wonderful they were? How happy I made you? Come, my lover. Give me the relic. I want it."

Ebek-Nedjes narrowed his eyes.

"You always want what you cannot have, Chaciutique. Your greed has turned you into a monster. You were meant to return to your tomb years ago, and yet you linger. These people fear you."

"Yes, they fear me! They serve me. They give me everything I want, everything I desire. Why would you not want this for me? Don't you want me to be happy? Do you not want me to love you? I still love you."

"What are you going to do with me?" Ini-herit's feet dangled far above the earth. He looked like such a small being, but so powerful at the same time. "Are you going to give me to the fire goddess?"

"Yes," Chaciutique was practically purring. "Give me the relic. We'll open our mouths and swallow him together. Feel the Sekhem. Can't you feel it now?"

Ebek-Nedjes could.

"Don't you want to absorb all of it?"

He did.

“Throw the Blue Nile into my mountain and all will be well. Come, lover. You know what you must do.”

“I do know.”

Ebek-Nedjes threw the boy over his shoulder and began his descent toward the base of the volcano.

“No! Ebek-Nedjes, I beg of you! Don’t do this.”

Chaciutique’s voice took on a familiar, sharp edge. It made Ebek-Nedjes’s heart hurt. It helped him clear his mind, nearly mad by the nearness of the Blue Nile.

“If you take him back to your tomb, he’ll die! What will you do, pull him into your tomb with you? Take him underground? Living things aren’t meant to reside with the dead. Now give him to me!”

Her voice was strident, ugly. The mountain trembled so viciously that Ebek-Nedjes nearly fell to one knee.

“I will protect you,” he told the boy, and continued down the hill.

“My followers! Destroy him! Feed me what is rightfully mine, or you shall all perish.”

There was a great rumble and the mountain shook so forcefully that several people lost their footing and fell to their knees.

“Slay the Arisen!”

The call rang out, and several of the men turned their swords against Ebek-Nedjes.

“Give us the relic,” a man said, “or we will slay you.”

Ebek-Nedjes smiled bitterly.

“It is impossible to slay that which is already dead,” he answered, and put the boy on the ground behind him.

“Run away,” he commanded, and Ini-herit nodded, scrambling over roots and vines as he fled the horrors of the crowd.

The cult tried to follow, but Ebek-Nedjes held them back with his tremendous strength. Blood pattered to the ground like hot rain, and the hungry insects of the jungle opened their mouths to receive it.

“Father!” Ini-herit screamed, and fell down beside a bloodied man struggling to his knees.

“My son,” Barros said, and held the boy close. Then he held him at arm’s length and looked deeply into his eyes. “You need to get away from here, do you understand? Run fast.”

“Come with me, Father.”

Barros shook his head, and touched his son's face briefly. "I cannot. I wish I could, but…." He coughed and blood gushed from his mouth. Ini-herit took a step back in terror.

"You are your mother's son," Barros said, and smiled. His mouth was red. "She was strong and clever. So are you. Go, Ini-herit. Go."

Barros took another gasping breath and breathed no more. His eyes stared at nothing as he was released from the horrors of the living.

"Father," Ini-herit whispered, and clenched his good hand. He pressed his forehead briefly against his father's, and then climbed to his feet.

"You have doomed all of us."

A hand grasped his elbow, holding so tightly that Ini-herit squealed in pain. It was Olall, her lovely eyes dark and hard with anger.

"You betrayed my mother," Ini-herit screamed. "She was killed because of you. All of this is because of you."

"I was trying to save the rest of us," she said, and pointed behind her at the rest of the village making their way through the jungle. "We're all here to see your sacrifice. So go and do what you're supposed to do."

She dragged him, kicking and screaming, toward the volcano.

"I won't do it," Ini-herit hissed. "You aren't worth saving."

He kicked her hard in the knee and she went down. He wrenched away from her and ran away.

"Get him!" Olall shrieked, and it was difficult to differentiate her voice from Chaciutique's. The words, the tenor, the hate and boiling wrath were the same. "If we don't get him into Nindiri, we all die."

It was Ini-herit's worst nightmare. Everywhere he turned, he saw the people of his village advancing on him. They hated him. They wanted him dead. His parents weren't there to save him.

But someone else was.

"Ebek-Nedjes, help," he yelled, and soon he was covered in bodies of those whom he had once loved as they fought and scraped to grab a piece of his clothing or a handful of hair. They were going to kill him. They were going to fling him into the volcano and there was nothing he could do about it.

• • •

Ebek-Nedjes heard his name shrieked in desperation. He pulled his knife from the body of his newest kill and searched for the source of the sound.

Members of his cult poured out of the jungle like maggots from a carcass, spilling onto the broken boy. He watched with anger as they scrabbled at the boy and started to drag him back towards the fray.

To the volcano. To his frenzied lover.

They were taking the Blue Nile created especially for him and were giving it to another.

"Traitors. Betrayers," he growled, and his words sang round the mountain. "Shame on you and your village for your desertion."

He reached the boy in minutes. Had the boy in seconds. Stood face-to-face with pinched, frightened faces and ravenous cries of the volcano.

"Lend me your power," he said to Ini-herit.

The boy nodded. "Anything."

He wrapped his arms around Ebek-Nedjes's waist and closed his eyes. Ebek-Nedjes breathed in, Sekhem and strength flowing through him like nothing he had ever experienced. His blood raced through his body faster than the flowing rivers. His veins felt ready to burst, and his eyes glowed blue.

Ini-herit fell to the ground, his eyes closed. The wind blew his hair over a strangely pale face.

"You took him for yourself!" Chaciutique's fury radiated through the very core of Ebek-Nedjes's Sekhem-infused being. It felt glorious. "You selfish beast!"

Ebek-Nedjes felt the power dripping from his fingertips. His golden blade flashed as he roared, demolishing all in his path.

The fury of an Arisen was an unmentionable thing. If anybody had remained to tell the tales, they would have been full of blood and human flesh. They would have spoken of a mummy moving faster than lightning, striking harder than any fanged snake ever could. People fell. Men with spears. Women with children. All those who had the misfortune of being born were killed in the most magnificent of ways.

Within minutes, Ebek-Nedjes stood in a river of blood and bodies, the blade of his golden knife tarnished crimson. He turned toward the mountain.

"Who will worship you now, Chaciutique? There is no one left to serve you. You are alone."

Shrieks and shrieks and shrieks. Ebek-Nedjes could picture her trapped in the base of the shuddering mountain, her hair flying as she clawed at her face with her hands.

The mountain Nindiri blew.

Molten rock bubbles from inside the mountain and ran down. Bodies were consumed and burned in the fire.

Ebek-Nedjes picked up the body of a small child and fled. Fleet on feet filled with the Blue Nile's Sekhem, he bounded away from the disaster. Trees ignited and fell behind him. Animals squealed and were burned away. Everyone that Ini-herit had ever known were destroyed and decimated by the fire goddess' fury.

“What to do with you, little one,” he said. “I was created to protect you, but using your Sekhem to do that nearly killed you.”

The boy didn’t open his eyes, but his breathing had become regular.

Ebek-Nedjes’s clarity of mind began to leave him. He found himself struggling to recall the names of familiar creatures of the jungle. He felt thirsty and the boy was getting heavy. Sekhem dissipated from his body and left skin and sinew behind.

“Ebek-Nedjes?” The boy in his arms was tired and drawn, but his azure eyes were alert. “Where are we going?”

Ebek-Nedjes searched for the word. It was familiar and slightly sad. Dust and forgotten refuse.

“Tomb,” he managed to say, and staggered forward. The boy was silent.

Several hours later, the boy was on his feet, holding the mummy by the hand. Ebek-Nedjes dragged his own feet, disoriented and weary. It was difficult to stand, even harder to walk. He pressed forward mindlessly.

“I know you’re tired. You did a lot. Thank you.”

The mummy didn’t answer Ini-herit but suddenly stopped at the mouth of what appeared to be a cave.

“Is this where we’re going?” Ini-herit asked.

The mummy felt a pull to the rusted and weary meat of his heart. This was where he needed to be.

They ducked inside. The humidity of the jungle clung to their skin and followed them down the corridor.

“This is beautiful,” the boy said. “It’s the best masonwork I have ever seen. Is this your tomb?”

The mummy glanced at the strange boy with unusual eyes and a useless hand. There was no recognition in his drying eyes. He pushed past the child and shambled toward the back of the tomb.

An old man in fine robes and a tall headdress rose to meet them.

“Ah, Ebek-Nedjes, you have returned. Your duty fulfilled, I assume.” He bowed, and then turned to the boy. “And who might you be, privileged enough to see the tomb of Ebek-Nedjes?”

The boy blinked at him and opened his mouth to speak, but the priest held up a hand.

“I can see by your eyes, child. You are the Blue Nile. It was you that Ebek-Nedjes arose to find.”

Ini-herit’s eyes filled with tears.

“He found me, and saved me, but everybody else is dead. Everybody. I’m all alone, and Ebek-Nedjes is falling apart and can’t even remember me.”

The priest smiled at Ini-herit.

“You are not alone, child. My name is Truylos. I have lived here many years and have so many things to show you. Let us help Ebek-Nedjes into his slumber, and then you can tell me the story of his power. I saw the glow of Nindiri erupting. Were you there for that, too?”

Ini-herit and Truylos opened Ebek-Nedjes’s sarcophagus. They helped him climb inside. Ebek-Nedjes’s majesty had left, leaving him gray and withered.

“Thank you, my lord,” Ini-herit whispered to him. “I will never forget you.”

The Arisen closed his eyes, falling back into death, and as he fell he heard the sweet sound of Chaciutique weeping.

IN PACE REQUIESCAT

Stefan Petrucha

O, my judge, Heraf-Het:

Hear your servant, Ankh-Nephris, the Hand of Wisdom. While it is through the Shan'iatu that I have risen to walk this earth across some six thousand years, it is to you that I am sworn. Just as this shell is but the vessel for my five-fold soul, may it be that this soul is but a vessel for your will.

The short-lived are invariably short-sighted. Upon my most recent rising I was mortified to find my cult had degenerated into a carelessness bordering on the profane. But no matter how mesmerized the living become by the gaudy distraction of these endless present-days, I remain to remind them that to serve you is to serve fine distinction, through strict adherence to holy rote and to most sacred law.

Not an inch to the right, nor an inch to the left!

No less, and no more.

Yet, while I see more than the living, I also see less than you. Only when I face you again in Duat can there be true judgment. It is with that humble awareness I now turn my fallible eye upon my fallible self, and am forced to admit — not to you, who knows all things — but to myself, that I am not at all certain why I acted as I did during the events I am about to recount.

I think it may have been the ball.

I pray it was solely because of blasphemy, because of the desecration of ritual law and base theft of your vessels.

But… it may have been the ball.

When we Deathless are summoned for a purpose, that purpose is paramount. To rise with a turn of the Sothic Wheel, however, brings a greater obligation: To pursue the deeper aspects of our being, and hence, Heraf-Het, your own deeper truths, my Judge.

The Sekhem that invigorates our shell provides energy to fulfill that purpose. Meditation provides a means to better understand it. Just as the skilled hands of my ancient creators, the Shan'iatu, once worked teeth, hair, bone, and flesh into the uter that collects and channels Sekhem, certain objects provide us, their priestly servants, with ways to work the mind.

The ball did that for me.

Why, I can't say. Due to my flock's feckless record-keeping, I can't even say where or when the ball came into my possession. For the Deathless, memory is both a seed that needs to be cultivated and a sign of Sekhem fading.

I want to say I found it myself, in the 1920s, during an expedition with Percy Fawcett in the jungles of Brazil. I may have believed that the ruins he sought held signs of the Nameless Empire, that civilization of my birth. But I cannot be sure if the flashes of sight and sound that play in my mind reflect actual events, or something I read about. I do know the ball came from Mesoamerica, where a form of what is now called rubber was used to create it some four thousand years ago, and that it was used in a sport called Ōllamaliztli.

I first saw it, or rather first saw it recently, next to the stele here in Baltimore.

To explain for this record, our wealth affords several burial chambers, allowing my flock to transport this shell closest to where I'm needed before waking me. Near each chamber stands a four foot stele, sometimes basalt, sometimes marble. One dates back 3600 years to the New Kingdom. The one in Beijing is but a few years old. Each is carved with the same glyphs, indecipherable to the uneducated, conveying the basics of my history, easing my transition to the current world in an efficient and safe manner.

As will soon be evinced, how quickly we recover our bearings upon being called varies. At first, I am so overfull with life-force that the voices of my loyalist followers are little more than an aggravating insect-buzz, a buzz I might not hesitate to swat.

The steles provide a more… indestructible form of orientation.

The one here is granite and sits in a glass-roofed atrium. Right beside it, atop an onyx stand, sat the ball. Despite the reckless urges arguing within me, given its prominent position, I knew it held significance.

This was a fact I found, at first, puzzling. It was such a little thing, three inches in diameter, dry and brittle as my newly risen skin. Also like it, the pliancy was long lost, any coloring reduced to shades of grey. In a state where I might lash out and kill one of my own, I hesitated to touch this fragile artifact, for fear of leaving a marring trail.

When I allowed myself the touch, the softest caress I could manage, it proved its usefulness. It reminded me, or rather, reminded my fingers, of the tactile skill they once possessed, the subtle grace and control we shepherds of the chamber

once used in preparing corpses, whether for their souls' final journey, or for use by our ancient masters in their experiments.

The ball, you see, filled me with a sense of pride… and loss.

In time, the Sekhem teeming within me faded into something akin to equilibrium. My desiccated sahu filled out, growing closer to my soul's remembrance of its living self. As my memory acquired finer shades, the ball brought more, but things more difficult to understand, and so more difficult to name.

When the pad of my index finger made the barest contact, I found I could, or thought I could, hear the laughter of all who'd touched it, sense their playful struggles, smell the sweat of their competitive exertions, even taste the spices in the smoke from their cooking fires.

Was it a lesser vessel, a vestige that held Sekhem? No. I sensed none within. Did this dead culture hold some peculiar value to me? No. Other remnants from the same place and period had no such affect. Was it the feeling of connection with the living, no matter how long dead? Again, no. I am wary to the bone of anything that might tie me to the living and take me further from your will. Besides, we possess many true vestiges that provide those feelings with far greater clarity.

The closest I can describe the feeling invoked is that it made me, not think, but feel that if this were an inferior culture's toy, the Nameless Empire must have been a thousand-fold grander. That comparison, real or not, engendered a fleeting glimpse of Irem.

Whether this truly came from the ball, or through some trick of mind it happened to elicit, I had and have no idea. But such sensations are rare tools for meditation. Thus, I realized that this object deserved its position, both beside the stele, and in my appreciation.

And he broke it.

Oft-Tun-Rao broke it.

But… I get ahead of myself.

It's not unusual for the Deathless to encounter one another. Despite our small number, we are bound by shared history, shared state of being, and perhaps most important, shared purpose: To secure sacred vessels, place them in a proper Lifeweb, and protect them until such time as we must return them to the Judges and the gods. Given the zealousness with which we guard our territory, it is rare for one cult to reach out to another.

My current high priest, Tomas Benes, CEO of our enterprise, is a rare functionary in these times. Lean, dark and steady, well-versed in customs both ancient and new, I've come to prize him for his diligence, especially in matters regarding those powerful, though irritating, tools of information and analysis, computers. As part of that diligence, his underlings regularly review his "junk folder" for unusual items.

A shepherd of the Su-Menent, I am intimately familiar with the arrangement and alignment of wall, idol and vessel. I confess, though, I don't understand where this "junk folder" resides. I can only liken it to locals of the mind, held, not in gray matter, or writ upon bone, scroll, or stone, but in an electronic ether.

Form, that is, without substance

Any uneasy idea to one nuanced in substances. Rightly so, as things turned out.

At first, the coded message was thought either a hoax (similar to fake messages apparently often from Nigeria, offering millions to the foolhardy), or a joke by one of the staff. Benes, however, saw details in it that only a follower of the Judges would know.

After harsh questioning, he also assured me, that no one in our flock jokes.

It was from a Daniel Trask, in Texas. He claimed to be high priest of the cult of Oft-Tun-Rao, a scribe of the Sesha-Hebsu, who was likewise sworn to you, Heraf-Het. While recognizing I had no obligation under the Diasporic Code, Trask hoped my allegiance to you might move me to provide assistance. Apparently, Oft-Tun-Rao was in dire need beyond their ability to address.

I did not know, or did not recall, Oft-Tun Rao, but the stele told me of the Sesha-Hebsu, known as the Closed Books. In addition to the judges, these scribes also have a powerful devotion to "a secret god who writes and is written upon with all that is and all the ever shall be." Despite their claims there is no contradiction (the Judges act, their god records), this duality smacked to me of, as they might say among the Judeo-Christians, trying to serve both Mammon and God.

At the same time, the word is the purest form of power. How else could the sacred laws I follow be writ? That must be respected.

There was also the fact that Sesha-Hebsu rarely act alone. They not only prefer groups, they seem to require them. Trask had not explained why he had not approached another of the same guild. Still, there are many explanations that need not arouse suspicion, primary being that our numbers, as I said, are finite and few.

Having no ascribed goal beyond the exploration of my deeper purpose, amicable contact with a similar being might shed light for me. If he was indeed your servant, aiding him would serve you.

Thinking these factors outweighed the possible dangers, I allowed Trask, and, at his request, his assistant, one Liza Ames, into my presence, but in the security of our Baltimore office in the Meriwether-Holst Building. While willing to entertain the idea he'd stated his purpose honestly, the Deathless are not above pilfering from one another.

Whatever my functionaries had lost in other areas, they retained in caution. All my burial chambers contain a variety of powerful relics, including the very hook used to remove my brain during my mummification in Irem, millennia ago.

Not only are such riches arranged perfectly to enhance the Lifeweb, they are well-hidden. With one exception, sadly damaged to a point of dubious value, all that remains visible here is a simple, but elegant, place of business.

My followers are also rightly invested in protecting me. Several security personnel, among them our new head of Security, the burly Ben Stiles, were present for the meeting. My office is arranged such that the desk and seats are well-illuminated, as if by torches hung aloft at intervals, while the room's fringes remain dark. This was an homage to the way I imagined the sorcerer-priests of Irem greeted visitors. As if a series of cool, dark statues, security kept to the shadows by the walls, to make our visitors comfortable. They also carried weapons, should it be necessary to make them uncomfortable.

As Benes ushered them in, I remained by the window, seeming to take in the pageant of the night sky, but actually assessing our guests through their reflections.

Trask's suit was inexpensive, but not unacceptable. He himself seemed plain and ordinary, his manner brusque in that American way. He stood silent awhile, as if puzzled he hadn't been offered a seat or a libation.

Finally, stiff-backed, he lowered his head. "Thank you, Ankh-Nephris, for allowing the unworthy into your presence."

I took a dislike to him at once. "I assume the dire nature of Oft-Tun-Rao's need explains why he has not approached me himself."

It wasn't a question, but he raised his head to answer. "It does, Ankh-Nephris."

The submissive tone was a struggle, but his voice also carried concern, tinted with fear.

"Has his need to do with Ms. Ames?" I asked. "Is that why she is here and not he?"

The simple question perplexed him. "No, Ankh-Nephris… She is my assistant."

"I understand the concept," I said, half-turning.

Trask's assistant, was dressed more to distract with her body than impress with her wits. Her makeup, though, showed the gift of being invisible, enhancing rather than masking her beauty. That requires intelligence. Given that she realized I'd not yet addressed her, and so remained silent, I also forgave the fact that her bowed head had risen with his.

It occurred to me that she might be here as Trask's misguided effort to impress me, the way a warrior might appear with evidence of his conquests. I hoped she was not a gift. While her cosmetic acumen and continued silence already had me thinking her the smarter of the two, the thorough background checks Benes had instituted for our new recruits had become a distraction from other matters.

Still, the way her lively brown eyes darted about communicated how captivated she was by the trappings our success. The building had been carefully renovated to assure the strength of the Lifeweb. I was pleased to have it admired.

I turned back to the window. "Tell me what troubles Oft-Tun-Rao."

"There was… difficulty in summoning him."

"Summoning? I'd assumed he was still arisen from the Turn."

He answered rapidly, parsing words and tone to avoid blame. "Yes, but his descent was extremely… rapid, due to circumstances beyond his control… or ours. I myself…"

I raised a finger. He bristled, but dog quieted.

Absent centuries at a time, Deathless cannot always be judged by their high priest. Even the best garden can go to seed when the gardener is indisposed. But I could tell through Trask that Oft-Tun-Rao's current followers were neither business people, nor effective functionaries. They were more likely grounded by primal chest-thumping forms. The scribe would sit at the top, issuing eyes for eyes, teeth for teeth. Below him would be dogs like Trask, barking and biting his commands into reality. Holding the simple hierarchy aloft would be sheep, expected only to blindly obey, like Ms. Ames.

"You must have had proper cause for calling him again so soon," I said. "What was it?"

He hesitated, deliberating, or pretending to do so.

"You seek my help, but expect me to operate in the dark?" I asked.

It was only when his assistant looked as if she might blurt out the information that he answered. "He sought a particular vessel. If we ever had word of it, we were to awaken him."

"And what is this vessel?"

"Forgive me, Ankh-Nephris," Trask said. He said it in a way that made it clear this forgiveness was not a request. "I am sworn not to say. The vessel's not the point. Anyway, our sources have proven untrustworthy."

I sneered. "You called him, then, for nothing."

"Yes," he quickly admitted. "But," he added with a self-serving smile, "the misleading sources have been dealt with."

Preferring the conversation get to the point, I did not mention that he had yet to be dealt with. It is the high priest who performs the Call, and Trask should not have done so without solid information.

"The thing is, when he rose, he was… different. More… out of control. I mean, Jelson Marquis, the same man who greeted him when he woke for the Turn, had his head torn off."

Liza Ames shivered, telling me she'd witnessed this.

I narrowed my eyes. “Then, this Jelson Marquis didn’t take proper precautions, and deserved his fate.”

Forgetting even his flawed sense of decorum, Trask began gesticulating, making meaningless patterns in the air, as if this would augment his pathetic defense. “But he did! We all did! Every step. Every rule was followed. He was different. I could see it right away, but I didn’t understand how bad it was.”

I took a step closer. Trask met my gaze.

Ms. Ames, again showing superior wisdom, lowered her head.

I spoke evenly. “Mr. Trask, you saw what your master did to his servant, and you are no servant of mine. Don’t lie to me again. Every rule was not followed.”

Offended, the dog actually grit his teeth. “No. It was different. This was the third time I witnessed the Call, the second that I performed the ritual myself. That first time, his disorientation lasted a day. A decade later, hours. Now, it’s going on for weeks. Five died at his hands, four more driven mad. Worse, instead of protecting our vessels, he’s draining them one by one, as if trying to keep himself crazed.”

Setting etiquette aside for a moment, I considered his words. “If, as you say, you took the same precautions afterwards, something must have taken place during the ritual.”

“No!”

“I cautioned you once not to lie.”

My increasingly harsh tone made him brace for an attack. In response, my guards stiffened. While I noted their readiness, he was only a source of danger to himself, and I still wished to determine what had happened to Oft-Tun-Rao.

“Ms. Ames, you were present at the Call?”

She looked to Trask for instruction, but I held his gaze such that he dared not acknowledge her. “I told you, she’s my assistant. An acolyte. She doesn’t know anything.”

“She has eyes,” I said. “She seems capable of speech. I suspect she has a memory as well. Ms. Ames, you will answer my question.”

She blinked twice before complying. “Yes, Ankh-Nephris, I was there. But it was my first time. I’d have no real idea if anyone did anything wrong.”

No real idea.

Saving my disdain for Trask, I addressed her without anger. “To see a dried shell fill with life, watch it move again, not by some shift in the air, but through its own effort. Magnificent, wasn’t it?”

Her chin jerked in a shaky nod. “It was… the most amazing experience in my life.”

“Who would not be awed to see incontrovertible proof of our beliefs? I recognize that you, an acolyte, would not necessarily comprehend the intricacies of the Call.” I glanced back at Trask,”…though it is among the simplest of our rituals. But did you hear anything, anything at all, that indicated something may have gone… not as expected?”

“Liza,” the dog warned, as if it might yet bite.

She shook her head at him. “He’s just like Oft-Tun-Rao, the face of a living god, right here in front of me. If I keep anything from him, what’s the point of anything?”

“He’ll kill us.”

“Ms. Ames, I promise you’ve nothing to fear from me, if you answer honestly.”

She swallowed. “I do know some things, I guess. Personal vessels make the Call easier, right? We don’t have anything that belonged to Oft-Tun-Rao while he lived.”

Despite my rising ire, I tried to appear reassuring. “And when an unfamiliar vessel is used, it’s destroyed, an offence to Heraf-Hat and the Judges. It is therefore done only under the most urgent circumstances. This was not an urgent circumstance, was it?”

“No,” she said, appropriately ashamed.

Trask must have known it was too late for him, but reason won’t keep a dog from barking. “Liza, shut-up!”

“Mighty Ankh-Nephris…” she began.

He leapt for her. Security sprang from the darkness to hold him.

“For pity’s sake!” he begged.

On my way to the sheep, I raised a finger to the dog. “Don’t speak further. Now, Ms. Ames, tell me everything you think I should know. What vessel was destroyed?”

“Two,” she said. “They used two vessels. A scroll and an amulet. They were both destroyed.”

I whirled on Trask. “You wasted two vessels on this false lead?”

One instant, he seemed angry, ready to fight me. The next, realization dawned and he tumbled to pleading. “You have to understand, the amulet was already nearly drained, I thought it wouldn’t be…

I snapped his neck. The sheep gasped at the quickness of the event. Her whimpering filled the silence that followed. Trask’s shell, head twisted sideways, slumped into the arms of the guard that held him,

“So die all who transgress the laws of Heraf-het,” I intoned.

“Should I dispose of the body?” the guard asked.

"No. Take it to the place of purification. Since it's fallen into our hands, I'll use it to practice the mummification rites, as the might be expected of a funerary priest."

Ms. Ames, unaware I intended to keep my word and not harm her, blurted out, "The Blue Nile!"

The room went silent, as if it had been slapped.

I heard her well enough, but couldn't believe I had. "What did you say?"

Head shaking she raised her eyes. "The Blue Nile. That's the relic Oft-Tun-Rao wants."

The name afforded me a rare smile. "The Blue Nile is a fairy tale. It does not exist."

Somehow she briefly composed herself. "Oft-Tun-Rao says it does." The scrapes of Trask's body along the floor quickly restored her fear. "Am I going to die?"

With the same gentleness that I first caressed the ancient ball, I touched her cheek. "Not today. Not by my hand. Only a fool expects the same from an acolyte as a high priest. You've spoken truthfully, and come asking aid. Take me to Oft-Tun-Rao and, in the name of Heraf-Hat, I'll do what I can."

2.

Our long automobile, a stretch limo, rocked dreadfully in the close urban spaces surrounding the Austin airport. Among the helter-skelter buildings, purposeless in their position relative to the heavens or the earth, I'd found little to recommend southwestern Texas.

Benes tells me the drought conditions there are so severe they required a new category, beyond extreme. To me this was yet another indication of a weak people who've no clue how to live within nature's flow, let alone what lies beyond, and would likely not care, even if they did.

Once in the desert, though, the car glided effortlessly. The abundant brush seemed a pointless life-form, but the road that cut through it, a seemingly infinite line, coupled with the sheer enormity of the sky, could not help but remind me of the gods.

The air within the vehicle was artificially cool, lending comfort to the other passengers. In front was our driver, whose name I did not need to know. Next to him sat Ben Stiles, a questionable hire made prior to my recent rise. While by reputation an expert in his field, he was not yet fully indoctrinated in our ways. He was ours, but not one of us, as Benes said, hired not for etiquette, but for his

protective instincts. In any case, both he and the driver were sealed off from any conversation by thick glass, yet could be summoned at the touch of a button.

Benes and I were seated in the rear, both facing forward. He was operating his portable computer, taking care to occupy less than half the seat's space, to allow me the most room.

From what Benes was able to discover, in the late 19th century, Oft-Tun-Rao was one of a triumvirate of Deathless. In 1853, they founded a Wall Street legal firm — William, Bartleby and Fink — its huge collection of records a suitable mask for the stores of lore they kept. The firm disbanded in 1952, but Benes had yet to discover whether the "partners" had a falling out, or, owing to a powerful opposition, or their own mistakes, fell on ill fortune. It is possible Oft-Tun-Rao's shell was abandoned for a time after that, until discovered by his current cult, most recently led by the late Daniel Trask.

Despite Trask's death, Liza Ames and the remaining followers we spoke with assured us we we'd be welcomed only with gratitude. After all, they were already in disarray, and apparently in danger. At the same time, a burial chamber is sacred and secret, defended at all costs. I did not intend any disrespect, but also didn't plan to experience any. A second auto moved ahead of us, a third behind, each carrying security personnel.

As a way to study Liza Ames, and perhaps glean more about what lay ahead, I had her take a rear-facing seat. As it turned out, I was the far greater object of fascination. Hands folded in her lap, she sometimes pretended to look out the window, but mostly stared at me. Her youthful awe, though not yet properly subsumed, was noted, as was my sense that she, unlike Trask, struck me as yet incapable of attempting to deceive anything she perceived as divine.

I remained motionless, allowing her to take in my features; my height, my strong narrow form, my hairless head and the ritually applied kohl-makeup around my deep-set eyes. When I felt she'd had her full, I decided to prod her for more information.

"You understand Trask had to be punished."

She started, as if she'd forgotten I could speak. "Yes."

"Can I trust that all Oft-Tun-Rao's followers will likewise understand?"

She paused before repeating, "Yes."

"You hesitate."

"Some will miss Daniel. Some won't. Right now, we all only want to survive."

On the horizon, rocky hills, too low to be considered mountains, came into view. As we neared, their surprisingly specific shape became apparent. They formed a nearly perfect circular scar of crushed bedrock.

"Benes, how is it explained when such formations rise from this flatland?"

His fingers swirled along his keys. “It’s called an astrobleme, an ancient impact crater created by a meteorite.”

As our caravan maneuvered the perimeter, I saw that a flat area that had been artificially carved in the center.

“Are you aware of the Lifeweb, Ms. Ames?”

She shook her head. “I’m sorry, no. I only joined…”

“It’s all right. Every tomb is constructed with a lattice that draws in the presence of the god, focused on the central chamber. If everything is not in its proper place, even an inch to the right, or an inch to the left, the tomb will be abandoned by the Judges and, therefore, the gods. I am pleased to say that the way this astrobleme has been used as a natural protective wall, speaks well of its builders. Whose idea was it?”

“Daniel’s,” she said.

Our vehicle slowed before the main gate. The location may have been well-selected, but the structures within were not. Low-cost chain-link fence, many rusted at the support joints, surrounded several terribly plain cinderblock buildings. Cinderblock is the poor man’s concrete, concrete the poor man’s stone. Combined with cheap sheet roofing, the appearance of this place was more appropriate to a temporary building than a sacred fortress.

Worse, a brazen pink neon sign hung above the gate, as if proud of this aesthetic atrocity.

“Benes, what does the gaudy bauble say?”

He sighed his own distaste. “The Sacred Bunny.”

The combination of the two words was nonsense to me. “Explain.”

He sighed again. “I assume… it’s the name of a brothel.”

I twisted my head. “Temple priestesses perform sex rituals here?”

He shook his head rapidly. “No, no, no. Prostitutes in a brothel provide sexual services in exchange for money.”

“And this is how the cult accumulates their wealth?”

“From what I gather,” Benes said. “They also deal in drugs… recreational medicines.”

When Liza Ames looked down and away I understood why our office had been so impressive. I tried to ease her concerns. “Indulging hedonism in any age provides a quick, reliable way to accumulate capital. My only surprise is that a Sesha-Hebsu would have his burial chamber here as well.”

In response, she uttered her first and only defense of him. “He said this was the last place anyone would look for real treasure. From your reaction, mighty Ankh-Nephris, was he wrong?”

Benes seemed impressed at her sudden verbal poise.

I said, “Perhaps not entirely.”

The gate open, we drove on level gravel toward the largest of three buildings. There, with the sun’s setting orb just beyond the protective hills, turning the sky pink and orange, some thirty men and women waited.

“Benes, how many employees did that legal firm have?”

“Over a thousand.”

No wonder they sought me out.

Most dressed for the heat. Three wore threadbare robes. Each was embroidered with a figure representing you, Heraf-het; winged, linen-wrapped, the face a featureless oval, as well as a glyph particular to the Closed Books.

Seeing our vehicles, they quickly hid their plastic water bottles, cellphones and music-listening devices. Randomly, rather than in unison, they went down to one knee.

Our other two autos, stouter Utility conveyances, stopped first. The stretch limo nestled between them. Ben Stiles opened my door. Refusing the help of his offered hand, I exited and stood in a single movement that would have been impossible for the living. My form still, my robes swirled from the motion, the hem tracing soft lines in the dry dust above the gravel.

I called out, “Who speaks for the followers of Oft-Tun-Rao?”

The tallest of the three in ceremonial garb stood. Standing in the presence of a priest without leave was inappropriate, but I suppose I should have been delighted that they’d been kneeling at all.

“I do, Ankh-Nephris. Chris Bates.” Hair sun-bleached, skin pink, he spoke with a bit of a drawl, but none of the pride Trask had evinced. He was either genuinely humble, or at least a better liar.

As Liza and Benes climbed out behind me, his eyes lit on her. “Stand with us, Liza.”

To avoid her decision, I said, “I’d prefer she remained with my high priest for now.”

Though his nostrils flared a bit, Chris Bates responded, “Whatever you say. Can’t tell you how grateful we are, and, honestly, I have no idea how we can repay you for your aide.”

A better liar than Trask, then.

“Then let us not speak of such thing while Oft-Tun-Rao suffers. Tell me where he is.”

He strode to a patch of dirt indistinct from any other, some ten yards from the door.

"Understand, sir, I'm about to reveal a secret we've guarded for decades. Our members have laid down their lives to keep this place hidden. We'd all do the same."

"As it should be," I said. "No more, no less."

As the metal toe of his boot pressed an unseen lever, I sensed a wave of tension among the cultists. With a squeak that indicated a lack of proper lubrication, a thick metal door beneath the dirt slid away. The cement staircase it covered was now revealed, its depths vaguely lit by the hazy glow of unseen oil lamps.

Not one for delay once action has been decided upon, I strode toward it. Before I could reach the first step, Ben Stiles bounded up, earning a number of stares, including my own. Fortunately, Benes stopped him before his nearness became impertinent.

"Mr. Nephris," Stiles said, "I'm responsible for your safety. We don't know what's down there. Let my men check it out first."

Benes winced at Mr. Nephris.

"That won't be necessary," I said, expecting that would end the conversation.

But the man was insistent. "At least let's use the Power Hawk."

As the gruff fellow opened the rear of the nearer utility vehicle, I turned to Benes, puzzled. "The what?"

Behind the passenger seats sat a gangly metallic device. It had treads like an armored tank, and a thick, boxlike body from which protruded several artificial appendages, mounted with weapons, drills and claws. The tallest held what I recognized as a photographic lens. A camera.

"Apologies for not anticipating your need for an explanation," Benes said. "This device was created for use by law enforcement as an alternative to putting lives at risk in dangerous circumstances, gathering information in hostage situations, or removing explosives. We've found it expedient in retrieving artifacts from difficult locations."

I wrinkled my face at the thing. "No, Benes. No. I'll have no trouble sensing him."

"But, he'll also be able to sense you."

"Do you doubt me?"

He closed the door, removing the thing from my sight and stepped aside, head lowered, hands clasped over crotch. Stiles, finally catching on, did likewise.

I glanced at the utility vehicle. "Mr. Stiles, I understand that device might prove useful, and you may continue to exploit it in my service, but do not allow it to be seen again in my presence. I find it disturbing."

"Yes, sir. Sorry about that."

As I walked to the stairs, the kneeling cultists shifted warily. Though I cannot read the living the same way I did as a mortal, it was clear their tension increased in proportion with my nearness to their sacred space. As a show of respect, but also to get a better sense the tomb's Lifeweb, I removed my before descending.

The narrow stairway walls rising around me, the outer world receded and the glow of the lamps increased. Reaching the bottom, some thirty feet below the surface, I knew at once the foundation was off by two degrees, perhaps two and a half. While not enough of an error to explain Oft-Tun-Rao's condition, it was an insult. Moreover, the wall rose 12' to the ceiling, fulfilling only the minimum requirement. If it were off anywhere, or the foundation shifted over time, the minimum would be breached.

The minimum.

Given how the Closed Books can fanatically discuss the placement of a comma, I'd expected the same respect accorded the architecture of a tomb. At least the oil lanterns were appropriately spaced, and marked with the proper signs.

Of course they would get the writing correctly.

Still, I was nearly halfway along the entrance hall before I could sense the Lifeweb. The tingling of kepher registered first in my bare soles, then slowly rose to the base of my spine before stopping. The flow of Sekhem wasn't even strong enough to resonate in my entire form. This made it difficult to determine the number and varying strength of its sources.

The strongest stood out like the neon sign at the gate, but was also the most jumbled. It moved, or should I say, paced the length of what must be the central chamber. It rushed east, halted abruptly, as if having thrown itself into a wall, pulled back to the west, then repeated.

Oft-Tun-Rao, I assumed.

Further down the first hall I encountered the expected alcove. Inside was a small obelisk. Its tilted position was the least of what skewed the flow here, but I had to start somewhere. Whispering a small prayer, I placed it upright and aligned it with the meridian.

Energy hummed though it now, but had nothing else with which to connect.

Ahead were several T-sections, each new corridor heading deeper into the tomb. I thought it wisest to tend the perimeter first, restoring the outer lines of the lattice, trying to strengthen a ladder, as it were, that might breach the inner chaos. This way, by the time I reached Oft-Tun-Rao, the effects might already be easing him, drawing off the glut of his Sekhem.

Disastrously, I found more than a few vessels had been utterly destroyed; a once-glorious scroll crumbled in my hands; all that remained of a codex was its dried, featureless cover; a molten blob of gold, perhaps once an amulet, was too far gone to identify.

All drained to nothingness.

I repositioned what remained as best I could, fighting to keep my anger at bay, but pleased with my progress. Near the northwestern corner, at a turn nowhere near an appropriate spot, I came upon something that took me particularly aback. It lay the way a broken toy might be abandoned by a spoiled child when it no longer provides amusement. Its lack of energy had rendered it invisible as a vessel. Only its shape, or rather the echo of its shape, hinted at its prior purpose and beauty.

It was, for the most part, the skull of a bison, cradled by the bones of human hands. The fingers were splayed across the cranium, held in place by the most intricately raveled golden hair I'd ever seen. The fingers wrapping the skull were clearly intended as both adornment and as a gesture of comfort to the animal's spirit. Now the bone was blackened, the lovely hair frayed.

Seeing it filled me with a profound sense of loss.

Once the perimeter was reestablished as much as possible, the shape of the deeper chaos became more apparent. I could hear Oft-Tun-Rao's footsteps, dragging on cement, then stumbling, followed by what I thought might be… laughter.

To avoid any possible misunderstandings about my presence, I called out to him: "Oft-Tun-Rao! I am Ankh-Nephris, known as the Hand of Wisdom, priest of the Su-Menent, servant of Heraf-Het. I have entered your tomb at the request of your followers, who have asked me here to help guide you from your current confusion."

The distant shifting paused.

"Do you understand my words?"

The dragging, stumbling, and laughter resumed, suggesting he did not.

I made my way around the second layer, finding less to salvage. Only four vessels retained any Sekhem, which at least made my work quicker. As I stood at the path to the third level, the footsteps stopped again.

A soft croaking voice disturbed the dry air, pronouncing, "Heraf-Het."

This was followed by a scratching sound, as if of pen on parchment.

scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

"It is good you remember the judge we serve, Oft-Tun-Rao. Will you also now recall your duty to protect the holy vessels of this place for He Whose Face is Behind it All?"

In response, he repeated, "Heraf-Het."

It was more a hollow parroting than something uttered with comprehension or respect, but I took it as a favorable sign.

But again came the sound, scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

I made my way through the final layer, able to find only two unharmed vessels to position. All the while, he muttered, almost chanting:

"Heraf-Het… Heraf-Het…"

scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

As I worked, I kept talking, hoping my words, in conjunction with the restored Lifeweb might help draw him further down.

"Inhabiting these shells upon our return from the underworld can be most confusing. I know how hard it is, at the start, when the Sekhem roils our being, to even distinguish even light from the dark. But this is sheer sensation. The laws and rites your guild so dutifully records tell you to know the tree from this fruit, to seek the cause from what are merely its result."

I went on that way for a time, until at last, I shifted a final book and the whole of the tomb sighed into place. The Lifeweb, frail, but no longer feeble, resonated through my entire form. Oft-Tun-Rao had stopped speaking, but the odd sound continued.

scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

Rather than confront him, I stood just beyond the entry to the central chamber, pondering how best to proceed. Given a scribe's devotion to word, hearing my voice might be better than seeing my face. Indeed, my physical presence could startle or enrage him.

scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

Closer, the sound no longer resembled quill on scroll, but more stick against stone.

"Oft-Tun-Rao, Closed Book, I must trust that, confused as you are, my words still echo to your five part soul, carrying at least some of their meaning. I've done what I can to repair the Lifeweb, but while I can call across whatever abyss your being has entered, you must provide the answer."

scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

Even with prodding, he no longer repeated your name. With little alternative than to stand there for hours, or possibly days, I stepped in.

The first thing I noticed was the heavy alabaster sarcophagus. It was off-center, as if in some great fit, he'd pushed it aside. The lid was on the floor, among still more wrecked vessels. Seeing the others had been hard enough, but this plethora of divine corpses had me struggling not to weep or explode in fury.

I'd have lost that struggle were it not for the walls. Not crude cinderblock, but fine marble, each, ceiling to floor, had been carved with writing so elegant, the glyphs not only seemed gloriously alive, but in some way greater than the objects and concepts they represented. I could not keep from feeling admiration for their

maker, and further dismay at the fact that even they had been marred, scratched, stained and sullied.

Moved, I barely noticed the decaying human bodies, torn, mangled and piled in the northeast corner. The remnants of the cultists who sought to approach him.

Despite his Sekhem's harsh glow, oddly, I saw him last. He was in the southwest corner, a withered bundle of flesh and bone that had decayed nearly to dirt. A lit oil lamp was by his side, its lick of its slender flame threatening to tough the brittle gauze that trailed from his body and set him alight.

In the yellow ellipse cast by the lamp, he was doing as a scribe is wont to do; writing, but not with the quill or stick I'd imagined. No, the hand that had perhaps previously carved so wonderfully upon these walls, now forced its index finger against the stone, etching with his own flesh and bone, now worn to the first joint.

The glyph echoed the word he parroted: Heraf-Het. Heraf-Het. Heraf-Het.

scrtch-scrtch-scrtch

I might have lashed out at the offenses, as I'd done with Trask, assume the sacrilege at least partly an act of will. Instead, Oft-Tun-Rao struck me like the Lifeweb here, in need of correction. Once properly aligned, I thought he would function as he should, gathering more vessels for you, even producing more of the glorious writing he now marred with the detritus of his shell.

I announced my presence. "That's it. That's correct. Heraf-Het is our judge."

The wrapped skull pivoted on it exposed neck bone, turning the rotted leather of an eyeless face toward me. The remnants of goatee and mustache on his chin and upper lip evoked, in my imagination, the image of a fuller face. His head quivered, but roughly centered on me.

"Dream. All dream," he said.

"No. It is real," I assured him, no matter how horrid.

"Not it. Me. I am a dream."

I knew the taste of this delusion. The humanity of our forms is artifice, the shades of our connections to this world unreliable, the continual ebb of our Sekhem is a constant reminder of the nearness of our next descent into the underworld. Reality so barely grasped, if our purpose is unaccomplished, there is a profound sense of futility. It can make us feel, if not unreal, then at best a bad idea. For me, the sacred rules define me, and hold me in place.

But some go mad. At the time, as I said, I preferred to think him misaligned… drunk.

"You are a scribe," I told him. "You are Oft-Tun-Rao of the…"

"Sesha-Hebsu," he said. "Oft-Tun-Rao."

"Yes."

After that, for the next hour, it became a game of inches. As I wiped what stains I could from the walls, and cleared away the ruined vessels, I spoke to him in simple phrases. With each word repeated, he seemed more present. When I moved to lift his sarcophagus lid back into place, he lifted the other end, to help.

The orbs of his eyes, if lidless, had returned. The flesh was not so withered. Once the lid was back in place, he put his hands on its edge and studied the carvings. When a piece of sundered amulet glinted in the oil lamp's light, he turned to it, surprised. Then, he took in all the ruined vessels, as if seeing them for the first time.

He shook. Full of a rage and accusation I felt quite familiar with, his bare eyes lit on me. "Who did this?"

I remained still. "You did."

"Lies!"

He seemed ready to lunge. When he did not, I again explained who I was and why I had come. Thinking a keeper of record would appreciate detail, I listed all I'd found, each repair I'd made. His hands on the sarcophagus lid, his index finger still missing, his bent chin to bony chest, he listened.

When I finished my accounting, he said, "Yes."

I assume this meant he'd accepted the truth of my words. In retrospect, I can't be completely sure. It may have been a comment on my grammar. By the time he looked back up at me, he did seem even more in control of himself.

Under the circumstances, one might expect his first cogent utterance to be an expression of gratitude. It was not. Instead, it was an expression of suspicion.

"Did my followers dare tell you why they summoned me?"

"Would you not know that yourself?"

"Of course. I'm asking if you know."

It seemed advisable to paraphrase Daniel Trask. "They'd received word of a vessel you wished to retrieve in the name of our judge, Heraf-Hat."

"That's all?"

I said nothing, hoping he would take it as offence at the implication I would leave something out. This stance relaxed him, as if it assured him I was not concealing something, but only briefly.

"Do you know of the Blue Nile?"

Ames confessed his fascination with this myth — a vessel of such unimaginable power that it's shape, origins and abilities vary wildly from teller to teller. Even a moderately rational mind would dismiss it as fable. Given that Oft-Tun-Rao now labored under a purpose I did not think remotely possible to accomplish, this was not the time, to use the parlance of the day, to tell a child that Santa Claus does not exist.

"I've heard of it," I said.

The few facial muscles he possessed managed an expression that was either further suspicion, or amusement. "But you don't know where it is? Or suspect where it might be?"

"I do not."

"No idea?"

"None."

In response, he grasped his chest in the manner of a hopelessly melodramatic actor. "I do! I can hear it! It calls so strongly, I can barely describe it."

He reminded me, in a way, of the neon sign above the entrance to his chamber.

The Sacred Bunny.

I tried to change the subject. "Perhaps you should not try. You have experienced a great deal…"

He ignored me, as if I were an audience member whose purpose was to listen, not speak. "Imagine, priest, a language in which each word is so simple any child could grasp its meaning, yet when combined, they convey a complexity greater than reality itself!"

I tried again to shift his focus. "Oft-Tun-Rao, I fear the scant Lifeweb here has yet to…"

It was no use.

"Now, imagine that language perfect and complete, save for a single, missing word, a word with which all rises, a word without which it falls. That's how the Blue Nile calls to me, like that missing word." He paused only long enough to press his blunted finger into his chest. "To me. Only me. Why would that be? Can you guess?"

"I would prefer not to."

His grin revealed only bone above the teeth. "Su-Menent. I know how you priests are, so conservative that even the smallest deviation from the tried-and-true rattles you to the depths. We Closed Books understand that for our words to match the world, they must move like it. Regular though it may seem sometimes, the Nile does not flood."

At least, rather than destroying vessels, he was simply being tiresome. I thought he might wear himself out, but he went on: "We rise to protect our vessels, or at the call of our followers, or at the turn of the stars, while our true purpose, the reason the Shan'iatu created us, remains hidden. What would any of us not do to cast aside illusion to know that purpose, and by knowing it, make it real?"

While his subject was harmless, I was content to let him babble. Here, sworn to fine distinction, I felt a need to voice truth, whether it helped him or not.

"Not knowing something does not make it less real," I answered.

“Oh, but it does.” He waved his hand at the walls. “Just as knowledge does not exist without expression, sacred words, properly arranged, give the world its shape.”

I was beginning to think I’d been mistaken about Trask being foisted upon Oft-Tun-Rao during an absence. Perhaps he had been hand-picked.

“Clearly, you have not yet completely returned to yourself. Yes, the word is the purest form of power, but the gods give the world shape, just as the Judges of Duat reflect their meaning through us.”

He may have wished to smile in a harmless manner, but owing to missing flesh and muscle, his lips curled in a demented leer. “Semantics is my realm, priest. But I’ve no wish to be angry with you. You have done me great service. The point is, while I once sought it the same way any deathless might seek a powerful vessel, I’ve now realized my intended purpose is to find the Blue Nile!”

I tried not to sigh. “Then your purpose, Oft-Tun-Rao, is great and terrible indeed.”

His agitation spent for now, he let his head hang as his thin arms pressed on the edge of his sarcophagus. “It is,” he said. “Great and terrible.”

Whether he would come more to himself in time, or this was some version of himself, this seemed as good a moment as any to tie up loose ends and bring our… association… to an end.

“There is one more matter of which I must make you aware. During the call, your high priest destroyed two alien vessels. Believing this sacrilege not only robbed our Judge, but caused your troubled state, I did as I know you would have done, and fulfilled the expectation of sacred law.”

He raised his head, but barely seemed interested. “You killed whoever it was. Yes. Well done.” He smiled. “I’ll have to select a new high priest, then.” The flesh near his temples and sockets a bit more pliable, he was able to narrow his eyes. “Any suggestions?”

His continuing suspicion of me was so ill-concealed, it was clear he worried I might be part of some conspiracy. Mentioning any name would have meant their death at best.

“It is not my place. In any case, I don’t know any of them well enough.”

“Then go, with my thanks, Ankh-Nephris. Tell my followers I will be out to speak to them shortly. I need to walk a turn or two to still my beating mind.”

As if a boy-king dismissing a servant, he flicked his fingers at the way out.

I left him there, my own thoughts beating. I’d expected to find someone remotely like myself. His followers were incompetent, to be sure, far more than mine, but I left wondering how much of their state was due to Oft-Tun-Rao’s presence rather than his absence.

Of further concern was a Chinese proverb that happened to come to mind:

If you save another's life, are they indebted to you, or are you now responsible for them?

3.

Naturally, I considered procuring Oft-Tun-Rao's remaining vessels, if only to ensure their proper treatment in the future. But acting on that impulse, especially after having been invited into his tomb, would have far-reaching implications. However justified, stealing from another's burial chamber would make my own less secure.

The shoddy remnants of his cult were so relieved upon hearing he would no longer be destroying the vessels, or them, the imbeciles may have simply given me one or two. But I doubt the scribe would have agreed. In any case such a request would have exhausted any influence I had with them, influence which might be needed later.

Still, I could not let them or their master think there was no debt for my efforts, so I made what I thought a harmless, symbolic request. I asked to keep the ruined bison skull, which I happened to have carried out with me. It could provide nothing to Duat, the Lifeweb or Oft-Tun-Rao, whereas a closer examination of what remained of its subtle architecture might provide a funerary priest such as myself with an appropriate meditative path.

They agreed.

Or, at least they did not disagree.

In the days that followed, I convinced myself that even if I'd been wrong to aid Oft-Tun-Rao, any consequences would likely be minimal. Suspecting the shortness of his previous descent was due to his own recklessness, I told myself his current journey would be equally brief, and that would be that. Meanwhile, Oft-Tun-Rao could go on with his "great and terrible" — but ultimately pointless — purpose and I could go on with mine.

I was therefore surprised when, a few weeks later, he appeared in our offices, and took it upon himself to await me in the atrium. Benes, more perplexed than I'd ever seen him, pleaded for me to let Ben Stiles handle things. Struck by visions of the metallic Power Hawk wheeling through the intricate Lifeweb I'd established here, I instead instructed him to contact Liza Ames to see if she might shed light.

I, meanwhile, went to see our uninvited guest.

He stood before the stele, near the onyx podium that held the ancient ball. His shell had filled out completely. Half-a-head shorter than myself, his arms were thin, but muscular in a wiry manner. Dark hair lent his angular face a mischievous, rather

than, say, demonic, quality. Hands clasped behind back, he bobbed rhythmically on his heels, facing away from the doors, as if no threat to him was possible.

His dress was almost as surprising as his presence. Beneath a threadbare burgundy vest, he wore an ink and dye-stained white shirt, long sleeves rolled up past the elbows, with plain black jeans and worn sneakers. Without knowing better, I'd have taken him for one of the unemployed Bohemians that frequent college town streets, the self-fashioned artistes more in search of handouts than inspiration.

A bit of his compulsive movements from the tomb remained. The bobbing betrayed a nervous energy such an artiste might honor in himself, but which most living would seek to quench through medication or malt.

Sensing my entrance, he nodded at the stele. From the oddly cheerful expression that took his face, I thought he might express admiration for it. Instead, he said:

"I cannot help but think this was inspired by the walls you saw in my secret chamber."

"It is a copy of one several thousand years old," I explained, not understanding any offense, if one was intended.

He smiled. "Ah, but what if the walls of my tomb were also a duplicate of work I'd done in Irem, work so impressive, its shadow survived in both our memories. Or…" He turned in my direction. "… your sadly linear sense of time is faulty, and, despite appearances, the future can inspire past"

He pivoted back to the stele.

Realizing my mouth was open, I twisted my head to the side. "Are you… joking? The story it tells is mine."

"Well," he sighed, "original or not, the work is quite good."

Before I could think how to respond, he pointed at the first line. Strangely, the tip he'd used to scratch on the walls of his tomb was still missing. It had been replaced by a prosthetic, gold, save for a silver nib-like tip, turning the false digit into a sort of stylus.

Tracing the stele's carvings, he went on, at length, about the thickness, depth and curve of the lines. He noted where they excelled, and where they faltered. While his manner was audacious, his descriptions were so sincerely appreciative of an unstated ideal, another may have actually been convinced that idea for the stele, indeed, the idea of writing, may have originally been his. Such nonsense aside, whatever misgivings I had and have about Oft-Tun-Rao, in matters of inscription I freely admit him a connoisseur.

While he spoke, I took the time to read what I was more familiar with; bone, hair and muscle. His mien was clearer, his eyes brighter, lids full. I could tell he was at that too-brief equilibrium where the Sekhem has diminished to a point

where it no longer overpowers the mind, but at the same time has yet to deeply lessen our capabilities.

Still, there were things amiss with his sahu. The finger, certainly. Also, the remains of the goatee I'd noticed in the tomb had not been filled by natural growth, but by a clever cosmetic fakery generally afforded only by the rich and vain.

Since our living appearance is simulacrum, Oft-Tun-Rao's prosthetic digit and fake facial hair had to be intentional. Was it a form of writing on his own body in emulation of his secret god? To what end? Was he perhaps coyly pointing to his true form? Or was it just… fashion?

Noticing my attention, he flicked the edge of his moustache with the tip of his capped finger. "Do you like it?"

Rather than opine, I evaluated. "The stitching is all but invisible, the artistry guiding the hand apparent."

He nodded quite graciously at the imagined compliment, as if he'd done the work himself.

Jutting his hairy goat-chin at the skin of my bald head, he said, "I can give you her name."

Aghast, but not wanting to show it, I blinked. "My appearance is traditional."

His quick exhale gave an impression of pity. "Really, Ankh-Nephris? Does your sense of tradition actually allow any choice, or is it, like the way you see time, capable of flowing in only one direction?"

"Why are you here, Oft-Tun-Rao?"

His smile widened. "Your offense at my insightful remarks only proves my point. I am a scribe, but you are the line-walker, walking lines through time, through tradition. If ever I teach you one thing, it will be that rigid structures are the ones most easily broken."

In spite of myself, I growled. "Teach me…?"

"Yes. No one is so old they cannot learn. Take your question, why am I here? I could say it's to see my benefactor, meaning you. On the other hand, wouldn't you argue that Heraf-Hat is my true benefactor, and you, but his vessel? And if you are but his vessel, do you, in the sense of will, really exist at all?"

"Imperfect, I strive to be his vessel in all things. I define that as existence. I confess I preferred our conversation in the tomb."

"I was disoriented."

"And far less irritating. I will ask once more, why are you here, Oft-Tun-Rao?"

His bobbing faded, along with his smile. He lowered his voice, as if believing it would make him seem more dangerous. "You are the only other Deathless to have ever entered my tomb. When you left, I am told you took something with you, aside from my gratitude."

"Is this about the bison-skull? It was a gift from your followers."

"A gift. And why would a priest need a gift to fulfill his obligation to his Judge?"

I stiffened. "I did not, and do not, perceive my aid to you as an obligation."

A thousand responses sprang to mind, each more violent, but the very discipline he mocked held my hand. Worse than there being no point, even winning, I would lose. He had practically destroyed his own chamber. A battle between us here would surely hurt mine.

I calmed myself as best I could before speaking. "If the skull is an issue for you, in the interest of ending this conversation peacefully, and permanently, I will return it."

The smile returned to his lips, but not his eyes. They glowered, not in the way of a believable threat, more the way a lapdog might think itself a predator.

"Excellent."

Following a quick request, Benes appeared, bearing what looked like a hat box. He first showed the wrecked uter within to me for verification, then presented it to Oft-Tun-Rao. He yanked the box from Benes' hands, studied the contents greedily, and looked up with deep, inexplicable disappointment.

"It's ruined. The Sekhem's been drained."

"That is as I found it. I assumed your followers would have told you that much, unless they were too afraid to correct your false assumptions."

He ignored my taunt. "Then why would you ask for it?"

"The crafting caught my attention. I wished to study the stitching."

He shook the box at me, raising little puffs of bone dust from the contents. "If it was so well crafted, how was it drained? Who drained it?"

"You did, Oft-Tun-Rao, just as you did many of your vessels. Do you not recall that you were… out of control?"

A hideous expression swept his face, one I can't quite describe. A slow shrug followed it. "I'm fine now. Your story, true or not, we do agree something was taken. Therefore, I am owed. I've no wish for enmity. I hope we can arrange something that is mutually satisfactory." He looked around at the walls and floors. "A place like this must allow you to keep your most prized relics quite safe. Still, I was a bit surprised to sense an object that had the glow of Sekhem visible in your lobby."

He could only be referring to one thing. "The Volar of Zoroaster?"

"Yes. Is it actually his?"

"Whether the five metacarpal bones actually belonged to the prophet is irrelevant. Though it is none of your concern, I will tell you that in the process of procuring it from the ruined city of Balkh, it nearly fell into the wrong hands, so

to speak. I was forced to drain most of its Sekhem, and use the energy to defeat our foes."

"Then I am not the only one guilt of such crimes."

I gnashed my teeth. "The circumstances were genuinely extreme. It is near-impossible to restore its original capacity, but I continue to try. The most propitious is in the gallery where you saw it. There it has sat for many years, with no change."

"Well, then, such a small, practically useless thing seems a reasonable exchange for what you have taken."

He held the box out to me.

"No, it is not." I opened my hands, palms up, toward the skull. "This is the only reasonable exchange: What I was given, as it was given. Take it, freely and in good will. Your followers will confirm it has not changed since it left your tomb. I only ask that you take it not as fulfillment of a debt, but as a gift."

He slid the cover back on the box. "If it is a gift, doesn't that mean you still owe me?"

"Not at all. It means I never owed you at all."

He spun back toward the stele, his mind perhaps forming a clever retort. But there was no such opportunity. The dangling sleeve of his unkempt shirt hit the ball. A poorly attached button snagged a surface irregularity, making it roll toward the edge of the stand. It might have survived, but rather than pause to evaluate his position and determine what further damage he might avoid, Oft-Tun-Rao impulsively yanked his arm back. Now pulled by the button, the ball fell two feet to the stone floor. It landed with an awful plop.

Indelicate chunks of rubber spread fleeing insects. Fleshy cracks formed in the remaining hemisphere, the largest splitting the whole in two. Those that followed made it four… six… ten. In less than a second, any sense of its shape was gone.

"Oh," he said.

That was all. Just "Oh."

I stood there, staring down. "Perhaps, Oft-Tun-Rao, your followers did not explain the state of the skull because they did not wish to shame you with a reminder of your destructive tendencies."

Gripping the box, he left.

Noticing how my gaze was fixed, not on our departing visitor, but at the remains of the ball, Benes softly asked, "Shall I have it cleaned?"

"Not just yet."

Uncertain I could contain myself, I asked Benes to have the front desk inform us when Oft-Tun-Rao left the building. That call came a long few seconds later.

Knowing he was gone, I exhaled, trying to come back to myself. "Did you reach Ms. Ames?"

"I did, but she was reluctant to talk to me."

"Afraid."

"Yes."

Despite the insults, despite the damage, despite my rage, I still did not plan to move against the scribe. I still hoped the intersection of our paths would simply end, that if the skull did not satisfy him, he might at least recognize he had now taken something from me as well.

Yet, remarkably, insanely, that very evening our gallery was breached. The first floor night watchmen were suddenly debilitated, as if sedated. The security cameras revealed an inept group of teen vandals coming in from an unlocked main entrance. Aside from shredding cushions, pulling down paintings, overturning plants and urinating on the floor like sickly mongrels marking territory, they took only the Volar. As if there could be any doubt who was responsible, scrawled across the wall in red spray paint were glyphs that read:

The debt is paid.

Oft-Tun-Rao was unaware that the Volar carried a curse which would cause Sekhem to seep from any who possessed it who was not Su-Menent, but there was little satisfaction in that. The uter so drained, the effectiveness of its curse was likewise weakened.

As to how the breach occurred, Stiles discovered a small device, left, no doubt, by the scribe himself. Stiles described its crude circuits as the electronic equivalent of wedging a door open with a rock. The expense of such a device relative to the impoverished status of his cult, coupled with the apparent use of a Deathless utterance to disable our living guards, was yet another example of a recklessness not easy to predict.

Stiles offered his resignation. I should have accepted, but held off on a decision. The blatant attack surprised us all, but this was not forgiveness. I could not shake the sense Stile had done me a favor. A dark corner of my self was glad, even delighted that I might now move against the scribe in complete obedience to my purpose.

At the same time, that delight confused the purity I always seek in my motives, riddling me with urges that would not settle into any reliable category. The disturbing depth of these feelings can most closely captured by a story told in Prague.

The Judeo-Christian God approaches a farm-woman and offers her a single wish.

"My neighbor has the most beautiful cow," she explains. "It's perfect, a pleasure to behold, simple to care for and it gives the most wonderful milk."

"Ah," the God says, "And you would like a cow like that for yourself."

"No," the woman answers. "I want her cow to die."

Although not a farmer or possessed of livestock, that is how I felt about Oft-Tun-Rao.

4.

The next night, I decided to practice the funerary arts on the corpse of Daniel Trask. I was some twenty feet below our elegant lobby, in a more austere locale, suitable as a place of purification. As I washed his lifeless form with palm wine and water imported from the Nile, I continued to seek clarity. Unlike the body, my motives resisted dissection.

More to the point, a viable strategic response had yet to present itself. Moving against another Deathless is never a simple thing. In addition to the immediate concerns in facing such a powerful foe, it could have repercussions for my reputation. And a wrong is not truly redressed if the consequences fall back on the one wronged.

I cut into the dog's side, removing liver, lungs, stomach and intestines, but found myself increasingly distracted. By the time I inserted the hook through his nose to smash the brain so it might be more easily removed, I found myself picturing Trask's body still alive and therefore experiencing the most exquisite pain. Trask, of course, felt nothing, nor would his preserved form ever rise, unless by the magic of others. I did my best to transform my disappointment at his numbness into satisfaction with my work, but it was not an easy trope.

His screams, even though imagined, brought such considerable pleasure.

As I filled his hollows with small bags of natron, a restless Benes entered. I was terribly curious as to what news, good or ill, might be stirring him, but knew he would remain silent until acknowledged. I fought to slow myself. The initial preparation complete, Trask's vitals would have to dry before being placed in canopic jars. The rest of the shell had to be let alone for seventy days as the natron did its work. The timing of our descent always a question mark, I hoped I would still be present to complete the mummification.

After dutifully placing the moist tools on clean cloth, I rinsed my hands in lukewarm water. Patting them dry with a flax-linen towel, I finally satisfied Benes' anxiety and my own.

"Yes?"

"Liza Ames called from a payphone about twenty miles from the Sacred Bunny."

The right side of my lips twitched upward. "I assume it was not to express her loyalty to Oft-Tun-Rao?"

His smile was more unabashed. “She swears she had nothing to do with the theft. She fears she’s being watched, but, says if she has to die, she prefers it be in the name of something worth believing in.”

Although the tools were not yet dry, I began to put them away, evincing the very carelessness I feared. “We must be cautious of transferring Oft-Tun-Rao’s sacrilege to us, through her.”

From his reaction, Benes had not anticipated the admittedly subtle issue. “How so?”

I nodded at the body. “I made the mistake of thinking Trask might not be a reflection of Oft-Tun-Rao. Likewise, however pure Ms. Ames intentions may be, her understanding will be an echo of her teacher. For instance, does she perceive this something worth believing in as Heraf-het, or myself?”

He shrugged. “Even here, where we take pains to make it clear we are all servants, to see the arisen is a powerful experience. To many, you are the face of the Judges and the gods.”

“Whereas I must strive to be a vessel of their will. And I do not think Oft-Tun-Rao shares this goal.”

He bowed. “Further evidence of your wisdom.”

I shook a finger at him in admonishment. “That’s precisely the sort of needless praise that validates arrogance. Oft-Tun-Rao’s word-stitches tend to blur rather than clarify such distinctions.”

“He is not what I’d expect from a Sesha-Hebsu.”

“No, but the comparison may help us discover the right questions. The Closed Books call the central cosmic principle the Scroll of Ages, personified in their secret god. But they also acknowledge a dark, tragically mistaken version. Rather than record and evoke, it entangles and traps. So, do Oft-Tun-Rao’s words trap him, or reflect his nature? And what of that might we encounter in Ms. Ames?”

Chastened, I took the tools back out and dried them properly. “I will speak to her, but let’s make sure the conversation is more secure than Mr. Stiles managed with our lobby.”

“I’ve already arranged it. It’s easy to track a cellphone, so I asked her to be at a cybercafé…uh, a coffeehouse with computers that can be used for video conferencing. This way you’ll be able to see her face.”

I rolled my eyes only slightly. “Yes. Her voice and image projected here, my voice and image there. Very well, but make sure the event is recorded. The emotional states of the living aren’t always clear, and I may request additional interpretations.”

He was about to leave, but his earlier comment on the impact of seeing the arisen came to mind, leading me to ask, “Benes, is there any danger to her in

seeing me this way? I seem to recall my reflection in a mirror once drove someone into psychosis."

There are times when the living see our true form, a Sekhem-animated corpse. The experience, however brief, can induce Sybaris, a form of madness in the mortal mind.

His response was assured. "Film and digital photography only capture the sahu. This would be no different. She'll see you as your soul wishes to be seen."

To prepare, I touched up the Kohl around my eyes and changed into new clothing. Rather than ceremonial robes, or other adornments, I wore only my business suit, thinking a less formal appearance might make her feel more at ease.

Twenty minutes later, I was on the seventeenth floor, seated at my desk, hands clasped beneath my chin, looking at a roughly moving image of Liza Ames on the computer's screen.

She'd clearly also taken pains with her appearance, her makeup again artfully applied. This time, however, it could not conceal the worry lines around her darting eyes, or the way her hands shook whenever she paused for a sip from her latte.

"It is right that you came to me," I began. "Oft-Tun-Rao's brash behavior has crossed more than one line. Do you know where the stolen Volar is being kept?"

She looked around, drank from her shaking cup and nodded. "He was afraid you'd try to find it at the Sacred Bunny, so it's being kept in a locker at the airport. I don't have the key, but I have the number." She pulled a napkin from her pocket. "It's B729."

I winced inwardly at the thought of any relic treated with so little respect. "I am in your debt, but I must ask more of you. While the stolen Volar is of importance, by this and other actions, Oft-Tun-Rao has also offended the one we both serve, He Whose Face is Behind It."

She seemed puzzled, so I clarified. "Our judge, Heraf-Het."

Her brow only furrowed more deeply. She stammered. "I… thought that was you."

I closed my eyes. "No."

Not knowing what Oft-Tun-Rao had told her, I had to go back to the beginning. "The 42 judges reside in Duat, the underworld where all souls travel after death. Though divine, they are not themselves gods, yet our cults are sworn to serve the highest among them, Heraf-het, He Whose Face is Behind It. Despite our power, we Deathless are neither god nor judge. We are his servants, and should be summoned only to fulfill his purpose. Do you understand?"

"I think so."

"You must be sure. I am not Heraf-het. Any statement to the contrary is profane."

She nodded. “Like a Christian priest saying he’s Jesus.”

“Yes. I told you ignorance was to be expected in an acolyte, but also be aware that even if you breach the sacred unknowingly, even if it is completely invisible, the deity is still offended.”

She started to look upset. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry.”

I waved my fingers to signal that, in my eyes, at least, no harm had yet been done.

“The true crime belongs to Oft-Tun-Rao. Ours is not the easiest existence. For some, it grows too difficult to bear, and a rare few confuse themselves with the gods. In a deluded state, they believe themselves a bau, the manifest power of a deity. Do you understand that?”

She nodded.

“I am concerned Oft-Tun-Rao has a similar delusion. Has he ever intimated to you that he is Heraf-het?”

Her response was quick. “No. He thinks you are.”

“What?”

“When he found out we didn’t know where the Blue Nile was, or even where to start looking, he locked himself away for days. When he came out, he announced he’d figured it all out. The only one powerful enough to keep him from his purpose had to be a judge, jealous of what would happen if he fulfilled his destiny. He said his will was stronger than your lies, and at last he knew who he was. That word, bau, he’s used it, in reference to himself.”

A clicking plate somewhere behind her, made her glance over her shoulder.

“Ms. Ames, what god does he believe himself to be? Re, Esit, Sutek, Ptah?”

“No, none of those. It has no name. It’s… the one who is written on…”

“The secret god who writes and is written upon with all that is, was and ever shall be?”

“Yes. But, then… he’s not the bau, is he?”

“No, Ms. Ames. He is not.”

A god is impossible to destroy. A being who thinks he is a god will destroy himself, given time. But I was not so patient, and now a strategy had presented itself.

The next turn of sun and stars spent in preparation, it was night, a few days later, when I returned to the Sacred Bunny.

5.

“Ankh-Nephris, this is a surprise,” Oft-Tun-Rao said.

He'd just emerged from the cinderblock stairs. He hadn't bothered to conceal the entrance to his burial chamber, nor did his cultists, Liza Ames among them, bother concealing their weapons. The fact that my caravan stopped a hundred yards from the main gate, while I walked in alone, was likely all that kept them from shooting.

Despite this tension, the only real resistance to summoning their master for me came from Chris Bates, apparently now high priest. He dared insist I first state my intent. In the face of a stony silence ages old, the new dog acquiesced and set about fetching his master.

I waited until the stone door slid back into place before speaking.

"Oft-Tun-Rao, it pleases me to see how well you are."

I was pleased. He did not look well at all. He was paler, eyes slightly sunken. The skin that held the goatee had shrunk, making the needlework more apparent. His right arm was strong, held across his chest, fist clenched, wiry musculature still tight, but his left dangled with far less conviction. The light from a "smartphone" he gripped wobbled inchoately against the paint stains on his jeans.

As Sekhem fades, we grow more human, and then increasingly feeble. Seeing this change in him made me certain that if left to his own devices he would soon be gone, his descent complete, his shell left lifeless. While that was desirable, I no longer thought it in keeping with my own rightful conduct to leave one such as him to his own devices.

Or so I told myself.

"Trying to flatter me in the hope I'll return the Volar?" He snorted. "It will not happen."

"I am not here to ask for it."

He tensed, tapping smartphone to thigh. "Then, you think to take it?"

At a signal from Bates, his ramshackle cultists moved to draw the bolts on their weapons. Single bullets would have little impact, but a hail of automatic gunfire might do me some damage. Even so, it would have been more impressive if they'd acted in unison. Several had such difficulty with the bolts, that many awkward seconds elapsed passed before the sad show of questionable force reached its conclusion.

I put out my arms, palms up. "You misunderstand. I am not here to take it."

He knew, of course, that defying the urge to retrieve a stolen relic would speed my own descent, creating inner struggle. His brow knitted so deep and so quickly it seemed to make his form waver.

"Unless you are not who you claim to be, wouldn't you find that… draining?"

I calmly shook my head. "Not in the least."

"How so?"

The most accurate answer was that it was because the Volar of Zarathustra was already back in my possession. But I said:

"I follow deeper truths that are in full agreement with my purpose."

He clicked his teeth. "Depth? From one who walks such a straight line that scenery itself is forbidden?"

"I find that meticulousness more clearly reveals my errors. I am here to correct such an error. I believed you were similar to me, and sought to aide you in the way I would aide myself. Now I know you are… more than that, and hope to achieve a more proper result."

He hesitated, seeming to consider the possibility I'd somehow gleaned the truth of what he believed of himself. In the end, he snarled at me like an exhausted lion.

"Shadows of words from a shadow of reality, a puppet-vessel unable to conceal its guiding hand. Whatever correction you seek, there's nothing here for that which does not exist. Reveal the face behind it, or be gone."

"I am not here to ask anything of you. Now understanding what you are, I come to offer more suitable aid."

"Do you, puppet? If you truly realized what I am, you'd know I require no aid."

I shrugged. "Throughout my existence, the judges and the gods do not require me, but allow me to serve. That is all I ask. You spoke of a certain relic. In an effort to correct my mistake, I have paid a great deal regarding its location."

It was a precarious moment. His skull shivered as if shaking away a chorus of inner voices. His mouth opened. His heavy lids rose. His eyes widened.

"The Blue Nile?"

What was left of his reason struggled with his desire, no, need, to believe me. Helpless in the face of that struggle, his expression provided a glimpse of how strong, how deeply that desire burned, more than a lover for his mate, or mother for its child. Finding it was his summoned purpose after all, as well as his own obsession.

Despite the strength of this force, some threads of caution remained in him. In an attempt to appear regal, his nose went up. "And what did you realize about me, puppet, that I am some mewling imbecile who might actually believe you and your judge wouldn't want it for yourselves?"

"I do not want the Blue Nile. I swear it. It would not be proper."

Wanting oh-so-badly to grasp any fleeting straw that might unite him with his passion, he paced his buried chamber door, the place he expected his shell to return to once his energies truly exhausted. When he stopped, reason had been all but defeated.

"You swear?" He approached within a foot of me. Our height difference required him to turn upward to glare into my eyes. "You would swear this to the skies?"

The blessed canopy beyond the protective hills was even more magnificent than I recalled. Ten thousand liquid diamonds seemed scattered on flawless black silk, the sparkling emissions of the first god, Atum, who created the cosmos through masturbation.

This was most dangerous water. Having less experience with words than the scribe, it was here I would most likely be revealed. My phrasing would be no less important than the placement of relics within the Lifeweb.

This oath heartfelt, I felt safe in it:

"I swear to Heraf-het, to all the Judges of Duat and to the gods themselves, I do not want the Blue Nile."

Oft-Tun-Rao remained unconvinced. "Kneel."

I hesitated, but only briefly, long enough to be inwardly certain of what I prostrated myself before. There could be no wrong in kneeling before so splendid a sky.

The scribe addressed his followers. "Train your weapons on him."

Give how much they'd been through, I wondered, if it actually came to it, how many would open fire on both of us. Most complied. A few, Liza Ames among them, wavered.

"All of you," he barked.

It was only for show. As long as he thought I might have spoken the truth, he would attempt no violence. As he scowled at them, I gave Liza Ames a near-imperceptible nod. When she aimed her weapon at me, the tentative others did likewise. If she survived, I thought, she might make a fine leader.

So there I was, some twenty guns on me, my followers too distant to interfere.

Oft-Tun-Rao growled and huffed, trying to shake off any distractions his doubtless busy mind had to offer. In time, his form stilled. The smartphone still clenched in one hand, he turned his face heavenward and intoned a single, ancient word. Its very sound seemed to mute the evening breeze, and reduce the whole of the living world to silence.

I had heard of this Utterance. At its simplest, it has the power to draw down a blazing meteor upon one's nemeses. In this, its more powerful form, it would allow Oft-Tun-Rao to glean, from the starry constellations themselves, a single important truth.

Having no idea he knew the spell, I feared what truth would be revealed. I readied, not so much for the possible rain of bullets as for whatever attack he

might launch himself. My mind raced to recall those parts of the compound not currently in my vision, to determine the closest shelter.

But instead of losing a horde of beetles, or conjuring a crippling whirlwind, upon receiving his answer, Oft-Tun-Rao laughed and slapped his sides with both hands.

"You did not lie! You do not want the Blue Nile!"

I ached, and still ache, to take the fact that this was the truth his utterance confirmed as a clear sign of your permission, Heraf-het, for all I had planned. But seeing how easily Oft-Tun-Rao misinterpreted such signs, I could not let myself go so far.

He waved for his followers to put down their guns, engendering their brief relief. Beaming widely, he put his hands on my shoulders and drew me to standing. Although repugnant to me, his touch revealed more about his state. Arisen are as strong as ten. His grip barely matched that of the living.

"You were right to come to me. More than right, destined!" His hand pressing the rectangular plastic of his phone into my flesh, he drew near for a whisper: "There have been so many shadows, so many false leads. Where is it?"

Mirroring his caution, I glanced about before responding. "Near a town called Visoko, northwest of Sarajevo."

He blinked. "Visoko? Never heard of it."

I feigned surprised. "How could that be, after all your searching?"

My sincerity confirmed, his belief in me had become complete. His quick answer echoed his argument for his placement of his sacred burial chamber beneath a cheap brothel:

It would be the last place anyone would look for such a prize.

Here, his exact words were, "Ah, because none would think to look there!"

"I have a jet waiting at the airport. It would honor me to take you there."

His fingers tightened like those of an excited child expecting candy. No longer bothering to lower his voice, he cried, "Yes! Let us go at once!"

I grabbed the hand still touching me as if to pat it, but pulled it gently away.

Without further thought to his cultists, or his burial chamber's security, he made for the caravan waiting outside the chain-link fence. I lagged behind, noting the surprised looks on his followers, and the genuinely hurt and angry expression on Chris Bates. The new dog glared as I passed, but this was not the time to deal with mere impertinence.

When the enervated scribe reached the stretch limo's passenger door, held open by Benes, he waved for me. "Let us make haste! Surely you can move faster than that!"

"Ah, Oft-Tun-Rao," I told him, "our energies should not be judged the same."

I certainly didn't judge them the same. I wished to conserve mine, while facilitating the expenditure of his. Even a simple wait would bring his final moment that much closer. I had to be careful though, to avoid the sacrilege of suggesting he waste Sekhem. As long as all choices were his, I felt I would be on the proper side of the line, and propriety would be served.

A furtive nod from Benes confirmed our preparations were in place. I entered, taking the rear-facing seat Ms. Ames once occupied, now to better study the scribe. It might be assumed that having gained his trust might allow me to enjoy his company. It did not. His blatant crimes aside, there were many other things about him that irritated me no end.

For example, while I find the technology of this era useful, Oft-Tun-Rao was enamored by his smart-phone. With his finger-cap enabling him to easily operate the touch screen, he pecked at it continually, making a constant tick-tick-tick-tick that allowed no true silence. I tried to turn the conversation to higher things I thought would reveal more of him, the purpose of the Arisen, of the gods, of the judges, but he was mesmerized.

tick-tick-tick

Hours later, as we taxied for takeoff on the company jet, an Airbus Flying Palace, it dawned on me that the sound was not produced by his faux fingertip, but by the "speakers" on the device. When I asked him to turn off the sound, he refused.

"I find it soothing," he said, as if therefore it should be that for me as well.

It was not.

tick-tick-tick

It recalled the dreadful sound he'd made against the walls of his chamber, rubbing away flesh and bone, marring the beauty he'd once created.

Hours later, over the Atlantic, the thing finally exhausted its energies. When he asked if there were a charger on board that might restore it, I engaged in one of the few actual lies I told him.

"I'm afraid not."

Verbal artifice does not come easily. Rules, rote and ritual do not make the world, but hold me in my proper place within it. Where there is variation, there is imbalance, where imbalance, loss, where loss, decay. But this one, this miscreant, with his fake facial hair and constant tick-tick-tick had but to call himself something, and he believed it true.

"A pad and pen perhaps?" he said, disappointed.

I shook my head. "Sorry." Hoping again to lead his restless attention elsewhere, I asked, "Are such things still a concern for… one such as you."

He leaned forward. "Are we alone?"

"Other than the two airship drivers," I said. "And they are in the control area, the cockpit, where I've been assured they cannot hear."

He leaned back in his seat. "You're right. I really shouldn't worry about communicating in such temporal ways," he said. "But deceptive habits still cling to me. You of all people must appreciate the insidious trap of tradition."

Fortunately, I did not have to respond. He waved his metal fingertip indicating plane, sky, everything. "These illusions will all fade once I possess Blue Nile. The core of reality will be the stone upon which I write… and am written upon."

I raised an eyebrow. "You refer to secret god of the Closed Books?"

He raised an eyebrow in return. "I refer to myself, but you already know that, don't you?"

I shrugged. "It is different to have you confirm it."

He chuckled genially. "Of course. Soon, thanks to you, friend, false lines that keep this form distinct from the Scroll of Ages will fade."

"So is that what the Blue Nile does?" I asked. "Remove that most profound illusion?"

He nodded.

"What form does it take, that it can accomplish such a purpose?"

"All of them! Scroll, uter, amulet, effigy, regia, and more. Ever-changing, yet always the same. Do you understand?"

By then I understood what he thought. "I am a vessel for Heraf-het, and you've said that if that illusion were shed, there would be nothing left." I pointed at him. 'But if the illusion of your shell is shed….?"

He smirked, the shrinking flesh around his lips making a bit of his false hair detach. "The naked truth will be revealed. I will become what I truly am and have always been."

"What of the other gods? The judges? Heraf-het whom we are sworn to serve?"

He shook his head pityingly. "The path is open but you have yet to walk it. Only when reaching the destination will you truly see. Heraf-het is illusion. All the judges are! The gods as well. Fairy tales written by the secret god, they have no essence at all beyond his constructs, which is to say, my constructs."

I didn't think to trick or goad him into making these horrendous statement. That would have been wrong. I did think to perhaps provide an opportunity for such a choice, and had thought it would be much more difficult.

Under certain circumstances, the loss of Sekhem can be accelerated. Among these circumstances is performing an act that denies the gods or the judges. The moment after the bold words tripped from his tongue, he curved forward, as if struck in the abdomen. Eagerly, I leaned forward to observe more closely, but he pulled back to a sitting position and smiled wanly.

“It is nothing. Nothing at all. As more of these shadows fall away and more truth becomes apparent, my own mistakes grow clear.” He exhaled and looked at me adoringly. “For instance, I know now that I owe you an apology.”

The word apology caught my attention.

“And I give it readily.” He looked out the window at a moon that seemed to rest on a pillow of clouds. “I am sorry I doubted the uter was already drained when it came into your possession. I see now that your devotion to truth provides a more than suitable explanation. I should not have taken the Volar. Once I have the Blue Nile, I will restore that bauble to you and more.”

I waited, thinking perhaps he might at least mention the ball, but he did not.

6.

Our travels took us through the next day and into the following night. In that time, beginning with his apology, friend become the only way he addressed me. Whether it expressed a true affection, or was an effort to obligate me in some way, is irrelevant. I found it impertinent, and certainly never used the appellate in return, or indicated it was welcome.

When our automobile stopped for fuel along E73, I tried to distract him by praising his patience. Unfortunately, in the convenience shop, Oft-Tun-Rao managed to find a charger. Not only that, he discovered it could be plugged into an outlet within the vehicle.

“Another sign that destiny approaches!” he said.

Aside from the renewed tick-tick-tick, I was also disappointed he didn’t bother using the infernal device to learn something about Visoko, our destination. After all, he did think it the place of his destiny, and I had picked it carefully so that at least on the surface, it might appear so.

Once part of Illyria, Rome, and later the Ottoman and Austro-Hungarian Empire, Visoko has been inhabited for some 6000 years, genuinely placing it in the time of the Nameless Empire. Visočica was our more specific goal, a large, imposing hill overlooking the town. Its origins were far more dubious. To the naked eye it appeared a tree and dirt-covered prominence with an unusually regular pyramid-shape. Some years back, a local claimed that Visočica was not only a manmade structure, but the “mother of all pyramids” built by the same culture that created the Egyptian and Mesoamerican pyramids.

I am assured that, like the astrobleme surrounding the Sacred Bunny, Visočica is largely a natural formation, called a flatiron. Indeed, we passed many similar hills on our way. It may, however, have been shaped long ago. More recently, it was certainly reshaped to attract tourism for a local economy devastated by war. To any with the vaguest recollection of Irem, it was a gaudy lie, an earth and stone

version of Oft-Tun-Rao's deluded word-stitches. The generous might say that in selecting such a location, I'd given him a last chance to realize his errors and recant. While realization might have dawned on him, my intent in bringing him to this ridiculous place was to mock him.

Fearing our appearance might attract undesirable attention in the town, I had our driver leave us at the outskirts of the hill. Even at our most human we tend to stand out, and we both wished to avoid unseen alterations in our plans. Once the car vanished along the local road, its headlights fading into a greater dark, Oft-Tun-Rao and I trudged alone through unkempt brush and cool night. At Visočica's base, we paused to take in its impressive size, several times taller than the great pyramid at Giza.

But the Himalayas are taller than Giza, too.

Upon seeing a brightly colored sign with garish lettering and symbols that indicated the way forward, he seemed supremely satisfied.

"Brilliant to hide the Blue Nile here. It's all so obviously false, it must be genuine."

We followed this trail for a time, until the white fire of dim electric lights grew visible through the foliage. I slowed. My companion, trusting me, did likewise.

Ahead, I saw a large metal gate that had been constructed in the side of the hill, entrance to the advertised tunnel complex within. The daily tours long complete, it was now closed Two workers, exhausted from a day's digging, and a security guard, modest pistol shoulder-holstered, chatted amiably before it.

I did not know them by sight, but one of the workers, with rounded head, bearish shoulders and what was left of auburn hair, was hired by Benes. The curators, quite open to public participation, were always looking for volunteers. It was easy, even on short notice, for Benes to slip him in to perform certain tasks for us.

I saw no reason why two Arisen would have difficulty slipping unseen into a tourist trap with modest effort, and so did not intend to interact with any of them. I was not, however, interpreting their presence in the highly symbolic terms of someone who believed themselves divine. To me, a tree could still be a tree, a man, a man. To Oft-Tun-Rao, here in this glorious place, this glorious moment, the environs need be drunk with meaning.

From our concealed spot, he asked, with some excitement, "Friend, what do you see here?"

"A few of the living that tend this place. We should easily…"

He interrupted with a hushed, "No. These shades may deceive you, but I know them, I know them well. They are the guardians of this lie I am trapped in, sent by false gods and judges to block my path."

He spoke with great patience, as if a parent explaining things to a beloved child.

Briefly stunned, I almost slipped and said, “I’m pretty sure they’re just two workers and a security guard.” But in my short silence, I collected myself. “And how do you think such lies should be dispelled?”

“With the truth.”

Of course.

Smiling beneficently, he stepped out toward them. I remained hidden, to watch with furrowed brow and yes, piqued curiosity.

Seeing him, the men shifted into a more formal stance, the way any decent retail employees might be roused to attentiveness at the arrival of a customer. The security guard, probably thinking his fifty-some years had given him a hint of wisdom, took one extra step closer, marking the boundary of the territory he protected. But they all greeted him as they might any tourist. The younger worker, in his dark-haired prime, politely informed the millennia-old scribe, in heavily accented English, that the tours were over for the day.

“You come back tomorrow, yes?”

It was only as Oft-Tun-Rao stared, and they continued to look upon him, that intimations of something amiss with their visitor registered. Our planted agent, though not particularly expecting this encounter, knew to expect something. He reacted first and most deliberately, moving backward toward the closed gate.

“Do you know who I am?” Oft-Tun-Rao asked.

The other two studied his face, as if they might recognize it. The more they stared, the more they recognized its wrongness.

Not that there was time for them to do much about it.

I’d thought Oft-Tun-Rao already too drained to accomplish another utterance. The moment his form stiffened, the same statue-like way it had when he’d asked the stars for guidance, it was obvious I was wrong. As if fearing he might be having a seizure, the elder guard and young worker seemed concerned for his health. The hired agent fumbled with the latch on the gate, sweat appearing at the lines of his red hair and scalp.

It was when the arcane words burst from the mad scribe’s throat, and the change in him began, that they all realized he was not ill in any comprehensible sense. Dark feathers erupted where his black hair, real and artificial, had been. The bone of his skull pinched and twisted. His eyes grew swollen and luminous, then shifted to either side of an emerging beak.

In seconds, he had taken on the appearance of the falcon-headed symbol of Ba, the spirit of the soul, which forms the pillar of strength for your servants, Heraf-het. As his height swelled above ten feet, I myself was aghast, both at the divine display, and the fact that one such as he could yet call on such powers. It did

not seem right for him to be able to appear in this way, yet I was forced to humbly accept it, and once again bow, if not to the guiding intellect, to the appearance of that great energy.

The reaction from the living, while less devout, was more extreme. All three were overcome by Sybaris, the mind-sickness that often results from such sights. The strongest, the young worker, fell to his knees and, his will rapidly devolving, launched into a dreadful fit of screams for mercy.

As perhaps befitting his age and therefore greater familiarity with his own feelings, including fear, the guard's reaction was more aggressive. He drew his weapon and fired.

Had the gun contained normal ammunition, the transformed scribe would have shrugged off every bullet. But, as instructed, our agent had loaded the weapon with a recent innovation suggested by Ben Stiles — the Radically Invasive Projectile, designed to better pierce, fragment, and rend.

As Oft-Tun-Rao came at him, the alarmed guard continued to fire. The first shot missed completely, instead tearing off a sizable segment of one of the support timbers that buttressed the gate. Each subsequent shot, though, had a larger, nearer target, and couldn't help but strike. Before the bullets ran out, I counted five tears in the scribe's shoulder and chest. The last squarely struck his raptor-like neck, and actually forced him back a bit.

But both wise guard and green worker, despite the latter's pleas, were dead in seconds.

Fortunately, that was all the time our agent required to open the gate and enter. Though I could not see him, or the RPG he retrieved and fired, I did see the cobra-thick smoke that trailed from the tunnel into Oft-Tun-Rao's weaker shoulder. The bright flower of the explosion that followed carried several pieces of ancient flesh and bone.

But it is not so easy to destroy any Arisen, let alone one who had become an avatar of holy grandeur. He did fall, however, and his giant form took to writhing on the ground.

"My friend…." Oft-Tun-Rao called. "Are the shadows defeated?"

Knowing that even the most loyal agent might lash out at anything when in the grip of Sybaris, I waited until certain no further rockets emerged from the open gate. Cautiously peering down the wide earthen tunnel beyond it, I was able to determine he had fled. Now I had to hope he would recover in time to perform the task for which he'd actually been hired.

I knelt by Oft-Tun-Rao. The chunk of missing shoulder regrew, the massive holes in chest and side stitched themselves as I watched, mending bone, sinew, muscle and flesh. While in time he would heal on his own, the speed meant he was expending even more Sekhem.

"Your attackers are gone," I told him.

"I am being tested," he said.

"If so, how will you respond?"

He closed his eyes and concentrated. More of the insults to his form healed, but the effort left him even weaker. I confess an increased unease misleading him as he bore the image of the ba. I took it as a reminder to be careful that as I walked the line of the law, I did not trip and fall.

"Will you stand?" I asked.

"With help, friend… with help."

Assisting him was awkward, not due to the weight, which I handled easily, but his body's unwieldy size. I managed, though, and as the brown feathers of his massive head uncomfortably scraped my nose and cheek, we passed beyond the gate to the head of what was supposedly miles of intricate tunnels. Better yet, he had been forced to leave the smartphone behind.

A few of these tunnels were genuine. Some were made by Rome, some during WW II, others by miners searching for the iron ore once plentiful in the area. As a tourist site, with every natural shift of earth taken as evidence of ancient design, scores more were created, dug rather than dug out. Noted archeologists warned that genuine Neolithic or Medieval artifacts could be destroyed by these efforts. Despite their complaints, the giddy digging continued. It seems scribes in all forms have an easier time getting lost in the labyrinths of their own ideas.

We progressed through crude corridors held aloft by rough-hewn timbers. Often these were illuminated by strung electric lights, but at time their shape was lost in darkness. All the while these tunnels grew more awkward and narrow. Keeping an eye out for any sign of my agent, I maneuvered Oft-Tun-Rao's large form deeper and deeper, until, after an hour, he turned his huge falcon eyes upon me and asked:

"If the Blue Nile is here, why do I not sense it?"

"That, I cannot say."

"Do you feel it?"

"No, but as you say, I'm more easily deceived. Something, though, is near."

"And your sources say it is this way? Do you trust them?"

"I trust that this is the way we should go."

"Then, friend, so do I."

We reached a tunnel sealed off with dry rock wall. Below, I could feel water slowly moving along beneath the ground. When his form contracted to his original size and appearance, he took my relief as a sign that we were all but there. And so, Oft-Tun-Rao, looking starved and feeble, pulled away from me and tried to stand on his own.

Unable to do so, he dropped to one knee.

Head wavering, he pointed at the wall with his false fingertip. “There. It must be. Will you take it down for me?”

“Of course,” I said.

I thrust my hands through the crass barrier, easily reaching a hollow on the other side. With a slight pull, the rocks piled toward me. Repeating the process revealed not a new tunnel, but a deep, dark chamber.

As good a place as any.

I turned to him, hand out, offering to pull him to his feet.

“No,” he said. “I will face the truth standing on my own.”

I nodded. “As befits one such as you.”

With an agonizingly slow, but monumental effort, he stood, then fell more than stumbled into the chamber. Centered in its darkness, he looked around. He gazed at the light he’d left behind, at the dank, invisible walls, and at me, but didn’t seem to recognize anything.

“I am so weak.”

“Is it truly weakness, Oft-Tun-Rao, or another illusion?”

When he fell again, I entered.

“I am almost there. I know it. Please. Help me reach the Blue Nile.”

I stepped closer. Bending down, pretending to think about his request, I looked at him with a most sincere expression. Feigning a conclusion to my inner deliberations, I rose and clapped the moist dirt from my robes.

“No. I will not help you. I am surprised you would ask such a thing. If you are truly who you say, your shell is false. Aiding it, by your own definition, would mean exerting precious energy on an illusion. I will not do it.”

“Then… what am I to do?”

I looked around at dark playing on dark, then touched my finger to my chin as if an idea had struck. “The Blue Nile. Did you not say it would remove such illusions?”

His croaking voice approached a whisper. “Yes. Yes. Is it near? Take me to it.”

I shook my head. “That would not be right. To find it is your true purpose, Oft-Tun-Rao. Therefore it cannot be mine.”

“But… you serve me.”

I stepped back. “I serve Heraf-het.”

Apparently forgetting he had named you false, he rasped, “I… am… Heraf-het! I am the gods, and more!”

Inwardly wincing at his continued blasphemy, I retained an outward calm. His form rattled from what I hoped was yet another payment in Sekhem.

I motioned at my body. “You said that if my shell is a vessel for divine will, that I, in the sense of will, do not really exist. If you are divine, but this shell is Oft-Tun-Rao, does Oft-Tun-Rao then exist?” I widened my eyes as if experiencing an epiphany. “Could that be the illusion the Blue Nile will reveal? That Oft-Tun-Rao does not exist? Has it perhaps revealed that truth to you already?”

He actually thought about it for a while, until something akin to a dying chuckle slopped from his throat. “You joke! I’ve taught you, Ankh-Nephris. I’ve broken your rigid world-view! Help me, my friend, and we’ll laugh together, once I have the Blue Nile.”

I took a step back. “I do not joke.”

His brow, rendered uncannily smooth by weakness, managed a single wrinkle. “Where do you go, friend?”

“I am leaving you to your great and terrible purpose. Would a friend do any less?”

When he managed to raise his arm, the prosthetic tip fell from his index finger. It landed, a pretty, petty bauble of gold and silver, in the dirt at my feet.

“Oh,” I said.

Just that. “Oh.”

Hand too heavy now, he lowered his arm and took to rocking in the earth, like an earthworm that had forgotten how to crawl.

“Do not fear my wrath,” he said. “If you made some error, any error, it is forgiven. Let us be gone. Take me to where my followers may find me, so I can be summoned again.”

“To find the Blue Nile?”

“Yes!”

“Then, yes,” I said. “Let us be gone.”

I stepped out of the small chamber and began putting the stones back in place. He called to me a few more times, but soon the words stopped. All that was left was the sound of his body bobbing against mud and stone.

shlk-shlk-shlk

Though by far the most pleasant sound I’d heard him make, by the time the wall was restored, it had stopped.

There was but one more thing to do, to ensure that within reason, as I could best imagine it, that he would never be found.

The living are so loud, locating the hired agent was easy enough. Yet in the grip of Sybaris, he’d run himself into a corner if the maze and stayed there. The detonator I needed was in his hand. As a witness to the burial, he could never have been allowed to live, but I had planned a quick, merciful end for him. When he turned his crazed eyes on me, I knew it would happen that way.

I said, “Not yet,” thinking to delay him long enough to grab the device.

But he would not, could not listen. The explosives he’d planted throughout the tunnels, intending to bury both Oft-Tun-Rao and this mockery of a place, erupted, threatening to bury me as well.

So in the end, there was a price. Forced to spend my own energy, I uttered dust beneath feet, allowing me to move through roaring tons of falling earth as if through water. The hill air that braced me as I emerged was… stimulating. It served as a reminder that one day soon my own Sekhem would fade, and my shell would likewise grow inert.

But not that night, and not in a place no one could find me.

At a prearranged spot, a reasonable distance from the hill, I watched as the tunnels continued to collapse, not from the blast now, but crumpling of their own accord. If there was any lingering doubt the Shan’iatu had something to do with this place, the fragility of the structure dispelled it.

Benes, twenty seconds early, appeared at my side, offering clean robes and a folding chair. As I sat, he stood beside me, sipping local coffee, the mist of his breath flowing calmly from his exhales. In meditative peace we observed the ill-equipped emergency responders. As expected, they failed to save their attraction, but once they had given it their all and started to head to whatever hovels they considered home, I turned to my high priest.

“The loose ends, as you say, have been tied?”

He nodded. “The major media will report that all the digging caused the collapse. As for Texas, most of Oft-Tun-Rao’s followers cooperated immediately after he left. The holdouts did so after we eliminated Chris Bates. We’re confident Oft-Tun-Rao only had two other burial chambers. The relics secured, both have been destroyed. One was actually a rented storage unit.”

“Where no one would think to look,” I mused. “Put Ms. Ames in charge of what’s left in Texas for now. Let’s see how she does as a functionary.”

“Yes, Ankh-Nephris.”

As for the ball, while it did have a place in the specific way events unfolded, I continue to pray it was not my sole motivation. A different one, older by a century, now sits on that onyx stand beside my stele. Ben Stiles procured it from the Museo Nacional de Antropología, in Mexico City. On the one hand, it is not the same. On the other, I am less hesitant to touch it, to allow my ancient fingers to leave their traces, and it does still provide a tool for some reflection.

As I result, I have decided to give Mr. Stiles a second chance.

There will not be a third.

• • •

And that is my tale, O, Heraf-Het.

I cannot say if you will, as I hope, approve of my attempts at fine distinction, or, as I fear, condemn them as transgressions. This is something I will not know until I stand before you again, to face the judgment that is by definition, pure.

As for Oft-Tun-Rao, buried alone, perhaps forever, in a carnival mockery of Irem, what can I say?

Not an inch to the left, nor an inch to the right.

In pace requiescat.

FATHER OF AB

Lisa Morton

"Although the Blue Nile was one of the relics most sought by all of the guilds, each of them also created a handful of their own small miracles, endowed with Sekhem and gifts of fiery inspiration. The Tef-Aabhi, for example, produced the Father of Ab, claimed to be among the most prized relics from any guild. The Father of Ab, perfectly crafted in lapis lazuli and gold by the guild's finest sculptor and then layered with enchantments by some of the most gifted sorcerers, was said to guarantee success to any who possessed it. Later on, when the citizens of Irem grew fond of the aphorism, 'He who succeeds most may be the first to be victorious in death', the adage was said to have been inspired by the Father of Ab."

— Antu-Herap, the Prince of Glass

Lightless. Cold. A void.

Then:

Descent rushed like a tsunami. Energy flooded every cell, compelling movement. There was no thought, only instinct that drove forward.

A square of light ahead. Figures beyond.

Reflex screamed attack. Hands with bony, curved fingers extended, seeking soft, warm flesh.

But:

An explosion of white formed into a shape, paralyzing. The luminescence was a man with the head of a lion. It awakened as it stunned, and in that awakening awareness flooded in, with questions.

Where/when/who am I?

Why, however, was not asked, because the answer was already known: Something has been found. I feel its presence, pulsating nearby like a black star. It is my goal.

"Nebet," said a voice.

That name resonated, drawing forth shreds of consciousness. Nebet… I am Nebet… I am Arisen… I am of the Tef-Aabhi… I am ancient…

I am needed.

"Who summons me?" she asked, in a voice that sounded like desert sand scraping stone.

The glow faded, was lowered, a man revealed. He was middle-aged, with brown skin, curly graying hair, and a dark suit. He fixed Nebet with a cautious gaze. "My name is Alberto Gonzalez. I am your humble servant."

Questions continued to tumble through Nebet's head, but she knew they couldn't be answered all at once. She looked around, seeking familiarity. She was in a windowless tomb, surrounded by pillars around which wound exquisitely rendered marble serpents and vines. Behind her, a stone and metal platform held the sarcophagus she'd just stepped out of; steady, warm illumination was provided by shaded sconces. One wall was covered with an elaborate bas-relief frieze, and Nebet recalled that she had sculpted it, as well as the elaborate pillars.

"Sorcerer," she said, turning her attention to the man who called himself Gonzalez. There were three men with him — younger, tense, eyeing her with near-panic. Their unease filled her with grim satisfaction. "You are the leader?"

Gonzalez shook his head. "No, I am only an aide. Our master waits just outside. He will explain your task." He stepped back, gesturing to a flight of ascending stairs on the far side of the spacious chamber.

Nebet didn't move. Instead she took in their clothing, the strange lamps, the air that felt artificially cooled and smelled of ozone. "What year is this?"

"2015," said Gonzalez.

She searched her memories for other years, but found only glimpses: flames kept in glass containers, rough woven garments, horses and desert vistas…

"I don't remember…" Nebet's rough voice trailed off. Her eyes wandered back to the frieze, which she realized was an attempt to capture centuries of history… her history. She tried to connect to the images recorded in rock, but they were like fading echoes at the end of a tunnel.

One of the other men said softly, "We should go."

Gonzalez nodded and walked to the stairs. "This way, please."

Part of Nebet was reluctant to leave this place; she knew it was hers, she felt comfortable here. But the Sekhem was raging within her, urging her into action, so she walked forward, uncertainly. She hesitated, examining one of the lighting fixtures. Behind her, she heard the youngest man whisper, "I don't get it. She was awake in 2012, so she's seen electric lights before…"

"They're not supposed to remember shit," one of the others replied. "What's your excuse?"

Just before she reached the stairs, she spotted a round mirror at eye level in one corner of the room and moved to it. Bracing herself, she looked: Tattered skin-shreds the hue of the River after a flood barely covered a skull that shone beneath in places; withered lips drew back over jutting teeth, strands of black hair fell past shrunken ears and down a narrow neck. But despite the rot and the great age, the eyes glowed with determination, even passion.

My eyes. My face.

Nebet turned away from the reflection before she put a fist through the glass to shatter it.

• • •

Dr. Elizabeth Beresford shifted the figurine in her gloved hands, examining it for about the hundredth time, searching for some clue she'd missed before.

This is big.

Not the figurine — it was only eight inches tall — but what it meant.

It can't be Tongva.

Beth placed the carving on a soft white cloth and pulled the print-out of the report closer, re-reading it again. The facts were simple, if somewhat morbid: A work crew tunneling beneath the Santa Monica mountains, digging a new subway line from Union Station in downtown Los Angeles all the way to the coast, had unearthed a cave that seemed to be some sort of burial ground. Fifteen skeletons had been found, with indications that they had died violently. A few ornaments and weapons scattered among the remains were unidentifiable, although Beth guessed they pre-dated the Tongva. She wouldn't have the carbon dating results for another two days, but she was an expert on the original peoples that had once inhabited Southern California, and she knew without a doubt: Those corpses had never been Tongva.

The figurine was a more obvious clue. Its rich azure color meant the stone could only be lapis lazuli; although lapis lazuli was found not far away in the San Gabriel mountains, the design of the figure (or should she call it an effigy?) couldn't possibly belong to any of the natives, for one simple reason:

It was lion-headed.

There was no mistaking the regal features, the feline eyes, the flowing mane. Whoever had sculpted this piece had been possessed of astonishing skill; Beth could make out every hair and whisker, from every angle. The lion head sat atop a man's body, with legs together and arms crossed; the hands held their own tiny effigies. The piece had been worked with gold to bring out the lion's eyes, loincloth, armbands, and the miniature effigies.

It looked classically Egyptian.

But that didn't make sense, either. Ancient Egyptian civilization had started about 3150 B.C., and Beth was guessing the carbon dating would reveal this piece to be considerably older.

What am I looking at?

The city had called her university when the work crew had found the burial cave last week; as UCA's expert on the local Tongva, Beth had been first on the roster. As she'd stood in the cavern, heavy-duty work lamps painting the stone walls in artificial daylight, she'd examined the skeletons and known immediately that the whole site was too old for Tongva. The bodies had been piled around a plain stone box, but the lapis lazuli piece inside the box was certainly not plain. Excavation of the rest of the cave had revealed nothing. The box and the figure were the focal point.

Had the bodies belonged to defenders of the box? Or had they been victims sacrificed to protect it? Perhaps even offered to the leonine god represented by the effigy…

Beth heard a sound from somewhere else in the workroom behind the university's small museum; she looked up, startled to realize how late it was — nearly midnight. She'd been going over the effigy for almost eight solid hours.

This could be my tenure.

She needed publication credits to advance in her career, and what lay before her represented at least one significant paper. Unless Dodd tried to take credit for it…

Something rattled nearby.

A small jolt of fear shot through Beth as she realized how isolated she was. The museum was secure, surely...but at this time of night, the campus was largely deserted, under-lit. She'd still have to make her way back to her car, parked in a structure on the far side of the grounds. She should never have stayed this late.

What if she ran into Dodd? She knew there was no way the department dean would be working this late, but the thought nonetheless unnerved her even more. Ever since she'd joined the UCA Anthropology Department almost two years ago, Raymond Dodd had found reasons to visit her unannounced, follow her to her car, rub against her, or make jokes — usually about sex — around her. She'd grown more used to that than she should have — she was blonde, slender, pretty, despite a chin just a little too broad, her father's chin — but Dodd's innuendoes and strokes were somehow even worse than the open leers of college frat boys.

Two weeks ago, Dodd had ordered her to attend a party designed to lure wealthy alumni into donating to their alma mater. She'd reluctantly complied, only to find herself declining an invitation to dinner from a man at least thirty years her senior. Later on, as she'd tried to leave the party, Dodd — severely drunk

from too many martinis — had cornered her near the front door of his large house. "I thought you wanted tenure," he'd said.

Trying to edge away, Beth responded. "I do, but…" She wanted to shout, to get angry, to tell him that was interested in being a professor, not a courtesan. Instead she stared at her shoes, feeling heat rise in her cheeks, hating herself.

"Beth, I expect you to do whatever it takes to get more money into this school. After all, if we're socked with one more budget cut, we may have to lose a few positions in the department." Before she could respond, Dodd had sidled up closer to her and rested his cocktail glass against her bare arm. "C'mon, Beth, how bad could it be? You've been divorced for a year now, right? It's time to loosen up again."

Beth had stood, frozen in shock, as Dodd had slid the glass down her arm and plainly ogled her chest. Only a call from his wife had saved her. She'd fled to her car, but her hands were shaking so badly that she'd dropped her keys.

If she'd thought Dodd might apologize or at least avoid her the next day, she'd been wrong. Instead, he'd passed her in a hall, said, "Remember what we talked about last night," and winked at her as her gut had churned.

But maybe there was a way to go around Dodd to achieve tenure…at a better school.

She looked at the lion-headed carving again. Although it appeared to be Egyptian, if her guess was right on its age, it pre-dated the ancient dynasties. And how could it have been found here, in America? Was it possible that there had been some sort of African civilization prior to the Egyptians that had visited America?

If she could prove that, she could have her choice of universities.

Beth abruptly had an intense desire to run her bare fingertips along the lapis lazuli, as if that unencumbered contact would reveal the secret. It was ridiculous, of course; she was the last person to believe in metaphysics, like some New Age psychic reading vibrations.

But she peeled off the white cotton gloves anyway.

She set fingers on the cool stone. It was smooth, with just a slight variation in texture where gold had been applied. She felt the head and face, again admiring the workmanship.

A picture began to form in Beth's head, taking form and then unreeling like a tiny movie. In it, she saw herself, looking tall and resolute, approaching Dodd and telling him off. By the time she was done, Dodd was begging her not to file a harassment complaint, and guaranteeing her advancement.

Beth gasped and yanked her fingers back in shock. The image had been so real; it had, in fact, felt more like a memory than a daydream. But she could never do it; she hadn't even been able to speak when Dodd had practically demanded she offer sex to wealthy potential donors. And the divorce…Mason's attorneys had

demolished her, even though Mason had been the one found in a janitorial closet with a twenty-four-year-old teaching assistant. Mason had walked away with their house; he'd already drained most of the joint checking account. She got the six-year-old Toyota and their collection of out-of-date textbooks.

Curious, Beth inhaled and touched the figurine again.

This time she saw herself at a book signing, and was startled to realize she was the author. She smiled and shook hands and chatted, confident and happy. She inscribed a copy of the book to Mason: Thank you for giving me the freedom I needed to write this — the divorce was the best part of our marriage.

"Ms. Beresford…?"

Beth jerked her head up and yanked her fingers from the stone, her heart pounding, only to see the museum security guard, Hector. He raised a reassuring a hand to her. "Whoa, there, sorry. Didn't mean to spook you. Just didn't know anyone was still here."

She sighed, rubbed at her eyes, and stood. "I shouldn't be. Let me just wrap this up and I'll be out of your hair."

"Take your time. I'm here until midnight."

Hector turned away, Beth wrapped the figurine in protective cloth and impulsively shoved it into her shoulder bag.

What the hell am I doing? This thing is priceless.

She knew it was wrong, against the rules, a bad idea…but she also knew that this thing was her future. She wasn't going to let it go.

Stuffing an empty piece of cloth in the stone box, she replaced the lid and turned away. "I'm done here."

"Oh, okay. I'll let you out."

As Hector led the way to the museum entrance, Beth considered asking him to walk her to her car, but she decided against it.

Somehow, with the figurine in her bag, she felt safe.

• • •

Nebet's tomb was set into a hillside, and opened onto a large enclosed yard that displayed obvious great wealth. Even though it was night, the air was warm, smelled of smoke, and a slight reddish glow covered the sky, blocking out any stars.

"Where are we?" Nebet asked, eyeing the luminescent, blue pool before her, surrounded by tile, stone, and plants she knew had never grown in Irem.

Gonzalez answered, "The city of Los Angeles." As he saw her pause and stare into the sky, he added, "…on the western edge of the North American continent."

Nebet turned her attention to the three men with Gonzalez, who seemed to represent a variety of races: one looked like a traveling merchant she'd once met from the Far East, one looked like Gonzalez, and one had pale skin the hue of the simple white shroud she wore. "None of you look Iremite."

Gonzalez smiled. "Los Angeles is a melting pot, and the Tef-Aabhi have embraced that. We have all manner of people in the guild. My own heritage is from a country to the south of here called Mexico."

Nebet stared at him unblinkingly.

Gonzalez paused by the edge of the pool, its shifting surface forming dancing shadows on his dark features. "It's true that I was not present in Irem," he answered, "but my ancestry is legitimate, as is my service. We've passed the knowledge on from generation to generation. I may not have been present during your Rite of Return, but I know how to assist you in fulfilling your sacred purpose."

As he spoke, it was hard for Nebet to concentrate on his words. Arisen often suffered confusion upon first beginning the Descent, when the Sekhem roiled within, nearly overpowering thought… but it was not her own force that distracted her.

It was the reason she had been awakened. Whatever had been found — although "released" was probably more appropriate — was substantial enough to make the air vibrate with its essence. No normal human would sense it, but to a mummy, a creature of occult senses, it was like moving through a thick mist.

"This object that has been found…" she ventured.

Gonzalez said, "I'll leave that to John to explain."

They walked to a short flight of brick steps; Nebet reached the top, where she gaped at the house just beyond. Even though she didn't (yet) recognize the style, the elegance of the design and construction was breathtaking. "This is the Tef-Aabhi's place…?"

Gonzelez hesitated before answering, "Well, actually…it's John's home. John Medina — our nomarch."

Nebet wanted to question Gonzalez further (what had Medina contributed to the Tef-Aabhi to have acquired this much personal wealth?), but Gonzalez had disappeared into the house. She followed him past large open glass doors and into a room filled with antiques, including some of Egyptian design that nagged at Nebet's consciousness. She was examining a standing iron oil-lamp when a voice called her name.

She turned to see Gonzalez standing beside a tall, well-built man in his early forties. His face might have been handsome had it not been for the pitted skin left from his youth; he'd grown a full beard and mustache in an attempt to cover as much as possible. His dark brown eyes peered at her intently. "Do you remember me at all?"

Something…she felt she should know him, but true familiarity hovered just beyond her reach. "No."

He grunted, then added, "Well, that'll come in time, I suppose." He walked closer, looking her over, his expression halfway between amusement and contempt. "Damn, I always forget how ugly you are at first."

The Sekhem in Nebet flared. "I could take your tongue for that," she said, even as she restrained the urge.

Medina didn't flinch. "You could, but you won't, because you serve me, and not the other way around."

"I am Deathless," Nebet said, glaring at him. "I serve none but the Tef-Aabhi and the Judges of Duat, and you will not speak to me that way again."

He nodded, but there was something she didn't trust in the motion. "Of course." Medina turned away and picked up a small tablet of some sort, not much bigger than his hand. He held it up before her eyes.

Nebet looked at it, perplexed. "Is this a vessel of some sort?"

Medina chuckled. "Some might think so. But no, it's just a tool, for the exchange of information." The tablet glowed with an internal illumination which formed a picture; the picture showed a small blue lion-headed effigy.

Recall crashed down, flooding Nebet with memories: herself, alive and young, 6,000 years ago, apprenticed to a sculptor of the Tef-Aabhi / her skill with lapis lazuli astonishing all who saw it / her assistant, a large, bare-chested man, handing her tools as she worked on the lion-headed Father of Ab, a gift to the great scribe Antu-Herap / her genius earning her the envy of Khnumbaf, her guild superior / being taken by the sorcerers for the Rite of Return, which she was told was a great honor but she suspected was really Khnumbaf's vengeance upon her talent…

"The Father of Ab," she blurted out.

Medina lowered the tablet. "Yes. So you do remember some things…"

"Some…is returning."

He stepped closer and whispered, "You'll remember more, soon — like sharing my bed two years ago, at the dawn of the new Sothic Turn."

Nebet stepped back and raised an arm to strike.

The three men who had accompanied her back from her tomb leapt forward, hands going under jackets. The youngest — the one who had asked about her memory, the one with milk-white skin and straw-colored hair — withdrew a large weapon. When Nebet turned her bright black eyes on him, he panicked.

He pulled the trigger.

The bullet struck Nebet in the chest.

She felt the impact, but nothing else. A tiny geyser of dust erupted from the hole.

And then Nebet was moving, so fast she was a blur, too fast for the gunman to fire again. He screamed as the arm holding the pistol was pulled from the rest of his body and flung away, blood spraying the chic furnishings. His screaming was silenced when his head followed his arm, and his decapitated body collapsed. Nebet, still holding the man's open-mouthed head, turned to glare at Medina as she flung the dead weight away.

Medina held her gaze. "Ah, damn — Robbs was a good man. That was unnecessary. I would have disciplined him myself for his actions."

"Then I have served the Judges by saving you the trouble."

Medina turned away, waving the remaining two men forward. "Lee, Mario — get this cleaned up. Gonzalez, anything you can do…?"

The sorcerer nodded. "Mr. Robbs died in our service. His ghost is Blessed, and will continue to serve." Gonzalez positioned himself over the spilled blood, closed his eyes, and began to recite a prayer rapidly under his breath.

Medina turned away and motioned Nebet to follow him, leading her outside to the walkway beside the pool. He leaned against a cocktail bar and asked, "Do you remember any of the effigy's history yet?"

Nebet answered, "No."

Medina reached under the bar, came back with a bottle, cracked it open, took a swallow, and then began. "The Father of Ab has the power to grant an affinity most needed by whoever possesses it. A moderately-skilled artist, for example, will become a genius… or a genius will gain good fortune. It was a gift from our guild to Antu-Herap, the Prince of Glass.

"But it was stolen before it reached the great scribe. A sorcerer named Inkaef believed it was too much power for any one man to have, so he took it and fled with a small army. Antu-Herap pursued him around the world until they both landed here, in the New World. About to be captured, Inkaef hid the relic in a cave, sacrificing fifteen of his men in a spell to hide the relic from Antu-Herap, and then took his remaining troops to face their pursuers. They were slaughtered and Inkaef committed suicide rather than face the scribes' excruciations. But the magical protections held and the relic was never found… until last week."

"The protective spell was finally broken?"

"No, nothing that arcane. The spell hid it only from other sorcery. Laborers working for the city dug it up, purely by accident."

Nebet allowed the information to settle into her mind before asking, "And my place in all this?"

"Because you sculpted the effigy, we hoped you would assist Antu-Herap in locating it. Your first task was to accompany him here. When he was unable to use his power to find the relic, he returned, but you remained here. You have served

this nome for the Tef-Aabhi in many ways ever since. My home, as you see, was built around your tomb, to protect you."

Nebet felt the Father of Ab calling to her, playing on her consciousness like a master musician. "We should delay no more in regaining the effigy."

Medina laughed. "Quite right. According to the news, it's at the university museum in—"

Cutting him off, Nebet said, "You need not tell me where to find it. I can feel it."

Medina set his bottle down before turning to head back toward the house. "Naturally. Gonzalez and my guards will accompany you. You will retrieve the Father of Ab and bring it back to me."

"You mean we will retrieve it for the Judges of Duat."

Medina smiled. "Yes. For the Judges."

Nebet turned to go, already weary of Medina and his sumptuous home that seemed more like a palace for a pharaoh. She didn't like knowing that he had turned centuries of Tef-Aabhi skill and acquisition to his own personal gain, and she knew full well that he had no intention of relinquishing the Father of Ab once he had it. But he was right about one thing:

It was her duty, sworn before Neheb-Ka in the afterlife, to serve in this manner.

And serve, she would.

• • •

Beth's dreams all involved the effigy. Images and scenes collided with each other like pebbles in a mad sandstorm: She was in a dusty workshop, her fingers deftly chipping away bits of lapis lazuli. She handed the finished effigy to a man who smiled, while another man behind him glowered at her. She should have been honored when she heard the words "Rite of Return," but instead she wanted to scream. She faced trials beyond imagining and finally stood before a lion-headed titan in a shifting afterworld. She returned to earth, traveled around the world, stepped from a boat onto a beach and felt the pull of the effigy but failed it. She faded into the darkness of henet, which lasted centuries.

And then: She threatened Dodd with a lawsuit when he groped her at a party, and he blanched. She wrote a book about the effigy, and it revolutionized thinking about the early Egyptians. She gained a reputation for being brilliant and tough.

Beth dreamed on. In her sleep, she smiled.

• • •

It was late, and traffic was light as the SUV negotiated the side streets that led to the freeway. The University of California at Alhambra was thirty minutes to the

east. The 405 was under construction tonight, and so Medina's driver had to wind his way along surface streets from the hills of Bel-Air to the 10 freeway.

Nebet was anxious to retrieve the effigy, but she also appreciated the delay because it gave her time to think. The car was a new experience for her — a black box that moved with easily five times the speed of the fastest chariot. It thrummed and rattled around her, and she wondered how it could hold together at such velocity.

They'd given her clothes to wear, assuring her they were new and would blend in. She had black pants made from a slightly rough fabric that fit tightly, a long-sleeved top woven from silk in colors she'd never seen, and a heavy scarf that concealed her peeling skull. She knew that soon her sahu would mold itself into something more human, less in need of disguise…but until then, the scarf and large, dark glasses were wise.

Her thoughts, though, were less on the new wonders she saw around her and more on the oldest of human behaviors:

Medina was deceiving her.

Why hadn't he come with them? Surely he was as anxious to have the Father of Ab as she was. He clearly expected it to increase his fortunes even more.

Of course he had a sorcerer, two armed men, and one of the Deathless as his proxies, so he wasn't needed. But still…

What hadn't he told her? Was this some sort of trap? No, she felt the relic's pull too strongly for that. Another sort of danger, then? Yes… She glanced at Gonzalez in the front seat, and the man seemed tense, his gaze darting repeatedly from the small glowing tablet he held in one hand to the night-dark streets around them. Nebet had come to like Gonzalez, who was cautious and respectful where Medina seemed all swaggering bravado; Gonzalez had even placed a small slip of paper with a number on it in one of her pockets and told her that if they should be separated, she could use a phone to reach him at that number.

"Gonzalez," she asked, looking at the illuminated screen he studied, "is that device connected to the number you gave me?"

Gonzalez barely looked up. "What? Oh, yes…this is my phone. We can talk together on it, but it also serves other purposes." He looked outside again, his anxiety plain.

Taking her cue from Gonzalez, Nebet glanced out at the surrounding area. The neighborhoods had shifted as they'd driven south, from the wealth of Bel-Air to upper middle class houses with manicured lawns to lower-class urban collections of fast food joints, auto repair shops and run-down apartment buildings. This area was less well-lit, dirtier and more dangerous than where they'd come from…but she didn't think that was the source of Gonzalez's unease.

"Gonzalez," she finally said, "what trouble do you expect?"

Gonzalez froze for an instant, like a kid caught red-handed stealing, then he turned toward her. “You are observant, Nebet. We have…rivals.”

“I have no doubt. A man like Medina would have many, even were he not of Irem’s bloodline.”

“John is…impulsive. Ruthless. Qualities that have served the Medinas well in business, and allowed them to create a fortune using the skills of the Tef-Aabhi. They’ve patented everything from SSD solid state technology to nanobots, and they’ve taken over dozens of companies. They do serve the Tef-Aabhi, and have made invaluable contributions to the guild. But…what he did to you, two years ago…”

Nebet liked Gonzalez more with each passing second. “You did not approve.”

Gonzalez eyed the younger men in the car, weighing how much to say in front of them, but the decision was made when the slender Asian spoke up. “It was shameful. John leads our nome, yes, but that doesn’t mean he’s immune to criticism. Knowing that your devotion to the Tef-Aabhi would not allow you to refuse, he manipulated you into serving him...wrongfully. We are still considering Obloquy.”

“Obloquy…” The word took a second to define itself in Nebet’s thoughts: the process of challenging another member of one’s guild. To plot such an action against a nomarch could only come about with great difficulty, perseverance, and the genuine belief that he had committed acts that endangered the Tef-Aabhi.

“Lee’s family,” Gonzalez said, smiling appreciatively at the man, “is like mine. They were brought into the Tef-Aabhi centuries ago. Mario, on the other hand…” He indicated the youthful brown-skinned man driving. “…is a recent recruit.”

The driver grinned in the rearview mirror, revealing dazzling white teeth. “It was either Tef-Aabhi or the Latin Kings. I like building shit a lot more than selling meth, so you know who won.”

Nebet asked, “Is the Latin Kings also a guild?”

The three men all laughed, then Gonzalez answered, “Not exactly.”

Addressing Gonzalez, Nebet said, “You spoke of rivals…”

“Yes. Our relations here with the local Sesha-Hebsu nome have always been strained. They also seek the Father of Ab.”

Nebet nodded. “As they should. It was a gift to their guildmaster Antu-Herap, after all.”

Gonzalez shifted in the front passenger seat, uncomfortable. “That gift was made 6,000 years ago…”

“I don’t understand.”

"John feels that the Sesha-Hebsu have changed. They don't share the Tef-Aabhi's vision of a new Irem; they live for the past, and their greatness is far behind them. John believes the Father of Ab should be returned to the Tef-Aabhi… permanently."

"Aah," Nebet said, as this new information began to pull memories from her swirling consciousness. She remembered: twenty years ago, when she was awakened to witness Medina's installation as nomarch, and she had to quell a fight that broke out during the ceremony between Medina's men and visiting Sesha-Hebsu members; then, ten years ago, she'd been sent to negotiate peace with the Sesha-Hebsu, and had left the talks guessing that Medina had no intention of honoring the terms; then two years ago, when the Sothic Turn had brought her out of the cold space into the world again, and she learned that the remaining members of the local Sesha-Hebsu had built a fortress masquerading as a library, having grown fearful of the Tef-Aabhi.

"Gonzalez," she asked, "how did my Descent two years ago end? I don't have all of those memories yet…"

"I…" Gonzalez trailed off, cleared his throat, and finally said, "I don't think it best for you to hear it from me."

She was about to press him when she broke off — the air seemed to be growing heavier around her, making her senses prickle. She tilted her head, seeking the source of the sensation.

Sekhem.

"Nebet…?" Gonzalez noticed her abrupt concentration.

"Stop," she ordered.

Confused, Gonzalez asked, "'Stop'? Do you mean, the car?"

"Yes. Stop the car. NOW."

Gonzalez muttered something to Mario, who looked around the desolate neighborhood. "Here? But the freeway's just ahead…"

"Can't you feel it?" Nebet was nearly clawing at the glass. "Sekhem. Deep. Rich. A vessel nearby…" She abruptly gasped. "By the Judges of Duat… the Blue Nile."

Mario steered the van over to the curb. Just past the sidewalk a closed taqueria squatted beside a shuttered store front sporting sunned "FOR LEASE" signs. The Sekhem grew denser by the second, nearly sending Nebet into an ecstatic swoon. She'd felt the Blue Nile once before — all Arisen had felt its creation — and she remembered this nearly overwhelming rush of Sekhem.

"The Blue Nile cannot be here," Gonzalez said.

"But it is. It feels like…it's moving. Coming closer."

Gonzalez thought for a moment and then his eyes widened and he turned frantically to Mario. “Get us out of here!”

“No,” said Nebet.

The window next to her shattered.

She instinctively drew back when the rest of the car’s door buckled, as if gripped in giant constricting jaws. The door was torn away, flung aside, and Nebet looked out to see a huge ebony-skinned man there, naked from the waist up, his torso and arms bulging with muscle, a quartet of bullet holes located above his heart. An aura blacker than his skin surrounded him, his eyes pulsed with malevolent energies.

He was Shuankhsen — one of the Lifeless, enemies to the Arisen — inhabiting a recently-murdered body he’d probably just acquired. In one hand he held a blue bottle, something recent and worthless, and certainly not the Blue Nile.

“Nebet!” the Shuankhsen shouted, as he thrust the bottle out to her. “How do you like my Blue Nile? A trick created by a sorcerer for me… just before I ate him.”

Of course. Now it was obvious. But seconds ago, she’d been so sure.

“Keres-Sef!” That was Gonzalez. He knew the Shuankhsen even in this body.

Lee and Mario drew their guns and jumped from the SUV, firing. The bullets slammed into the Shuankhsen’s dead flesh, joining those already lodged there. Keres-Sef wasn’t even slowed down by the impacts; he leapt forward, opened his mouth impossibly wide, like a snake unhinging its jaws to swallow prey larger than itself, and he bit through Lee’s right shoulder. Lee screamed as his gun arm was severed; he fell back, instinctively clutching at the gushing stump, not seeing Keres-Sef thrust the arm into his mouth, where it was devoured in three chews.

Nebet heard Gonzalez chanting behind her, but she knew whatever spell he was trying to cast would take too long. She leapt from the SUV, her tongue already moving to curse her enemy. She called upon shadow, heart, and spirit to combine in a single powerful utterance. In an instant, a vortex of particles and city grit spun around her. Somewhere she heard Mario shriek.

The obfuscating, whirling cloud would have hidden her from view of mortals, but did nothing to conceal her from Keres-Sef, who knew this enchantment well and saw through it easily. However, he pulled away when Nebet draw back an arm and hurled a bolt of concentrated rubble, like ten-thousand tiny asphalt daggers. The attack hit Keres-Sef on the right side of his chest, exploding out tissue and bone, leaving the body occupied by the Lifeless so damaged that it actually started to weave and then topple. She knew it wouldn’t stop Keres-Sef, who would find a new form to inhabit soon, but perhaps it would slow him down enough to give Nebet time to escape, which seemed to be her best option. Even without the real

Blue Nile, Keres-Sef was stronger than she was, and Nebet knew he had made sure that more than a few of the Arisen would never rise again.

She turned, seeking Gonzalez, and felt something holding her, tearing into her.

Jaws of the Devourer. Keres-Sef hadn't been as badly damaged as she'd hoped.

There was no time for another utterance, no chance for a fight, so Nebet did the only thing left to her: She pulled herself out of Keres-Sef's distended jaws, disregarding the plate-sized part of her torso that ripped free.

The world spun around her. Sekhem gushed into the Los Angeles night, leaving her staggering, disoriented. She felt the Shuankhsen behind her and thought, So this is how it ends… as another meal for this monster.

Keres-Sef's face dipped down… and his head exploded.

Nebet dimly made out Mario, sprawled on the sidewalk with one leg torn off at the hip, but he'd managed to lift his gun for a last shot. As she watched, the gun slipped from dead fingers.

She had no time to either mourn the young man or find Gonzalez. She needed to escape, find some source of Sekhem and focus on salvaging her own body. If she could get away, she might just survive this Descent.

She ran, half-hopping, off-balance from the large part of her that was missing. She fled, heedless of direction or destination, into the corrupt heart of the city.

• • •

Beth awoke early, invigorated. Usually she had to hit the alarm's snooze bar several times and she still woke tired, dreading another day of uninterested students and Dodd's belittling… but not today.

She showered and dressed, then examined herself in the mirror.

She looked dowdy, ten years older than her real age. Bethie, she thought, as she tugged at her dull pastel dress, no wonder you can't get tenure. Dodd's right about one thing: Wouldn't hurt you to loosen up a little.

Beth undid the top two buttons of the dress, then added an ornamented belt and a red jacket.

Better. But I seriously need to do some shopping.

Before she left, she did one last thing: She chose a large shoulder bag and placed the effigy, carefully wrapped and protected, within it.

She'd given herself enough time to stop by an electronics store on her way in. She'd be a few minutes late, but it was a necessary purchase.

She had two morning classes followed by a break. She hoped to find Dodd in his office then, and she did.

"Oh, Beth," he said, looking up from his computer. His finger jerked on the mouse, and she guessed he'd just closed down either a game of solitaire or (more likely for Dodd) porn. "What can I do for you?"

"Have you got a minute?"

"Sure."

She closed the door and then seated herself across from him. His eyes played across her open neckline, his eyebrows arched, and Beth hated everything about him — his shaggy, graying hair, his rumpled suit, his flimsy moustache. She placed her bag on his desk as she said, "About those wealthy alumni…"

Dodd sat up straighter, smiling. "Yes…"

"I thought it over, and I think I'd like to give it a try."

His smile broadened. "Really? Well, I'm happy to hear that, Beth. You know, you haven't published much yet, and there really aren't many other ways to tenure…"

"But this would be one of them, right?"

Dodd rose from behind his desk, walked around, and perched on the front, so close that their legs brushed against each other. "Maybe. That depends more on you."

Beth tried to bat her lashes; she'd never been good at flirting, but it seemed easier today. "What do I need to do?"

Dodd repositioned himself slightly, angling his crotch more towards her. "To start with, you could undo my belt, pull down my zipper, and…"

Not moving, Beth said, "Are you saying you want me to perform oral sex on you?"

He grinned. "Well… yes. No teeth, though."

"Right." Beth abruptly pushed back her chair, stood, slung her bag over her shoulder and walked to the office door, which she opened. As Dodd stared in deflated bewilderment, she reached into her purse, pulled out a small handheld recorder, hit several buttons, and Dodd's voice issued clearly from the tiny speaker: "Undo my belt, pull down my zipper…"

Beth thumbed the off button and returned the device to her bag. "I think that's a good clear recording, don't you?"

Dodd rushed forward and slammed the office door shut, then positioned himself between her and it. "Listen, I don't know what the fuck you think you're doing, but I can get you fired so quick it'll make your head spin…"

Summoning up resolve she didn't know she possessed, Beth looked him unflinchingly in the eye. "And I can get you brought up on sexual harassment charges, and who do you think they'll fire then?"

"I know you, Beth. You wouldn't."

"You don't know me, and I would. Oh, I absolutely would."

Dodd's jaw worked desperately to find a response, but failed. Beth pushed past him, opened the door, and stepped out into the hallway. Students moved past her, on their way to classes, caught up in their own thoughts.

None noticed how hard she was breathing, how fast she walked.

It was several seconds before she could slow down, force herself to exhale more slowly. She made it to her own tiny cubicle, closed the door, collapsed into a chair in disbelief.

What did I just do? I don't think Dodd expected to be the one brought to his knees.

The thought made her giggle. She felt strangely powerful, in control. Capable of anything.

Hefting her purse, Beth felt the weight of the figurine in her bag. It felt like a gift of hope.

• • •

Nebet shambled along the sidewalk in the early morning cool. She didn't feel the temperature, but then she didn't feel much of anything. She knew that soon she might face a final, potent death.

She had no idea where she was, but memories had returned as she walked the streets. She remembered being in this city before, but not these particular streets. She recalled more than a century ago, when the air had been tinged with the scent of orange groves that surrounded the city and horses had drawn buggies along sleepy streets lined with houses built by growers and entrepreneurs. It was nothing like the dingy, trash-strewn, rundown urban hell she staggered through now.

She'd been called back then to assist the Tef-Aabhi with a land deal that had gone sour. A member of the Tef-Aabhi named Petranilla de Feliz had been rooked out of inheriting thousands of acres of land by her late uncle's two attorneys, and Nebet had been ordered to curse the land. Her curse — that no crops or livestock would live there, that no human habitation would thrive — had endured so long the land had finally been given to the burgeoning city of Los Angeles, who had left it wild and renamed it Griffith Park.

And she remembered two years ago, when the Sothic Turn had awakened her. Medina had been waiting, with a story about a new sorcerer allied with the Tef-Aabhi who specialized in sex magic. He'd said that a nomarch coupled with one of the Deathless would create vast energies the guild could harness. She'd been foolish enough to believe it…until she'd overheard Medina with his men, mocking her gullibility. She'd willingly returned to her tomb then, despising Medina, seeking the release of nothingness.

Now she worked to bury those memories again, so she could focus on simple survival. She fingered the slip of paper in her pocket, the one Gonzalez had said would bring him to her, but her memories were tangled, disordered, and she was unclear on the meaning of the numbers on the paper.

Plus, she feared Gonzalez was dead. And if he was dead, might she not find herself talking to Medina instead? She wasn't ready for that yet.

She walked past a large building that stood out from the others around it; it was bigger, more ornate, cleaner but older.

It was also full of Sekhem.

Nebet stopped, irresistibly drawn by the essential, life-giving force. This building — which she believed to be some sort of temple, or place of worship — had what she needed. The door was a heavy block of wood, but it gave against a slight push and she entered.

Just inside, she found a dim antechamber. The Sekhem was nearly overpowering; some of it radiated from a metallic basin attached to one brick wall. Above the basin, a golden cross gleamed.

Nebet plunged her hands into the basin, and felt Sekhem run through her fingers. Liquid Sekhem? How is this possible? At the moment, though, her need for life was greater than her need for knowledge, and she luxuriated in the feel of Sekhem radiating through her hands, up her arms, to her damaged torso. She could feel her ancient flesh growing, reshaping itself, filling in the dreadful gap Keres-Sef's attack had left her.

"May I help you?"

Nebet abruptly realized that a man had been watching her for several seconds. He was small, older, with bald head, glasses, a kind face, and a black coat with a strange white collar. Nebet relaxed, sensing no danger from him.

"I was injured. This helps."

He smiled, an expression full of warmth and empathy. "I'm glad. Can I…?"

He broke off, staring at her face, and Nebet realized her concealing scarf had vanished during the fight with Keres-Sef. The small man stared in pity for a second before moving his hand in a curious, cross-wise motion over his chest and head. "Mother of mercy," he muttered. "What happened to you?"

Nebet wondered what she looked like. The sahu had probably been returning to a human appearance before the fight with the Shuankhsen; now she probably looked even more gaunt, more truly dead. "I… am ill."

"Oh, my child. Were you burned or is this cancer, or…? I'm sorry, I shouldn't pry, but I'd like to pray for you."

Seizing on his last guess, Nebet said, "Yes. Cancer."

"I'm so sorry. I'm Father Donnolly. Is there anything else I can do to help?"

"Who are you father to?"

He smiled and said, "I'm a priest."

Ahh… now it made sense. "What god do you worship?"

"There is only one God."

She remembered: she had encountered this new religion on other Descents, and had never understood it. Only one god, in a world (and an afterworld) full of so many different things? It made no sense to her, but the followers of this doctrine seemed sure of their beliefs. Plus, she sensed true caring in this "father" and that was an attribute she could use right now.

"May I ask your name?"

"Nebet."

The priest said, "That's a lovely name. Is it…?"

She almost responded, "Iremite," then remembered where and when she was. "Egyptian."

The Sekhem abruptly rushed through Nebet, staggering her. The priest put a steadying hand on her elbow. "Do you need me to call someone? An ambulance…?"

"No, that won't be necessary. May I just sit for a few moments?"

"Of course."

Father Donnolly led her to a long wooden bench in the back of the church. She fell into it, and he stepped away. "You're sure you're all right?"

"Yes. I'll be fine. Thank you. Oh, one question: What is that liquid in the basin?"

"It's holy water." At her look of perplexity, he added, "Water that has been blessed."

He walked off, and Nebet thought, Mere water with such Sekhem? *Perhaps there is something to this religion after all.*

• • •

An hour passed.

As Father Donnolly had busied himself attending to other parishioners around the church, Nebet had felt the newly-acquired Sekhem working through her, reshaping her sahu, creating new tissue, filling gaps left by Keres-Sef's attack. Her vision blurred once, for a few seconds, and she knew her brow had shifted, becoming fuller, younger.

As her body healed, she contemplated.

Was it possible that Keres-Sef was somehow working with the Sesha-Hebsu? No, that didn't seem likely. She knew she'd encountered the Shuankhsen many times before, although only two memories stood out clearly. The first came from two centuries earlier, when this land had been divided between the indigenous

Tongva people and missionaries come north from Mexico. The Tef-Aabhi, long allied with the Tongva, had awakened her to drive out the missionaries, but a Shuankhsen had followed the men, searching for the mummy said to be found here, who sought the lost Father of Ab.

The Shuankhsen, Keres-Sef, had been easily repelled that first time with combined Iremite and Tongva magics.

But he'd fled, wandered the world soaking up occult lore, and returned in the early twentieth century. Her tomb had recently been relocated from its old location near the Los Angeles River to the Tef-Aabhi's new estate to the west. She jolted up from lifelessness one day to find the monster bursting into her recently-built tomb, having slain her Tef-Aabhi protectors. Lifeless and Deathless been equally matched in that fight, and she'd won only because a Tef-Aabhi guard wearing a gunbelt and wielding two six-shooters had burst in and blown Keres-Sef to bits. Sekhem used up, she'd sunk back into henet; her last thought had been to wonder if Keres-Sef would return and kill her next time.

She didn't remember meeting him again before yesterday.

At least he hasn't killed me, yet.

She also doubted that she had slain the Shuankhsen. She guessed that he'd already found a new body, a ready corpse to inhabit. And she knew he'd be coming again soon.

What were her options? Go back to Medina and tell him what had happened? It was the safest course, but the idea of admitting failure to Medina filled her with self-loathing. What might he demand as payment for her mistakes?

Call Gonzalez and ask for his help? If he was even still alive, he'd likely just turn her over to Medina.

Or she could continue on until she found the Father of Ab, and return to Medina victorious.

There was no choice. But she would need to move quickly; even with her replenished Sekhem, her time in this Descent was running out.

She rose, intending to leave the church and follow the trail to the Father of Ab, but a voice stopped her as she made her way to the front door. "Nebet…"

She turned, saw Father Donnolly chatting softly to an elderly woman before excusing himself and jogging to meet her.

When he saw her face, he froze, staring. After a full two seconds, he crossed himself again. "It's a miracle," he muttered.

Of course her face had healed, humanized, taken on the beauty she'd once possessed as a young artist in Irem. The stunned priest forced his feet to move, walking closer to her, peering at her face in astonishment.

"Yes," Nebet answered. "A miracle. A gift from the gods and from Neheb-Ka, my Judge in Duat."

Donnolly shook his head. "I don't understand, but…" He broke off, halfway reaching a hand up to her face before pulling it back and whispering, "You're beautiful."

Nebet saw a way to put Donnolly to use. "Priest, do you possess some form of transportation?"

"Yes, I've got a car."

Ten minutes later, they were leaving the church in Donnolly's sputtering, ancient wreck. Nebet had remembered the name "UCA" and Donnolly knew where it was. He said it was twenty minutes away.

Anything that would speed up her re-acquiring of the Father of Ab was a blessing from the gods. She didn't even care which.

• • •

The world spun, her stomach roiled.

Beth had been at her desk going over test papers when the reaction had hit her with sudden, almost violent intensity. Had she eaten something bad, picked up a fast-moving bug? She was wondering if she could make it to the staff restroom in this wing when she looked up and saw a man standing in the doorway of her office.

Something about him made every hair on her body rise. She instinctively knew he was the source of her physical discomfort.

"Can I…" She broke off as she looked more closely at him. He looked to be in his twenties, tanned, but his skin had faded to gray. He wore a dark suit splattered with blood and torn on one side. He smelled metallic and rotten, but his eyes burned with fearsome vitality.

Beth had the unsettling thought that he was dead.

"Father of Ab," he said, his head jerking almost like a dog catching a scent in the air.

"I'm sorry…?"

"It's here."

The effigy. It had to be.

Beth had one second to regret having brought the artifact with her before the man stepped into her office. The sick feeling nearly overwhelmed her, but she fought it to concentrate on him.

He reached for her bag where it sat on a nearby chair.

Acting on impulse, Beth leapt from her chair, grabbed the bag, and rushed past him. She felt his fingers clutch at her, heard her jacket tear.

She ran from the office into the hall. There were no students present, no one to ask for help. If she screamed, surely someone would hear.

Instead she fled. She heard the man behind her, his steps heavy but strangely arrhythmic. But he was moving quickly, and would be on her in seconds.

She did scream, shouting for help as she ran. She heard a classroom door open behind her, but she didn't stop to look back. She came to a corner, remembered that the intersecting hallway led out to one of the UCA campus quads. Maybe if she could get outside…

She stumbled as his hand slapped her back. She kept her balance, but then he grabbed her arm. She was wrenched back, and when she saw the look on his face — tight-lipped, resolute fury — she nearly folded. Instead she found another reserve of strength, pulled her arm free, tried to run again.

A door in front of her opened and she nearly collided with a man who stepped into the hallway.

Campus security.

Beth nearly sobbed in happy disbelief. It was Hector, the guard from the museum. "Whoa, Ms. Beresford, what—?"

Beth dodged behind him as her pursuer barely slowed. He tried to shove past Hector, knocking him aside. "Hey, STOP!"

The pursuer reached out for Beth. She backed up against a wall, nowhere to go.

Hector drew forth a small object. "You need to back off, I've got a taser…"

The hunter paid him no attention.

Beth twisted out from under the man. Hector fired the taser.

The man uttered a grunt of irritation as electricity arced through him. He reached back and plucked the taser wires from his back as if swatting a particularly pesky fly. Hector unsnapped his holster, and in that instant the man lunged, grabbed Hector by the neck with one hand and lifted him in the air. Hector gasped and kicked and clutched and the pistol flew from his hands.

His opponent shook him, like a terrier with a rat.

Beth dove for the gun. She'd never fired one, she wasn't sure what to do. Her hands were shaking, but she pointed at the intruder and pulled the trigger. The gun erupted, and the recoil newly threw her off her feet. The bullet hit the man in the back.

He tossed Hector aside, no longer concerned with him. From the way Hector's body hit the wall, Beth guessed he was already dead.

But she didn't have time to think about Hector, because the attacker was coming at her again. She pulled the trigger two more times. One shot went through his outstretched hand; the second lodged in his chest.

He kept coming. And the wounds weren't bleeding.

Beth was pulling the trigger again when he yanked the gun from her grip and threw it down the hall. Left with no other weapon, she instinctively swung her bag at him. He grabbed it, pulled it from her grip, and stopped, looking down into it. His body even shuddered slightly, as if he were in the grip of some ecstatic force.

It was all the break she needed. Beth turned and sped away.

She made it out of the building, ran another hundred feet, then risked a glance back.

He wasn't following. He was nowhere to be seen.

She slowed, then. Adrenaline began to fade; her legs finally gave way as she reached a short flight of steps leading up. She slid down onto them, drained, and realized the sick feeling had vanished. As she sprawled on the steps, exhausted, hearing screams and sirens in the distance, she knew — with a gut instinct that her rational mind would later reject — that whatever she'd just faced hadn't been entirely human.

• • •

As Father Donnolly's ancient Volvo had approached the UCA grounds, Nebet had felt a shift in the Sekhem.

It was moving. She'd missed it.

They reached the main road that wrapped around the campus. "Do you know where I should let you out?"

Police car sirens shrieked behind them. Donnelly steered the car to the curb and waited as the cruisers raced past, flashing lights strobing. "Perhaps this is not the time—"

Nebet reached for her door. "It's not; it's too late."

Donnolly set a hand gently on her arm, restraining her. "Nebet, I don't understand what I've seen already today. I don't know what you might be involved in, but… let me drive you somewhere else, somewhere safe."

"There are very few places that are safe for me, priest. And my enemy now has possession of something that will make him even more powerful."

The priest looked away, searching for words. Nebet interrupted his thoughts. "I'd like to ask you something before I go. Have you actually met your god?"

"We all stand before Him after we die."

Nebet thought that was a perfectly reasonable answer. "Thank you," she said, before stepping out.

She hoped she would remember this man in all of her future lives.

• • •

The police held Beth for hours.

The worst part was coming up with a reason for carrying the effigy. She claimed she'd been bringing it to her office to compare it to books she had there when she'd been attacked. No, she hadn't known the man. Yes, she thought he'd probably been on drugs. Yes, he'd demonstrated extraordinary strength in killing Hector. Yes, she was sure she'd shot him at least three times. No, she didn't think he'd be coming after her again.

When they'd finally released her, she'd never felt so diminished; her self-assuredness had vanished with the theft of the effigy. She'd trudged out of her office and encountered Dodd, waiting outside. "We'll talk about disciplinary action tomorrow," he promised, before adding, "too bad you lost your entire bag, isn't it?"

It was too bad, especially since she hadn't copied the tape from the recorder onto her computer yet. Both of her bargaining chips were gone now.

The sun was setting as she left the History building behind, heading for the parking structure, and she thought it might be an apt metaphor for her academic career.

"You are the one who had the effigy?"

The voice cut into her mordant thoughts, she looked up and saw the most astonishing woman she'd ever laid eyes on. She was lovely, no more than mid-twenties, dark-skinned and darker-haired… but her eyes somehow felt older, far older, and her modern clothing seemed inappropriate.

"Yes," Beth said. It was all she could manage.

"And you survived the attack?"

That counted as both the most unusual and most unnerving question Beth had received in a day of questions. Who was this woman? Did she know something?

And why was Beth experiencing a recurrence of the nauseous feeling she'd had around her attacker? It wasn't as extreme, but it was still there.

"Do you know something about it?"

"I know everything — the history of the effigy, why you were attacked, and why you feel sick right now."

Behind the woman, Beth saw two of the investigators who'd just grilled her looking curiously in their direction, so she reached out and took the other woman's elbow in what she hoped looked like a congenial way. "We're being watched. Can we go somewhere else to talk?"

The woman glanced back, then nodded. "Yes."

They walked away, Beth wondering if the cops would follow anyway and what she'd tell them. Oh, everything's fine, Lieutenant. This is my new friend who seems to know everything about the man who just nearly killed me.

They walked in silence for a short distance, then Beth said, softly, "So you know the man who attacked me?"

"It was not a man. It was a monster wearing a dead man's skin."

Beth nearly stopped, nearly turned and went back to the police…but then she remembered the shots that hadn't bled, the way she'd felt, how Hector had been lifted effortlessly with one hand.

"So what does that make you, a monster hunter? Buffy?"

"My name is not Buffy. It's Nebet. And I'm not a hunter, but another of the hunted… like you."

They reached the parking structure, and Beth made an impulsive decision. "We need to talk more. My car's just over there. Will you come with me, or do you have your own car?"

"I do not have a car. I will come with you, but I should warn you: There is a chance that the Shuankhsen will pursue me, especially now that he possesses the Father of Ab."

Beth stared briefly at her new friend before saying, "I have absolutely no idea what any of that means, but I intend to find out."

• • •

Beth considered going to a safe public place — a restaurant, a shopping mall — but she was so spent from the attack that she opted for home instead. And something about the other woman, Nebet, reassured her, despite the sick feeling.

Since the divorce, Beth had lived in a one-bedroom apartment in a twenty-unit complex. As she led the way through the central courtyard to her door, Nebet eyed the surroundings with something like recognition. "This reminds me of how most of us lived in Irem."

"Where is Irem?"

"Nowhere now. It hasn't existed for some time."

Beth wanted nothing but to be inside her own rooms, with the blinds pulled down and a glass of Chivas Regal calming her nerves, so she didn't respond. She unlocked her door, led Nebet in, closed the door behind them, and indicated a chair. Nebet lowered herself carefully, but seemed to approve of the comfort once she was seated.

From the kitchen, Beth called, "Can I get you something? Coffee, tea, soda, something stronger…?"

"I don't drink."

Beth re-entered the living room with a small glass of amber liquid. "Do you mean just liquor, or… no, wait, don't answer that." She lowered herself to the

couch, took a sip of the whisky, let out a long sigh. After a second sip, she said, "Okay, tell me everything."

Nebet told her: of lost Irem, the sorcerers and the guilds, the Deathless and the Lifeless, the effigies and other relics that had survived and were still sought by the scattered remnants of the once-great empire. She spoke of her own part in that empire's history, and some of what she'd seen since.

Beth listened. She rose once to refill her glass, returning with the entire bottle. She slouched lower on the couch as Nebet went on. When Nebet finished, she asked, "So you're over 6,000 years old?"

"Yes."

"But you haven't been…uhh, alive…for much of that time."

"That is correct."

"Tell me again why this… what's it called, the thing that attacked me…?"

"Shuankhsen."

"Right. Okay, tell me again why the Shuankhsen keeps coming after you."

Nebet was about to answer, to tell Beth that the Lifeless burned with a desire for vengeance against all of the Arisen, but memory abruptly flooded her, and she was paralyzed by what she recalled.

• • •

Her workshop was located in an area of ancient Irem that was consigned largely to the Tef-Aabhi guild. At night she lived in a small, Spartan room behind the workshop; during the day, she chipped away at chunks of marble and sandstone and lapis lazuli, turning dull blocks into works of art that caused gasps among all who saw them. As her fame grew, so did her list of patrons, and the guild assigned her a laborer, a poor young man named Keres-Sef. Keres-Sef became devoted to her. He kept her chisels sharp, her polishing cloths at hand, her workspace neat and clean. Sometimes, after she'd finished a job, he would collect the larger pieces of leftover material and try his own hand at sculpting, copying Nebet's process and style, but his pieces looked like nonsense created by a half-blind child, and he destroyed every one of them. After a while he gave up on the idea of ever becoming an artist, himself. His fate was to serve.

And serve, he did. For three years, he was Nebet's devoted assistant, standing in the shadows while her fame rose ever higher. Soon enough, the Shan'iatu rulers of Irem came for her, and eventually thereafter, so did the Father of Idols.

She was given the task of creating an effigy that would be a gift to Antu-Herap. The Tef-Aabhi's relations with the Sesha-Hebsu had been tense lately, and it was hoped that Nebet could produce a masterwork that would repair the rift between the masons and the scribes.

A flawless block of lapis lazuli was acquired at great expense from a trader who bought it in Afghanistan. The effigy would represent Ab, or the heart of the five-fold soul. Nebet spent weeks on the piece, first blocking out the shape, then refining it with pick and polish. Lastly, she inlaid gold, and the Father of Ab was presented to the Tef-Aabhi's seven guildmasters, who had designed a spectacular enchantment for it.

On the day the spell was to be cast that would bestow the Shan'iatu's magical essences on the effigy, guards arrived at Nebet's workshop and demanded that both she and Keres-sef accompany them. Nebet recognized some of the men from guild headquarters, but they refused to answer her questions.

She and Keres-Sef were led to the guild's great center, into chambers Nebet had never visited or even known of. In one chamber, an opening leading down was guarded by a man-sized jackal that snarled and made Nebet shiver as the men led them past it. With the guards holding torches and leading the way, they descended for what seemed like hours.

They at last emerged into a massive underground cavern. Limestone walls extended into the darkness, and a black river speckled with glowing fish divided the space. Their footsteps echoed on the stone ground, and the temperature had Nebet clutching at her bare arms, chilled. The skeletons of great, long-vanished animals protruded from the walls; many of the bones had been inscribed with arcane symbols Nebet didn't recognize. Charms and talismans hung from them, incense wafted up from braziers, huge urns lined the walls between the bones. In one corner was a ten-foot pyramid of human skulls. The ones on the bottom had larger brows and jaws, leaving Nebet to wonder just how old this chamber was.

The seven masters of the Tef-Aabhi were already there, surrounding a large altar bowl which held a roaring fire. The flames were a color Nebet knew she'd never seen before, and the smell (what were they using as fuel?) made her stomach lurch.

Two of the guards positioned themselves on either side of Nebet, causing her heart to hammer in anxiety. Two more grabbed Keres-Sef by the arms and led him to one of the sorcerer-priests.

"Welcome, Nebet," the master said, ignoring the struggling Keres-Sef. "We thank you for the great gift you have given us. The Father of Ab."

Nebet felt like a child who hadn't studied for a test. Was she supposed to answer? She glanced at the guards, but they stared straight ahead, offering no clues. She opted to remain silent.

The Shan'iatu continued. "Today, you bring us the final ingredient we need to make this effigy a relic for the ages. We offer our gratitude and appreciation for your sacrifice."

Sacrifice?

One of the other Priests of Duat stepped forward with the figurine. Four of them began to chant.

The seventh stepped forward with a jeweled dagger held before him on a piece of silk.

The head sorcerer-priest took the dagger, and motioned to the guards who held Keres-Sef. They forced the laborer to his knees, and Nebet understood: She was not the sacrifice, but Keres-Sef — her dedicated servant — was.

She took an involuntary half-step forward, but saw the guards on either side of her tense. She froze, considering her options: Would they stop if she screamed? Even if she could break away from the guards, could she escape seven powerful magicians and save Keres-Sef?

She should try; he'd done so much for her.

As the sorcerer poised himself over Keres-Sef and lifted the dagger, Nebet's eyes locked with her assistant's. She saw the pleading, the terror…

And did nothing.

The sorcerer swung the blade down in an arc, cutting Keres-Sef's throat from ear to ear. As his blood gushed out, pulsing in arterial rhythm, the sorcerer holding the figurine rushed forward and bathed the lapis lazuli in the crimson fluids.

Nebet stood in mute fear.

Just before he toppled, Keres-Sef offered her a final look, not of terror but of furious accusation. Then he fell face down onto the limestone floor, already forgotten, his usefulness served.

Nebet's guards turned her around and marched her out of the chamber. Behind her she heard the chanting voices, crackling flames, and something else: a low hum, of power building.

Her legs were trembling by the time they reached the ground level again. The jackal-headed monstrosity was gone. The guards showed her out of the building, leaving her to stagger home through the darkening streets. Once she regained her workshop, she barred the door behind her. When she passed the thin pallet where Keres-Sef had slept, she fell to her knees, trembling, and wrapped herself into a ball, as if assuming the position of a fetus could let her start over again, with a mind that had no memory of what she'd witnessed and what she'd done tonight.

And somehow, she knew that the Priests of Duat would be coming for her soon.

• • •

"By the Judges…" Nebet murmured. She rolled the new memory through her mind, and saw how it must have played out. The Shan'iatu priests hadn't simply sacrificed Keres-Sef to create the Father of Ab. They'd turned him into something else. Something dark.

Something lifeless.

"Nebet?" Beth set her empty glass aside and was eyeing Nebet in concern.

Nebet offered a weak smile. "Apologies, but sometimes memory comes unbidden, especially as we near the end of a Descent."

"A Descent…?"

"That time when we are awake. We remember more as we go. Sometimes the memories are… intense."

Whether it was some effect of Nebet's or the alcohol working its own subtle magics on Beth, she accepted Nebet's explanation and leaned forward, intrigued. "What was that memory about?"

"Our common foe, Keres-Sef. He once worked for me, when I was human, and I allowed him to be destroyed."

Beth's next question surprised Nebet. "So you must know how to kill him, then."

"He is Shuankhsen… Lifeless. He can't be killed easily. He can take on dead flesh as you don clothing. He…" She broke off as some warning signal sounded from the edge of her consciousness. "Something is here."

Alarmed, Beth looked around. "Is it him?"

"No…" Nebet sought the source of the disturbance, felt it as she would a spray of cool water on a warm day. "Something else."

She rose, trying to follow the trace.

Below her, Beth shivered. "Cold…"

Nebet sensed a trail in the air around them, a flowing something that seemed familiar yet unearthly, that didn't belong here yet sought her. "I know you…" she said to the ethereal visitor.

"Nebet, what's happening?" Even the human Beth sensed it now, trembling uncontrollably as she rose to her feet.

The lights in the apartment began to flicker.

"Who are you?" Nebet asked.

A name came to her: Robbs. It took her a moment to match the name to the young man who had shot at her in Medina's home. The young man she'd killed.

"Why are you here?"

Looking for you.

"Who sent you?"

Gonzalez.

"He is alive, then?"

Yes.

Beth edged closer to Nebet. "I don't understand. Who are you talking to?"

"A ghost. But it is not here to harm us."

Beth bit back a sarcastic response and waited.

"Show yourself," Nebet commanded.

Nebet waited. Nothing happened, but then Beth gasped. Nebet followed the other woman's stare and saw a shape at the end of a hallway that led to the rest of the apartment. The hallway was unlit, but the shape was darker, a barely-defined mass that dimmed the light of a bathroom window behind it.

Her voice quavering, Beth asked, "How… how are you doing that?"

"I'm doing nothing. That is our visitor." To the shape, Nebet said, "I ask that you take a message back to your master. Tell him I will see him, but he must meet with me alone, and no one can tell Medina of this meeting. I will call Gonzalez tomorrow at noon and tell him where to come. Do you understand?"

Yes.

Robb's shade rippled and vanished.

The temperature returned to normal, the lights glowed steadily again.

"Was that real?"

Nebet turned to see Beth, her face pale, breathing too quick, staring down the unlit hallway. Nebet guided her back down to a sitting position, sniffed the bottle of Chivas to be sure it was alcoholic, poured another gulp of it and handed the glass to her new friend. "Drink this."

Fingers still shaking, Beth took the glass but didn't sip from it. "I don't understand any of what's happening."

"Do you want to?"

The question caused Beth to catch her breath and stare at Nebet. "Yes."

"Let me ask you… will you accept it if the understanding changes your life?"

"Changes my life… how?"

"What I will tell you would make you part of something that is bigger and more complex and older than anything you've ever known. It might also put you in danger… but it could bring you great success and satisfaction. If you are willing to accept this risk, I will tell you everything, and you will agree to help me. If you are happy with your life as it has always been, though, I will leave here and you will never see me or the effigy again. But you must decide now."

"So," Beth said, "magic, ghosts, coming back from the dead… it's all real?"

Nebet hesitated before answering, "Yes."

She wondered briefly if she'd just damned her new friend.

• • •

Beth gulped down more of the liquor, creating enough of a warm blanket to blessedly deaden some of her feelings.

"…part of something that is bigger and more complex and older…" She rolled Nebet's words over in her mind, she considered the possibility that magic actually existed, she thought about the confidence and power she'd felt when she'd held the effigy.

She knew it was all true. And she knew she had a part to play in it. She just didn't know what that part was.

"If I agree," she finally said, "what would I do?"

"You are a historian. You would likely be accepted for membership in the Sesha-Hebsu, the guild of scribes. They would teach you their magics and help you advance. You, in turn, would serve the guild in achieving their goals."

"But you're not in this… Sesha-Hebsu."

Nebet shook her head. "No, I am Tef-Aabhi. We architects, masons, and sculptors."

Beth studied Nebet for a few seconds, admiring the other woman's extraordinary beauty and grace, both of which struck her now as being paradoxically very old and timeless. She was finding it surprisingly easy to give up "if." It was no longer necessary to frame her thoughts with "if this is true." Instead she accepted, and found that she very much wanted to be part of Nebet's world. She wanted to learn from 6,000 years of living history. She wanted to write it down, study it, share it with peers… real peers who saw her as an equal, not as a toy, a threat, or an object of desire and contempt.

"How can I help you?" Beth asked the question in all seriousness. It was hard to imagine what she had to offer someone as obviously formidable as Nebet.

Nebet sat on the couch opposite. Her long fingers entwined around each other, and Beth was surprised to realize Nebet was anxious over something. "I am considering a very dangerous course of action. If successful, it will free me of Keres-Sef forever and return the Father of Ab to its rightful place. But if any part of it fails, I could be Deathless no more, and any who have aided me could also be hurt or killed."

Beth drained the last of the liquor, set the glass down, and smiled at Nebet. "Keres-Sef's already tried to kill me once. I'm not afraid to face him again."

"Then you accept?"

"Yes, I accept. My world's not so great. I want to be part of yours. In fact, I think I already am. Now just tell me what you need."

Nebet smiled, took Beth's hand, and then told her.

• • •

At eleven the next morning, they drove to Griffith Park.

Beth's head hurt from the night's liquor, but it cleared as coffee and ibuprofen kicked in. They entered the park from the south, driving past the Mulholland fountain and the large statue of Griffith Jenkins Griffith, the one-time owner of this land who had gifted it to the city when he'd grown tired of paying property taxes on what had become a cursed money pit.

"That man, Griffith…" Nebet said as they drove past the statue.

"What about him?"

"Why did they erect a statue to him? I met him once. He was nothing but a pompous little donkey."

Beth nearly spurted coffee on the dashboard. Nebet noticed, staring in perplexity. "It is true."

"Oh, I believe you," Beth said, still giggling. "That's exactly why I'm laughing."

Nebet made no comment.

When they reached the open area around the carousel, Nebet pointed to a sign that indicated Old Zoo Parking and said, "There."

It was early on a weekday, so the park was relatively quiet and parking spaces were plentiful. Beth pulled into one, then followed Nebet out of the car and west over green grass, beneath luxurious oaks.

"You were buried here?" Beth asked, looking around curiously.

Nebet pointed toward a short flight of steps. "Ahead. Up there."

They climbed the steps, and Beth realized she'd lived her life in Los Angeles but had never explored the city's great park. At the top, she paused to stare in amazement at the landscape before her: a comfortable, grassy bowl was surrounded on the left edge by ancient rocky enclosures, each one consisting of large blocks of tan-colored stone layered atop each other, forming arches and openings, rising up the hillside behind them. The tops were overgrown with vegetation, and the cages — for Beth recognized them as such — had obviously seen no occupants in decades. They were forlorn and exotic, lonely places that lost all meaning when the zoo had been moved in the 1960s.

Beth realized Nebet was waiting for her, and she jogged to catch up. "Your tomb was here, in the Old Zoo?"

Nebet smiled, a rare expression. "No. My sanctuary was moved from this place before they built the first zoo." Nebet abruptly staggered and closed her eyes, as if in pain. Beth moved to steady her. "What's wrong? Are you…?"

After a few seconds, Nebet seemed to regain herself. "I'm fine. It's just… so many ghosts here."

Beth looked around, saw only bright morning sunshine, grass and trees, the pointed peak known as Bee Rock in the near distance, the desolate enclosures. "Ghosts?"

"First the Tongva lived here for centuries. Then the Californios — many of them died here, fighting the curse I placed on the land. The zoo animals… they died here as well. Great cats, monkeys… I can hear them screaming."

Shivering in the warmth, Beth heard nothing but (living) bird calls, dog barks, the distant sounds of traffic and the city. "Where was your tomb?"

"We are standing over it."

Beth stifled an impulse to leap away. "Right here?"

Nebet nodded. "I slept here for centuries. When the Tef-Aabhi set up their nome to the west, we filled in my tomb here and removed all traces of it, but there are still remnants of the Sekhem it held. To me, it's like smelling a favorite flower, half-remembered from childhood. Even though it has been sullied by new ghosts, both human and nonhuman, it still feels like home." Nebet luxuriated in the sensation for a few more seconds before saying to Beth, "It is time. Call Gonzalez."

Beth pulled out her phone and punched in the number Nebet had given her. A man answered. "Griffith Park. Climb the steps to the Old Zoo. Nebet will be waiting."

She ended the call and turned to Nebet. "Do you think he'll come alone?"

"He is an honorable man…" Nebet turned away, and Beth heard centuries of regret in her voice. "…but I've been fooled by honorable men before."

• • •

Gonzalez arrived thirty minutes later. He was alone, although Nebet sensed the ghost of Robb nearby. He approached the two women slowly, eyeing Beth with particular wariness.

"Thank you for honoring my request," Nebet said.

"Of course. I serve the Tef-Aabhi, and honor should always be extended to the Deathless."

Nebet gestured at Beth. "This is Dr. Elizabeth Beresford. She is the historian who discovered the Father of Ab. She possessed it until she was attacked by Keres-Sef."

Gonzalez frowned. "Keres-Sef has the effigy now? I thought that might be the case." He turned to Beth, extending a hand. "Dr. Beresford, I look forward to conversing more with you. I don't know exactly how much Nebet has told you—"

Cutting him off, Nebet said, "Everything."

“Well, then,” the sorcerer said, weighing his words. “Since I trust Nebet’s judgment, I know you must be extraordinary.”

“The Father of Ab made me extraordinary, Mr. Gonzalez. I felt its power, and I know that it should only be held by someone with noble intentions. I want to see it returned to Nebet.”

“Not yourself?”

Beth looked at the ground before leveling a troubled gaze on Gonzalez. “It gave me confidence, yes… but I fear what else it might have given me in time.”

“Nebet has always chosen her companions well.” Gonzalez turned to the Arisen. “What do we do, then?”

Nebet hesitated, her bright eyes fixed on Gonzalez. Finally she asked, “I must know first: How do you feel about Medina?”

Gonzalez chewed a lip, looking off at the blue dome above Bee Rock. “I wish someone else led the Tef-Aabhi,” he finally said, so softly Nebet almost didn’t hear.

“Have you considered issuing a negative confession against Medina?”

“I have. But he has high-ranking friends, and I… well, I suspect I would lose.”

“If I had another way to bring Medina down, would you help?”

After a long beat, Gonzalez finally turned to face her. “Yes. I’ve tolerated his actions too long. He can only bring disgrace to the guild.”

Nebet allowed herself a sigh of relief; it was what she’d hoped for. She’d already decided she trusted Gonzalez, and besides… she really had no choice, because this Descent was winding down. Even here, in a spot that had long been sacred for her, she felt herself dwindling. Keres-Sef was probably gaining power from the Father of Ab with every hour that passed, but she had little time left.

“Then listen to my plan. If it succeeds, we will be able restore the Father of Ab to its true owners, remove Medina from power, and send Keres-Sef to Duat forever.”

Frowning, Gonzalez said, “Perhaps you don’t have these memories, Nebet, but we’ve tried before to lay Keres-Sef to rest. We don’t possess a way of terminating a Shuankhsen—”

“Gonzalez,” Nebet said, cutting him off, “my memories are accurate in that regard. I know the Tef-Aabhi possess no such spell, but I believe the Sesha-Hebsu do.”

“And they won’t share it with us.”

Nebet shot a look at Beth, who returned it uncertainly. “Not yet, but we believe we can persuade them.”

Gonzalez shrugged. “Perhaps. Especially if it involves the Father of Ab. I’d like to hear the rest of your plan. And I’d like to know what will happen should it fail.”

“If it fails,” Nebet said, “then perhaps we will all stand before the Judges of Duat together.”

• • •

Beth checked the piece of paper again that Gonzalez had given her:

The Glass Foundation, he’d written, in his neat penmanship. Below that was an address in Glendale, with directions.

But the directions made no sense. The streets didn’t appear on the internet or her car’s GPS. Gonzalez had warned her about that (in fact, his advice had been to “just turn off the GPS”), but it didn’t make her feel any less confused. She’d followed Verdugo Road up into the hills north of the town, past the Civic Auditorium and Verdugo Park, and had turned off on a road that wound past a residential district before giving way to two-lane blacktop surrounded by desert hillside. She nearly missed the road she’d been told to turn right on; brakes squealed and gravel flew as she yanked the steering wheel. It was a good thing she hadn’t seen another car in several minutes.

What are the chances of being anywhere in Southern California on a weekday afternoon and seeing no other cars?

The road meandered along a canyon rim, rounded a sandy bluff, and Beth was surprised to see a large building surrounded by trees and a fence ahead. It was exactly as Gonzalez had described it; a sign above the gate read “The Glass Foundation and Library”.

The stone fence effectively sealed the grounds away from view; only treetops could be glimpsed. A metal gate crossed the road beneath the sign. Beside the gate was an intercom.

Beth pulled up next to the intercom and eyed it uncertainly — there didn’t seem to be a call button. Was she supposed to —

A male voice blurted from the intercom, startling her. “Yes?”

Angling her head toward the device, Beth said, “Hello, Doctor Elizabeth Beresford. I believe I’m expected?” She saw a glint on the front panel and realized it had a camera built in. She looked up and saw round black surveillance cameras mounted overhead. She wondered what else they had for security.

I guess Nebet wasn’t understating things when she said these guys built their own fortress to escape the Tef-Aabhi.

She heard a buzz and saw the gate swinging inward. The voice did not return with instructions, so she waited until the gate was opened enough to drive past.

On the other side, the road led past the trees and manicured grounds to a large building designed in a classical style. A short flight of steps descended to a portico, where columns held up a roof adorned with a marble frieze showing images of scribes and writers from many cultures.

Beth spotted several other cars (all far more expensive than hers) parked in a small lot to the side of the building. She pulled into an empty slot, locked the car, and walked to the portico. Behind her, she saw the gate closing again; she was sealed in.

"Dr. Beresford?"

Startled, Beth turned to find a man waiting for her now at the door leading into the structure. He was in his early thirties, with stylish short sandy hair and glasses, dressed simply in polo shirt and khakis. He could have been a software engineer in Silicon Valley, or even one of her colleagues at the University.

"Yes," she said, trotting up the steps.

The man extended a hand and offered a slight smile. "I'm Dan Mayne. I work for the nomarch. This way, please."

He led her into a reception area. The automatic door hissed shut behind them, and Beth guessed it was locked. She followed Mayne down a magnificent hallway: their feet tapped on marble tiles, the walls held framed paintings, some of which looked like authentic works by old masters, and sunlight streamed down from artfully-placed skylights far above. Mayne stopped outside a door, opened it, and motioned her into a conference room. It seemed fairly ordinary in most respects — a long table, a dozen chairs, a large high-definition wall-mounted screen at one end of the room — but one long wall was made of dark, smoky glass that offered Beth a darkened version of her reflection.

Mayne seated her in a chair facing the shadow-colored wall, asked her if he could get her something, then sat at the head of the table. He studied her for several seconds without speaking, and between the ominous length of opaque glass and his scrutiny, Beth had to force herself not to squirm.

"So," Mayne finally said, "how exactly can the Sesha–Hebsu help you?"

"Well, at least I'm in the right place."

Mayne smiled slightly, and Beth continued. "I thought Mr. Gonzalez explained everything…"

"He told us how we could aid the Tef-Aabhi. I'm specifically asking what we can do for you."

"Oh."

My God, Beth realized, this is a job interview.

She cleared her throat and said, "I'd like to join the Sesha-Hebsu."

"Do you understand what that means? What kind of level of commitment you'd be making?"

"I believe so."

"You don't sound completely certain."

Beth looked down, suddenly sure she was failing this test. "The only time I've ever been certain about anything was when I held the Father of Ab… the effigy. If I can feel anything like that again…"

Mayne glanced at the dark wall, and Beth knew: It was two-way glass. She was being judged. "You know," Mayne said to her, "that even if the Father of Ab is returned to us, it's unlikely that you will come into contact with it again."

Nodding, Beth forced herself to look Mayne in the eye. "I know that. But I think that being part of this…" she motioned around her, "…will be another way for me to find myself. I want to be part of something bigger."

Mayne pulled a tablet computer from somewhere and set it on the table in front of him. He ran a fingertip deftly over the screen, squinting at information displayed there. "Your credentials are promising, if not exactly stellar so far…"

"Give me a chance. Let me become better."

He examined her for a last few seconds, then rose and faced the glass wall. Beth was halfway out of her chair as a concealed door slid open, and two figures stepped into the conference room. One was a wiry man with bronze skin and a rugged, ageless face; the other was a middle-aged woman of Asian descent with a commanding bearing and dark hair streaked with gray. The woman approached Beth and extended a hand. The tall man stood silently behind her. "Dr. Beresford, I'm Morgan Wong, the Sesha-Hebsu nomarch for this region. We've studied you and your work, and we think you'd make a fine addition to our guild."

Beth exhaled in relief. "That's wonderful. Thank you, Ms. Wong."

"Morgan, please. We'll worry about the particulars of your initiation later. First we need to talk about what Mr. Gonzalez is proposing." Wong made an odd half-wave at the man behind her, and with a start Beth realized he was not a man at all, but was rather one of the Arisen — an ancient mummy, like Nebet.

"Ah, very good," Wong said, "I see you've realized that Sefu is Deathless. We called him from sleep to retrieve the Father of Ab. He and I will both assist you."

"Gonzalez said your guild is capable of killing Keres-sef for longer than the usual Shuankhsen death-cycle."

"Did he," Wong said more than asked. Her eyes narrowed when she added, "We can indeed send Keres-Sef to his final rest. But I will let you know what I told Gonzalez: The Sesha-Hebsu will do this to reacquire the Father of Ab and restore relations with the Tef-Aabhi. If we are betrayed in any way—"

"You won't be," Beth said, even as she thought:

But someone else will.

• • •

Gonzalez pulled the car over two blocks from Medina's gate.

Nebet turned to him. "Why have we stopped here?"

"Nebet, I have concerns about this plan. Too many things could go wrong. If I'm the cause, and you are destroyed…"

Nebet felt a fresh wave of compassion for Gonzalez. She was weakening quickly and even small gestures cost her, but she forced a smile. "Gonzalez, you will make a fine leader for this Tef-Aabhi nome."

"But I…"

"Start the car."

Gonzalez gave up the fight.

By the time they'd passed through security and were admitted into Medina's house, each step was a struggle for Nebet. There was a relics in her tomb that would provide her with Sekhem for another few hours, but this Descent was coming to an end. Soon she would either return to dreamless henet or she'd awaken once again in Duat, this time permanently.

"You failed." Nebet was startled by Medina's voice. She'd lost track of the fact that she was seated in his home, waiting for him. Nearby, Gonzalez watched her in concern.

"Answer me," Medina demanded.

"Yes, I failed, but I believe there is still a way to retrieve the Father of Ab from Keres-Sef."

"How?" Medina sat opposite her and lit a cigar. The potent fumes from the tobacco caused her head to whirl. "He grows more powerful with each passing hour that he possesses the effigy, and I doubt that you could crush an ant at this point."

Nebet tried to answer and coughed instead. Gonzalez stepped in. "Keres-Sef seeks vengeance against Nebet, but even with the power of the Father of Ab he knows he won't be able to touch Nebet once she returns to her tomb; our defenses are simply too strong. Nebet has therefore proposed a trade: She will offer herself to Keres-Sef in exchange for the Father of Ab."

Medina exhaled smoke, set the cigar down in an ashtray, and peered at Nebet. "You know Keres-Sef will kill you. No more returns. A lasting death."

"Yes. I accept that as atonement for my failure."

Medina rose, turned away, paced a few steps, considering. Nebet watched the thick smoke from his cigar waft about the room, dispersing slowly…like me, she thought. If he doesn't buy this, Gonzalez and I could both be in danger.

"Why would we even trust a thing like Keres-Sef?"

Gonzalez answered, "Keres-Sef took us by surprise in the car. He won't have that advantage this time. And he may be powerful, but he'll also be outgunned."

Medina nodded, but didn't speak. Nebet found herself offering mental prayers to Neheb-Ka, her Judge in Duat. This had to work…

"How would we arrange the trade?"

"We pick the location," Gonzalez said, "and the time. It needs to be soon, because Nebet's time is running out, and Keres-Sef will want her to be awake when he seeks his revenge. We'll take every man we can, arm them. We'll tell Keres-Sef to set the Father of Ab down and back away. I will collect the relic, and at that point Nebet will be turned over to him."

Medina thought before turning to Gonzalez. "We'll need a new Arisen."

Nebet felt fury she was too weak to express. Medina was treating her as if she was nothing but a tool, an expendable, something easily replaced. She had protected him for his entire life, served him for twenty years, shared his bed, but not his true self…until this Descent. She swore to herself that if her plan failed, she would kill Medina before she left the earth.

When Gonzalez responded, Nebet heard the edge in his voice and knew that he, too, despised Medina. "Nebet has served the Tef-Aabhi for six thousand years, John. She deserves more than that."

Medina's eyes widened and he stepped closer to Gonzalez, shoulders tensing for a fight. "Are you trying to tell me how to run this nome?"

"Of course not, John. But I also serve Nebet."

The answer seemed to satisfy Medina; he grunted and turned his back to walk away. "I'll leave it to you, then."

As he strode from the room, Nebet realized: He has no intention of being there when this happens. Urgency gave her the power to rise from her chair and call after him, "I will only do this if you are present, John."

He stopped and turned back to her. She continued, "If you truly are the leader of this nome, then you must bear witness to such a sacrifice."

Nebet was secretly pleased at the way Medina's jaws ground in anger. He finally spat, "Oh, I will be there."

Medina walked out. Nebet turned to Gonzalez… and the world spun around her. She fought to stay conscious as Gonzalez rushed to her, catching her before she fell. "Hang on a little longer," she heard him say.

She wasn't sure she could.

• • •

Hours later, Nebet lay within her sarcophagus, feeling the Sekhem from the Lifeweb suffusing her tomb replenishing her. It wasn't much, but it would be enough. Tomorrow, she would return to her sleep again… if the Judges willed it.

She heard steps on the stairs leading down into the tomb, and Gonzalez appeared, his cell phone still clenched in one hand. He approached and leaned down over her in concern. "How are you feeling?"

"I can make it one more night."

"Good, because the arrangements have all been made."

"Keres-Sef…?"

"I summoned an old and experienced blessed one to locate him and deliver the invitation. We won't know until tomorrow if he has accepted, but…"

Bitterness welled up within Nebet. "…but he wants to kill me too badly to refuse."

"Yes."

Nebet swallowed back the regret and held up a hand to Gonzalez. "You've done well."

He took her hand, clasping it with respect and warmth. "We won't know until tomorrow night just how well I've done, but I promise you: I will do whatever is in my power to protect you."

"I know you will," said Nebet, adding to herself, And that is why you must be the one who leads.

• • •

The Tef-Aabhi owned land all around Southern California, including a deserted factory near the southeastern, industrial edge of downtown Los Angeles. It was an area that saw little traffic at night. An urban desert.

It was the ideal location for the meeting; far removed from sight or sound of any who might intervene, sprinkled with rusting storage containers that made excellent defensive shields… or hiding places.

Those buildings were for Medina's men, because Keres-Sef would come alone. Nebet knew it wasn't just that a Shuankhsen usually worked alone (since he had Fasad of his own), but that Keres-Sef was also arrogant, especially now that he possessed an item as powerful as the Father of Ab. He probably believed himself to be invincible. She hoped he wasn't right.

The drive to the location was conducted largely in silence. Gonzalez had already sent a force of half-a-dozen heavily armed men ahead. When they'd called to say they were in place, he, Medina, Nebet, and three more men had climbed into Medina's own vehicle, a boxy tan thing he called a "Hummer."

When they reached the factory, a guard was waiting for them. He unlocked and rolled back a gate. Medina lowered his window and asked, “Any sign of Keres-Sef yet?”

“No.”

They drove forward, parked, climbed out. Gonzalez assisted Nebet, who, away from the Sekhem in her tomb, was rapidly losing strength. Three of their men waited a short distance away, in an open area surrounded by old trailers and plastic drums. “Where are the others?” Medina asked.

The man from the gate nodded at places around them. “Kinney’s under that unit. Sarkosian’s behind that stack of barrels. Malik’s in that old trailer, behind the front window.”

“Good.”

Nebet saw Gonzalez turn away and slide his finger over the touch screen on his phone. Medina noticed the action as well. “Everything okay, Gonzalez?”

Gonzalez turned too fast, nervous, shoved the phone back in a pocket. “I had my own lookouts stationed not far, but none of them have reported Keres-Sef.”

A voice interrupted, “Because I am here.”

They all spun to see the Shuanksen standing not far away, the gate still locked behind him. The Tef-Aabhi guards all raised assault rifles. Medina, though, projected calm assurance as he said, “Welcome, Keres-Sef. I see you’re still full of surprises.”

Keres-Sef wore a new body, that of a distinguished-looking middle-aged man in a suit. Even in the dim light from the sodium lamps, however, Nebet could see that his skin looked stiff and sallow.

Medina’s eyes focused on a cloth bag the Shuankhsen held in one hand. “Is that the effigy?”

“Can’t you feel its power? Of course you can’t. Not really.” He turned his gaze on Nebet. “She can, though. Too bad she won’t be able to use it.”

Nebet shook off Gonzalez’s assistance and staggered forward a few steps. “Let’s get this over with.”

Keres-Sef offered a look of mock disappointment. “Oh, and I was hoping we could chat for a while. Maybe talk about how you let me die when one word from you could have saved me.”

“That isn’t true,” Nebet said, and was surprised to realize, truly realize for the first time, that she could not have saved him then, six thousand years ago, if she had spoken up. “The Shan’iatu would have sacrificed you, anyway. There was nothing I could do. Your entire existence since has been dedicated to a lie.”

Keres-Sef roared, a deafening bellow that his current body shouldn’t have been able to produce. He rushed forward, hands reaching toward Nebet, but Medina’s

men rapid-fired rounds that drove into him, the force of the bullets stopping him, making him stagger back. Over the gunfire Medina shouted, “Stop! You’ll hit the relic!”

The firing halted, spent casings littering the ground. Keres-Sef righted himself, looking down at the bullet holes torn through his suit and flesh. After a moment, he hefted the cloth bag. “Thanks to the Father of Ab, I barely feel it. Perhaps I should keep it after all. With it, I’ll become powerful enough to easily seek you out and crush you, Nebet.”

“Not if I have the real Blue Nile.”

Her reply caused Keres-Sef to frown. “But you don’t…”

Gonzalez stepped in. “We will, soon. And once we have it, you would be well advised to avoid the Tef-Aabhi.”

“I think you’re lying.”

Nebet pierced him with the hardest stare she could muster. “Then leave with your relic. But know that in the next Descent, I will be hunting you.”

Keres-Sef considered, then lowered the bag to the ground. “It’s not worth keeping this if it means I have to wait any longer for the satisfaction of killing you. There it is, guildsmen. Now keep your part of the bargain.”

Nebet was about to step forward when Gonzalez called out, “Wait.” She stopped to look at him.

“Let me examine it first, make sure it’s authentic.” He looked to Medina, who nodded confirmation.

Gonzalez walked forward, retrieved the cloth bag, and then returned to the circle of Tef-Aabhi gunmen. He looked into the bag, reached in, removed what at first looked like a bundle of rags. He carefully peeled layers of cloth back, and at last exposed a lapis lazuli effigy, gilt-ornamented and lion-headed.

“There,” Keres-Sef said, gesturing at the relic. “I’ve kept my part. Now give me Nebet.”

Medina gestured to one of his men, who moved up to lead Nebet forward. One step… two…

“This is not the Father of Ab. This is a fake.”

The tableau froze. Nebet stopped. Her guard tensed. Keres-Sef’s mouth dropped for an instant before he spoke. “Ridiculous.”

Gonzalez hefted the effigy and turned to address Medina. “This is nothing but a cheap trinket, something you might pick up in a tourist shop.”

Medina’s face flushed as he spun to face Keres-Sef. “You tried to trick me.”

The Shuankhsen shoved out a hand that was now missing two fingers in the direction of Gonzalez. “It’s your own man who is trying to trick you!”

Nebet husked out, "Gonzalez is telling the truth. There is no Sekhem in this piece."

Keres-Sef's fury exploded. He charged toward Medina, who screamed, "Fire!" Gunfire blossomed, spraying bullets wildly as the enraged Lifeless tore through the Tef-Aabhi. Blood splattered, the night resounded with shrieks both human and inhuman, and Nebet threw herself in front of Gonzalez protectively. Bullets raked across her torso and she fell. By the time she hit the ground, she was too spent to do anything but stare up at the reddish sky and wait.

It didn't take long. In a few more seconds the last gun blast sounded, there was a thud as the body hit the ground, and it was over. Nebet managed to turn her head, but she was uncertain who the bodies she saw belonged to.

And then Gonzalez was kneeling over her, concerned but uninjured. "Nebet..."

A whisper was all she could manage. "Medina…?"

"Dead. Torn apart by Keres-Sef, who has also fallen. Two of John's men were also killed, but the others will survive. I believe they will agree to serve me… provided, of course, that the guildmaster should find me fit."

"If he doesn't," Nebet breathed out, "wake me and I'll make sure he does."

Gonzalez smiled, then looked up at the sound of arriving footsteps. "Ah, the guests I summoned have arrived."

He rose and stepped out of Nebet's field of vision, which was growing steadily smaller. She knew she could rest now, that Gonzalez would remove the bullets and see that she was returned to her tomb, but she forced herself to stay awake for a few last seconds, hoping to see one last face.

Beth appeared and sat beside her, taking one hand in both of hers. "The Sesha-Hebsu owe you, Nebet. We have the Father of Ab again."

Nebet whispered, "Gonzalez is a good liar."

"You're not so bad yourself. We heard the exchange on Gonzalez's phone. Your bit about having the Blue Nile was inspired." Beth bent closer then, squeezing Nebet's hand as she whispered, "The Sesha-Hebsu accepted me. They say they're even going to let me study the Father of Ab and write its history. I feel like I'm finally home, Nebet. You did that for me."

There was a burst of light behind Beth, as if a ball of lightning had just ignited. Nebet felt something pass through her and above her, and she knew: The Sesha-Hebsu had just combined their power to release Keres-Sef from his Lifeless prison. He was on his way back to the land of the dead. Nebet wished him good passage and hoped he would find peace at last.

She closed her eyes, felt Beth's grip on her hand, and let her own peace sweep her away to that quiet, dreamless place.

• • •

"Scribes tend to take a dim view of prophecies, which present history that rarely comes to pass. However, there is one prediction recorded by an early Iremite sage that I find intriguing: namely, that a great lost relic will be found and returned to its true owners by 'two sisters born six thousand years apart.' While we cannot know if this applies to our missing Father of Ab, I nevertheless find myself strangely moved. I hope this shall come to pass, and that someday I might meet at least one of these remarkable women."

— Antu-Herap, the Prince of Glass

JACKAL PAW BLUES

Greg Stolze

The thing that wasn't a thing waited. It wasn't patient, but waiting was all it could do. It was constrained by orders. It could be something, but not yet.

It didn't think like a human, the thing, not in language and hopes and plans. It did have a name, though. Its mistress called it by name, had called it from nonexistence into almost-existence through blood and magic and toil. She called it 'Sabxent' and though it hadn't learned words, it knew those words when she hammered her intentions into it with them. Because she used language, Sabxent's semi-reality deformed around words.

Sabxent could become real, some times. It had a good bit of could-be-realness stored in it, but it wasn't allowed to get real because Mistress Perell had forbidden it. This was very frustrating. Mistress Perell had made Sabxent, but it didn't love her or even like her much. Had it been smarter, it might have inferred something about how she didn't like herself very much, but being dumb as a dog, Sabxent mostly thought about eating.

Sabxent ate reality. When it did, it could, for just a while, be real—be made of matter, and see color, and smell wonderful smells, and kill people. How Sabxent loved those times!

But it had to be actual in order to kill people (which made it a little bit real) or to feed on Special Things (which could make it real for longer still) or to fight with the Delicious Ones.

Oh, the Delicious Ones! Rarest of all but so full of being, meaning, existence… whatever it was that Sabxent lacked and wanted so badly, the Delicious Ones were soaked in it and if Sabxent could just get its fangs into one it could drink, and drink, and drink until it was almost as real as people.

Next to Delicious Ones, human beings seemed ephemeral and barely-there. Ghosts in time. Which made Sabxent the ghost of a ghost, or would have, if Sabxent had possessed the mind to consider it.

Mistress Perell had called it to a place, and told it to stay in that place until she was well away, and told it that when a Delicious One came there Sabxent was to be real and attack it. Sabxent was so eager! But then Mistress Perell had made forbiddances.

When real, Sabxent couldn't kill any people unless they were helping the Delicious One.

When real, Sabxent couldn't kill the Delicious One. It could feed and bite, but only until the Delicious One was still. Then Sabxent had to stop! Then it had to go back to being false, immaterial, scarcely an idea!

Sabxent growled and gnashed its teeth, but it had to obey. It couldn't fight Mistress Perell. It was, after all, her idea.

• • •

Chad folded the t-shirts slowly. He liked to take his time, because sometimes the movements of fabric made him uneasy, which was silly. Chad didn't like to feel silly. He didn't like folding t-shirts much either, but that was the job, working at The Gap in Fort Wayne Indiana. Chad wasn't from Fort Wayne or Indiana, but his old CO's sister managed the store.

"Hey, Enid," he said. "If you had to tell someone what Jennifer did, would you say she 'managed at The Gap' or just 'managed The Gap?'"

"What?" Enid was better at the job, nine years younger than Chad, and had the kind of looks that made people want to come a little closer to her. Chad, on the other hand, had once been unremarkable, but now had a series of small scars on his scalp and the back of his neck that made people want to move a little farther from him. He'd used his employee discount on a number of Essential Long-Sleeve Crew Neck Tees and Hooded Slub Henley Pullovers, mostly in Charcoal, True Black and Heather Grey. They covered up his left forearm. The scars on that made people want to move farther away still.

"Here," she said, sweeping over to the table. "Let me help you with those."

Enid had a brisk, efficient way of folding shirts, one after the other, like a machine. She grabbed in two places—at collarbone and short rib, if someone had been waring it—and with a couple of counter-intuitive diagonal folds, it was a perfect square with the collar in the middle.

"I'll do it," Chad said.

Enid ignored him and folded more shirts. The swirl of the cloth made him uneasy. The way it flowed reminded him of something he'd seen once. Something he'd seen 7,500 miles away and two years earlier. Something that had scarred his left arm.

"I will fold the damn shirts," he said. His cheek twitched.

Enid turned to scowl at him, just a moment too slow to catch the tic (which she would have thought was a wink). She really preferred to be called "Nid" and that was, in fact, what it had said on her name tag before Jennifer had decided name tags were offputting and created an artificial distance between customer and staff.

"Look," she started, but a nice crisp British voice interrupted.

"Excuse me."

She turned and smiled, as reflexively as a pouncing cat. "Hi! I'm Nid. How can I help you out?"

"I'm looking for someone named Chad Colver."

Nid blinked and narrowed her eyes. This man was not wearing the clothes of a Gap shopper. (She briefly wondered if that should be "a The Gap shopper," then silently cursed herself for letting Chad get in her head.) His suit was elegantly rumpled, and his stickpin had a little looped cross on it that matched his cufflinks. He had a cane, and not an adjustable orthopedic aluminum cane with a grey plastic handle (like Jennifer's brother had to use), but a proper wooden shafted cane with a brass handle like a question mark. He had tiny, brightly polished shoes and looked ready to break into a song-and-dance routine.

"That's me," Chad said, straightening up and looking wary.

"Can we talk?"

"Um…"

"It's about Djibouti," the man said.

"Oh boy."

• • •

"This is bullshit, Gary," the man with the blowtorch said.

"She's no good to us dead," Dr. Angstrom replied.

"We're no good to anyone dead, which is what we're going to be unless you let me do my job."

"We're also not much good jobless, which is what we'll be unless you let me do my job."

"Miss Dalca's in the passenger seat, she's not firing us if she dies."

"You're not making any sense," Dr. Angstrom said, checking the pulse of the still body before them. "The Amkhat knocked this thing out, like Perell said, exactly like it was supposed to. I'll get her restrained and vented, you keep her from waking up. It's all pretty clear, Maynard."

Maynard fiddled with his blowtorch while Gary clamped metal shackles and leather straps around the body on the slab before them.

"I don't know why you call it 'her,' anyhow," Maynard added.

"Fucking look at it," Gary snapped. They were standing over a five-foot figure in a headscarf, blouse, and unfashionable broomstick skirt. From one angle, it looked like a dead woman. But from where Manyard stood, a great bite in its (her?) side was visible, with no blood but only natron-soaked straw poking out. Though it was hard to look at that, his eyes didn't want to follow or focus…

The truck hit a bump and Maynard swore.

"Good thing you don't have your torch on," Gary said, "You'd have burned your nuts off."

"What are we going to do if someone runs into us, huh?" They were in the back of a sixteen-foot panel truck registered to Integrated Transport Solutions, LLC, standing, swaying, as it balled down the highway towards North Carolina.

"Get our necks broke, that's what."

"Same risks as ambulance personnel." Gary hastily stuffed the straw back in the hole, shaking his head as he smeared glue along the edges of the rift. "Look at this, it's fixing itself already."

"Don'tcha mean fixing herself?"

"Shut up, Maynard."

"What's with the leather straps? If she can break the metal ones…"

"Someone read a case file," the doctor replied, cutting garments away and gluing the flesh and bandages beneath to the heavy wooden and iron table. "Thing called Baht-Urit could take apart metal with ease but not organic materials. Boffin from Research went on and on about interrupting regular covalent bonds or some damn thing…"

A plastic window to the driver's cab groaned as it opened, and their boss called back to them from the passenger seat. "Get ready to stop," she said. "Change of plans. Dr. Perell is waiting at this rest station."

"What?"

"It's 11:50, gentlemen. We're starting the ceremony in ten."

Gary swore, and then he and Maynard both braced themselves in corners of the metal enclosure as the truck slowed.

"Look, that hole's already closed," Maynard said, as they sagged to a halt. "Fuck this, I'm lighting it up."

"Don't be such a…"

"You ain't seen 'em move!" The torch spat blue as the back door rattled upwards.

"What are you doing?" Dr. Perell was a stout woman with yellow hair, suspicious eyes, and a burly assistant helping her shove a duffel bag onto the truck. It clanged.

"Keeping us safe," Maynard replied defiantly, pressing the flame to their captive's stomach. The skin flared and crisped, emitting horrible smoke.

"Lower down, fool! I need something close to a spleen!"

"Still has a pulse," Gary Angstrom said, fingers on the jugular vein. Dr. Perell was hastily changing into a black and red robe and affixing a headdress while her helper unpacked five heavy, golden vases and a series of spindly golden blades.

"It's high noon in five… four… three…" Miss Dalca said.

"Turn off that bloody lamp!" Angstrom told Maynard, turning to slam the door back down. Dr. Perell started chanting and plucking at the prisoner's bandages, revealing something that looked and felt like human flesh, despite being stuffed with ancient grass and reeds. She rattled off weird syllables with the practiced haste of an expert rapper, snapping her fingers and pointing at her aide, who sorted through the heavy prongs to hand her the proper one. Pausing only for a long breath, the red-faced woman continued her incantation as she stuck the implement into the body, right where the spleen would have been, had the thing had a spleen.

The shape on the table opened its eyes and shrieked.

• • •

The Englishman introduced himself as Drake Adams and offered the kind of business card that you can't just get mocked up at Kinkos in an afternoon. It listed him as "Executive Vice President For Development" at Last Dynasty International. Then he took Chad to the mall's Starbucks. Drake ordered an espresso and loaded it with sugar. Chad had a Lime Refresher™.

"I don't want to talk about Djibouti," Chad said.

Drake smiled, knowingly.

"I'm not sure I should," Chad continued.

"Chad—may I call you Chad?—that's commendable. I assure you," he said, glancing to the left and right, "I have only the greatest respect for information security, loose lips sink ships and all that. Who do I need to have call you? Your old CO from the army? The president of the PMC? Perhaps Dorissa from the Company?"

"How did you find me?" Chad asked, leaning back from that last name.

"LDI is well-connected. We've been supplying… proprietary materials and techniques to the army for years. You can trust me: We're on the inside."

"Yeah, well…"

"Let me send a couple texts," Adam said, pulling out a handheld that seemed to have no seams or buttons at all, just the flawless lines of a teardrop. He thumbed it, frowning, then put it away.

"Chad, if you don't mind me saying, you seem rather hard-done-by."

"I'm all right," Chad said, picking at the cuff of his Heather Grey Slub Henley Pullover.

"Really? Working mall retail like a goddamn teenager?"

Chad glanced up at the 'goddamn.' Drake leaned in. "You were better than that. You trained hard and did well and took orders and took fire. Didn't you? You were, as people of my generation might say, 'in the shit'."

"I went outside the wire a lot, yeah," Chad said, staring at the water condensing on his plastic cup.

"They trusted you," Drake said, trying to catch Chad's eyes and succeeding. "You did your duty to your country and you went further."

Chad said nothing.

"You could have done your service and come home and been done, but that wasn't enough for you, was it Chad?"

Chad said nothing.

"So instead, you wound up in Djibouti."

"Look, don't make it sound like I'm Captain America here," Chad said. "I got a job and that was the job. That's all. Like this," he said, gesturing at the mall around them. "Do work, get paycheck."

"I have to think that working security for a high-value installation in northeastern Africa was substantially, meaningfully different from folding and selling jeans."

Chad shrugged and leaned back. Then his phone chimed.

He looked at it, then up at Drake.

"Go on. Take it," the Englishman said.

Chad did.

"Hey there, um, Dorissa. Ma'am. It's been a while since… uh huh. Yes. Um. He's right here, if you want to talk…? No, okay. No, I get it. Yeah. Yes, I mean. Ma'am. Yes." He was sweating a little.

"What do you want to know?" he said at last.

"Chad! You look like you just got bad news!"

"I really… don't want to go back to Djibouti. Not even, like, mentally."

Drake reached across the table and put his hand on top of Chad's, which made the American look up.

"You got hurt and you got fired," Drake said quietly. "I know this. Before you were even healed, they were questioning you. Treating you like a liar, and then like a madman. You were a guard and they acted like you were a prisoner. Isn't that right?"

Chad pulled his hand away. "It's a pretty crazy story," he said.

"I know Chad. But I believe you."

"…what?"

"I believe you and I want to hire you. LDI has bought out your old Private Military Company—what's left of it anyhow, mostly that arrogant old fart Beuchard and a few bureaucrats with friends in the Green Zone—and I'd like you to come back…"

"No."

"Let me finish, please!"

"I'm done being… whatever. I'm finished with all that."

"I'm not hiring you to stand watch with a gun in your hand any more, for Christ's sake! You, sir, have survived something… rare and strange. You're one of a handful of witnesses who survived the Djibouti attack and you were the only man with the stones to tell the truth about what you saw. I want you to consult with us about Amhkata. Your experiences are practically unique."

"Consult about what?"

"That's what you saw, Chad. That's what bit your arm. It's called an Amkhat."

"How do you know that?"

Adam Drake just smiled.

"A spirit of inquisition," he said, "Is a valuable and worthwhile thing. Even if there's some danger involved. But you, you've already faced the danger. So why not satisfy your curiosity? Find out what really happened, what's at the bottom of it all. We know a lot, but we don't understand everything. Your perspective, your almost singular survival… might tell us more." He took out a pleasingly-proportioned memo-pad with thick, cream-colored paper and wrote a number on it. "This would be your salary," he said. "We're very curious, and that makes us very generous."

Chad looked at the number.

"That's in dollars, or pounds sterling?"

Drake Adams laughed. "Welcome aboard, Chad."

• • •

Her name was Neter Henxet, but she went by the name "Netty Henshaw." She was a mess. Her clothes were torn, her hair in disarray, she smelled like charred leather and burnt salt, and she was chained and strapped to a metal and wood table in the back of a panel van. But she was still better off than everyone else nearby.

"Do you want to go back in the darkness?" she asked, threateningly.

"Noooooo!" wailed Dr. Gary Angstrom.

"Unclean," Maynard muttered. "Unclean, unclean, unclean…"

Dr. Angstrom was curled in a ball, pushing himself into a corner, eyes wide and staring at her. Maynard slumped against a wall, staring at nothing at all. Dr. Perell was hunched over, convulsing and puking, while her assistant lay unconscious. The front doors of the truck were open. The driver and the passenger were long gone, having fled screaming at their top speed.

"Release me!" Netty barked. "Unbind my person or by all oaths I shall consign you to oblivion forevermore!"

"Unclean, unclean…" Maynard's hands fluttered to the zipper of his jacket, pulled it down and fumbled out a compact 9mm pistol.

"No, don't!" Gary cried. "You'll make her angry!"

Maynard ignored him. "Unclean…" He chambered a round with a smooth, well practiced movement, then put it under his own chin and fired without the slightest hesitation.

Gary's cries lost all pretense of being words as blood and grey matter spattered out and up the truck's interior.

"Open these bonds! I'll not ask again!"

"Yes! Yes, I'll do it! I'm doing it right now!" Angstrom sobbed as he tottered to his feet and started fumbling desperately at her manacles and restraints.

As soon as she sat up, the crisped skin of her blowtorched torso crunching lightly, Gary scuttled back to the corner.

"You verminous, jackal-teated defiler," Netty growled, glaring at Dr. Perell as she dismounted, wincing, from the platform. "Die by the hand of Neter-Henxet, but by the will of Nebha the glorious flame, who your impure lips dared to blaspheme!"

Dr. Perell feebly raised her hands like a supplicant. "Seb…" she said, lips puke-stained, hiccuping as she tried to speak the name, "Sebxet…" Netty batted Perell's hands aside and encircled the doctor's neck with her arms. Instantly, Dr. Perell turned crimson and lost all speech. Netty leaned back with a grunt, twisting to produce a grinding, dislocating crack. Dr. Perell's headdress fell ridiculously into her lap.

Gary had been reduced to terrified whimpers. The thought of picking up the gun or the blowtorch never even crossed his mind.

Netty folded her arms and frowned, glowering at the two men remaining. She stomped over to Maynard's corpse and pried the gun out of his dead hand, then pointed it at Dr. Angstrom.

"You and this slack lump remain," she said, gesturing at Perell's passed-out companion. "Which of you is of greater use to me? Who among you knows most of this vile enterprise?" she asked, kicking at the golden jars on the floor.

"Please," he said, "Don't hurt me, don't hurt him, we're sorry, we didn't know, we didn't understand."

"I only need one of you to explain," she said, aiming more aggressively at Angstrom's face. "Him who can tell me the most will live. Is it you? Or him?"

"It's me!"

"Don't you lie to me, I'll know if you do!" she roared.

"It's me, he's just a mope, he's Perell's grad-student flunky, he doesn't even know who we work for!" Angstrom squealed.

Netty pivoted, stalked over to the unconscious man, and put a bullet in his brain.

"I believe you," she said. "Now get on the table."

"Oh, oh you don't… you don't have to."

"I hear sirens," she said flatly. "Get on the table lest I consign you to the darkness."

Weeping with fresh terror, Gary obeyed.

• • •

Sebxet had watched it all, while being unreal. It had fought the Delicious One until it stopped, just as Mistress Perell had bade it. But her command had been to return to being a shadow once the Delicious One stopped moving, and Sebxet had obeyed, as it was bound.

She had commanded it to stay away, to not bite the Delicious One again until told, and it had obeyed. Mistress Perell had also told it once "Protect me from harm," but it wasn't sure what order to take when two were in conflict. Being of little intellect, it obeyed the most recent, and stayed unreal while its mistress died with the name 'Sebxet' on her lips.

Mistress Perell had told Sebxet that in the case of her death, it would not be free but would, instead, go to Sonia Dalca.

"When I die," Mistress Perell had said, "Sonia Dalca becomes your mistress. Sonia Dalca, her," she said, pointing to a woman with a wide face and black hair.

Sabxent hadn't seen Sonia Dalca, not the way a real thing could see matter. But it knew her, it would recognize her anywhere and it would obey. With Mistress Perell's death, obedience to Sonia Dalca would become as much a part of its idea as anything else.

• • •

In Cairo, the nightclub owner looked at the three musicians and frowned. "You play what?" he asked, his Arabic smooth, rolling, punctuated by brief pauses. "Blues? Like in America? Go to Cairo Jazz Club, my people, they want Mahraganat." His name was Mudads and his club was not doing very well.

"We got better than Mahraganat," the tall black man said. "We do not need autotune. We are actually in tune, instead." His accent was maybe Syrian, more urgent and full of rising tones and a staccato rhythm.

The short woman in the blue dress said nothing. Her hijab was pulled partially across her face, almost but not quite a makeshift niqab. She had on sunglasses, even though it was dark outside and dim in the club. There was an aromatic scent that seemed to cling to her, like burning incense or marijuana smoke.

"She sings?" Mudads asked.

"She sings like you never heard," the portly brown man replied. The owner frowned at his words. He'd never heard an accent like that before and he'd worked for years driving limos to and from the airport. It sounded like it was provincial for every country in the middle east—like the man with the bass case was some kind of weird pan-asian-afro-hillbilly.

Mudads wrinkled his nose, shook his head. "The army," he said, glancing at the tall man's beard and the short woman's covered face. "They're looking for reasons to look for reasons."

"You won't have any army troubles with us," the possibly-Syrian said. "We have a friend."

"We aren't for Morsy," the possibly-hillbilly said, "We aren't against Morsy, we're just a blues band."

"People want Mahraganat," the owner said stubbornly. "Go to the Cairo Jazz Club with your blues, they have a night of blues."

The trio exchanged a look. They'd been ordered never to return to the Cairo Jazz Club. Their lack of problems with the army was, it had been hinted, entirely contingent on their absence from the Cairo Jazz Club.

"You let us play," the tall one said, tugging his beard. "Hear us play and if you don't like it, tell us to fuck right off." He said that last phrase in perfect American.

The club owner put up his hands. He nodded.

The short man got out a tall, upright bass. The tall man put on a harnessed harmonica and got out a fretless stringed instrument that looked like a home-made oud or perhaps a primitive guitar.

The men tuned up while the woman stayed motionless. Her hands were hidden in her sleeves, as they had been the entire duration of her visit to the club.

The bass player stomped twice, thrummed, and a piercing harmonica squeal cut the night. The guitarist matched it with a rapid rhythmic series of minor notes, and then the enigmatic woman started to sing.

The club owner actually jumped at her first note. She sounded like Umm Kulthum after a broken heart and a decade of heavy smoking. It prowled between

low tones and high, raw and reckless and at odds with her composed demeanor. The bass player started to sing counterpoint, about joblessness and lovelessness and powerlessness and pointlessness. It was a song that longed to kick nihilism in the balls but wasn't sure if it dared. It was delta blues through a muwashshah lens, equal parts Eddie "Son" House and Sheikh Imam. It was pain and resignation and life being worth it anyway.

They finished the song and for a moment, the club was silent.

"Egypt needs us," the tall man said. "Egypt… has the blues."

"What did you say your band was called?" the club owner asked.

"The Jackal Paw Blues Band."

"Fuck right off." His pronunciation wasn't nearly as good.

Without another word, the Jackal Paw Blues Band drifted off into the Cario night.

But 48 hours later, Muhdads called them back. He'd booked a Mahraganat DJ who'd borrowed money from his sister's husband to get his deck out of hock, then spent the money on Tramadol. Muhdads wasn't sure if it was the sister's husband who'd put the DJ in the hospital or the drugs, and he didn't really care. He was desperate and he figured the Jackal Paw Blues Band was too.

• • •

What had once been a lone human soul re-enacted the birth of the cosmos.

In the beginning the world was without form and roiled within the void of chaos. So to with this identity, which once had been a man. But as the universe began with a sudden light in the dark, this lone self had a brief and brilliant spark of existence.

I feel!

It was not a sentence or a thought, nothing so refined or elaborate. It was a burst of sensation, beyond logic, beyond the lies of external senses. It was fear and longing and awe commingled, undeniable.

Inextricable from that burst of passion was a sense of world.

I love, I hate, I yearn to know!

Now the senses, or their memory, joined the chorus of fury and joy. Sights, sounds, scents and sensations impacted the consciousness, receding when sought but buoying it upward, surrounding it like a jar that shapes the liquid poured within.

-The scent of desert dust and sweat and relief at sunset, when the toil of the laborers knew respite.

-Dawn over a basalt city, the pink and orange light shining off an ocean and glinting like dying embers as they struck the polished faces of black rock.

-The din of siege at noon, and the beating heat of the sun as something outside the city battered its walls, making them shiver like cymbals and boom like thunder.

-Her hair's scent of sunlight and wind and purity, that memory was the most intense, the wonder, joy and sorrow…

I am Sefet Qam.

That came next. Buoyed up by the sights and sounds of his life, Sefet Qam, Strength of the Crocodile's Skin, knew himself. He knew the down of sparse, coarse hair on his forearms and the way the muscles beneath became firm as mahogany when he flexed his fists. He knew his black knuckles, leathered with wear after his thirty years of life, marks that remained thousands of years after his death. He knew how scratching his head would feel, a springy pad of short, tight curls, he knew the way his hip ached in the cold, when the north-winds blew, an injury old when the first blond men stepped foot on arctic ice.

I move through world and time unchanged.

His self, his world, his wonder at it all, it flowed through him, shaking off the darkness of abnegation, blazing through the dim and murk. The first spark of the cosmos had flared, exploded, setting alight a million galaxies, and the spark of Sefet Qam did likewise, forging connections, thoughts, yearnings and shames, tying together those disparate memories with a web of deeds.

-His close friend, his colleague, setting a gentle hand on his arm and saying "There are questions, Guildmaster. My faith in you is absolute, but… there are murmurs among the journeymen. You may have to… consider your priorities."

-His black hands on her pale mauve ruff, gently brushing aside her hair as he loosened the starched linen. She trembled as he ran his fingers across the tiny marks on her skin, indentations left by the weight of stiff fabric. "I've never known a man like you," she whispered. "Your words are life poured in my ears," he replied. "Sustain me for a thousand years."

-The Seven-Times-Hallowed-Mask, weighty as he raised it above his head and drove on his followers across the icy plains of Greenland. "Push on and should you fall, my strength shall bear you up! Let the chill bear away all weakness and make you clean! We shall forge a new temple, unashamed and unbroken, in this land whose cruelty is pure! Better to freeze and die free than be warped into a mockery of yourself by the corruption we left behind. Yet heed my words and you shall not die, but live stronger and greater. Push on, I say!"

The ages, the order of it, jumbled but coming clearer, the coming of the Christians and the Muslims and he was not unchanged, not at all, he went from hot African prosperity to arctic exile, from rich man to indigent, from one black face in a crowd to the only one in the village. Years, named in Egypt and then numbered by the bookish religions… 1600 and 1922, bellowing at Syrian generals in 612 AD and before that, shouting at Cimmerian warriors at Ninevah in 612 BC.

He remembered his deeds and his shames. Snapping a trusted colleague's neck with one hand, muttering "It is the will of Neheb Ka." Saying the same thing as he set aside the chisel that marked him as Guildmaster of the Scorpion Dawn, the turquoise nail that could carve away the hatred in a man's heart, or the love. Saying it over and over as he seized relic upon relic from hurt and ignorant mortals, as he wrested beloved vestiges from them to return to his dead master.

I serve the will of Neheb-Ka.

He rose and wondered what that will would be this time.

• • •

"So," Drake Adams said, leaning back in the kitten-smooth leather of his private jet's seat. "That little salesgirl you were working with. Cute."

"Hm?" Chad was staring out the window.

"I said your co-worker was a nice bit of muslin." Drake had gotten out a bottle of Tanqueray Number 10 as soon as the flight was smooth enough to pour without spilling. He'd broken the seal, crumpled it into an ashtray and made tall, icy gin and tonics. Chad's first sat, half-empty, in a small lake of condensation on his tray, its ice melted down to slivers. Drake was finishing one that wasn't his first. Chad hadn't kept track, but the bottle was half-empty, like his glass.

The British man was flushed but still articulate, He'd loosened his necktie, letting its grey-ivy-over-cobalt silk pouch out slightly over his hooped cross tiepin.

"A nice what?"

"I mean," Drake said, leaning forward, "She looks like she's got a nice tight smackable ass. God bless Title 9!" He toasted and drank.

"Enid has a boyfriend." Chad frowned and sipped.

"No matter that, put a ring on it for all I care, an athletic girl with a ponytail and no morals is America's gift to men of the world."

"I kinda thought she was pretty at first," Chad said, fidgeting with his sleeve again. "She just made me feel… tired though. You know?"

"Oh, I know that feeling well. You want to know the cure?"

Chad said nothing, and Drake seemed to assume that meant he was very curious indeed.

"Money," Drake said. "Lots of money. As long as you make enough of it, you can work as hard as you like and still have all the energy for all the young college girls you care to put up with."

"It wasn't that kind of tired," Chad persisted. "Like… like I was the grownup and she was a child and didn't know it. She's in high school, by the way."

Drake's head wagged up, eyes narrowing. "Oh! Well, that's a bit too far then, isn't it? I had no… they can seem so mature, but you don't want to get fooled,

no. If it's not a father with a butcher knife, it's a brother with a cricket bat." He was staring down the aisle as if looking back into his own memories. "That or they get all funny on you and down a bottle of pills. No," he said, turning back to his newest employee with a serious expression, "Bad business all around, that. Terrible difference between unripe and just right."

"I guess."

Adams drank deep and Chad sipped again. "When are we supposed to arrive in DC?"

"We should be there now," Drake said, aggrieved, "But some officious snip of an air traffic controller seems determined to waste my time as if I'd never run out of it."

"Still a lot faster than driving," Chad suggested.

"Oh, driving. Don't get me started on driving."

The captain came on the intercom and warned them about turbulence, which finally prompted Drake to put the bottle away. The rocky landing justified, at least in Chad's mind, the five times they'd been waved off their approach and sent around Dulles. They de-planed and started towards a limousine, Chad craning his neck to see where his sole suitcase was while Adams assured him that it would be waiting for them at the Watergate after a light supper. That's when the limo driver stepped out of the car and shot Drake Adams with an FNP-45 pistol.

The report was deafening, echoing in the hangar, and Chad found himself sprawled on the concrete floor before he'd even registered that a gun had gone off. Before he even had time to blink he took in the driver, half hidden behind the car door, arms on top of the rolled-down window, tiny shiny shoes under black polyester trouser cuffs, a brimmed hat—Chad recognized it from TV as a chauffeur's cap, even though he'd never been in a limo before—aviator shades and a clean, smooth, androgynous face behind a gunsmoke cloud.

The driver fired again, Drake was screaming and Chad lunged to his feet. He'd run track in high school, he planted one foot like he was on sprinter's blocks and launched himself at the car. He hit the door full tilt, forearms up, pinching the shooter back against the frame. She twisted her head towards him—he realized it was a woman from the ponytail, and because she was lighter than he expected when he forced her back.

(Her hair swung, swirled like a serpent and it reminded him, it took him back to something he wouldn't think of voluntarily, Djibouti, something that moved like that, something he feared more than gunshots…)

She turned the pistol towards him. He grabbed her forearm and wrist, trying to keep her from pointing it right at his face. He had a moment to realize she was wearing earplugs before the gun went off inches from his head.

He concentrated on holding on but the muzzle flash had blinded him, the third shot left him deaf, he was relying on the sense of touch to get to the top of the weapon, the slide hot from firing, trying to pull that back or find the safety or wedge the trigger with a fingertip to keep it from going off again. He felt his body sliding along the smooth front of the car door as he lurched around, struggling with the assassin. He felt her breath on her face, a faint aroma of hummus and tabouli, right before she bit his nose.

It took a lot to penetrate the pain of his tortured eardrums and the panic of sudden vision loss, but the nose-bite had what it needed. He felt, more than heard, the squeal of terror and dismay that punched up out of his throat, and his whole body spasmed backwards, just pushed back and away with all the strength at his disposal.

He stumbled, and his ass hit the concrete, and then the back of his ribs, and then the back of his head with a an impact that he heard as a flat PHAP!—probably the result of bone conduction more than the actual sound. And he realized he had the gun in his hands.

He had the gun in his hands!

Somehow he'd kept a grip on it and when he'd jumped back he'd wrested it away from her, but he had no idea where she was (or really where he was in relation to the plane, the car, her, Drake, the pilot or the Watergate hotel). Most of his vision was obscured by a violet afterimage of the muzzle flash, but he instinctively got his right hand on the grip, his finger on the trigger, his left hand on his wrist. He figured he was pointing at the ceiling, since he was lying on his back and aiming straight up.

"BACK THE FUCK OFF!" he shrieked and let two fly. Then he stumbled to his feet, and pointed the gun wildly to the left and right, trying to get a sense of his situation from the bits he could see in his peripheral vision. He saw a bronze-beige blur to his left—that was the color of the plane! He set course towards it and ran, ducking under it and crawling as he heard, through the ring of traumatic tinnitus, the squeal of tires.

He had a moment to hope that he was far enough under the plane that she couldn't crash into him.

Then he had a moment to wonder if she was going to run down Drake Adams.

Then the tearing, too-personal pain of his nose caught up with him, and he sat down on his butt under the plane and cried. He did manage to eject the clip from the gun and clear the chamber before melting down completely, however.

• • •

Things did not go well for the Jackal's Paw Blues Band onstage at Muhdad's Cool. (That was the name Muhdad had given his club, had planned to give his club since he started squirreling money away for it out of his salary and baksheesh

money: “Cool.” The blue and green neon sign over the door was gorgeous.) First off, the sound system was crackly. Sargon (the tall harmonica player) had assured Muhdad that they could just turn off the amps and play louder, that it would be “intimate.” (This was his way of diplomatically commenting on the sparse attendance.) But Muhdad was determined to get his sound system under control, since he was sure no reputable DJ would spin at a club with a crappy board. So they played with electric static that squalled over Amy’s voice (Amy was the singer) and mild reverb feedback. The only instrument that sounded right was Fuad’s bass.

They struggled through most of their first set. Their blend of Sheikh Imam’s “Guevara Mat” with “Bela Lugosi’s Dead” went over all right, as did their Arabic language version of “Stormy Monday,” but the audience was looking at each other more than at the band, and a few were drifting towards the door. Sargon announced that they were going to play “Glad Tidings.” Amy and Fuad exchanged a glance and adjusted their microphones.

“Glad Tidings” was a song Sargon had written about Syria, a very personal song. It was their best tune, probably, so they usually finished up with it. But apparently he felt the need to take things to a better position.

“The first woman I ever loved was my mother,” he sang, Amy crooning in the background. “Loved her from before I was born. I held her hand the day she died on a cruel hot summer morn.” He sang it out about how that was, to have her there one minute and gone the next, like a shade being drawn. He’d been fifteen.

People were starting to pay attention.

The second verse was about his wife, the second woman he ever loved. He sang about how he wished his mother could have met her. “The day we met it was glad tidings, but she died far away with such sad tidings,” he sang, lamenting the violence and division that drove them apart.

He sang about being driven from his homeland and trying to get back, about the Turks and Americans and Frenchmen and Egyptians he’d believed and lied to and stole from and ran. It eased back on the mournful tone established in the first verses and made room for a brief bass solo and some fancy harmonica work. For a moment, even the growl in the speakers seemed to be harmonious.

During the last, and saddest verse, everything went to hell. He was just starting in on how the third woman he ever loved was his daughter when the sound system fed back with an agonizing, rending shriek. Sargon jumped up and kicked over his stool, swearing.

It was the swearing that did it. A bearded man in the front row took offense and expressed his distaste at great volume. Sargon ignored loud (and partially self-contradictory) complaints about blending Middle Eastern songs with decadent western music, but when the man demanded to know why Amy wasn’t respectably

at home where it was safe, Sargon dropped his guitar, jumped down, and started yelling back.

"Do something," Amy muttered to Fuad. "It's the Jazz Club all over again."

Fuad was sweating heavily and trying to get his bass back in its case as quickly as possible. By the time he'd managed to shove it offstage, Sargon had demanded to know why the dissatisfied listener hadn't said anything sooner about the rightness or wrongness of Amy's singing. Fuad struggled down off the stage as the crowd started to thicken around the bickering pair, and then the bearded man suggested that Sargon didn't even have a daughter because any real father of daughters wouldn't…

But no one got to hear the end of that thought because Sargon punched him. The man staggered, came back up swinging and then Sargon grabbed him by one ear and a handful of beard.

"Stop! Stop! Everyone please, for love of the Prophet, calm down!" Fuad's words had very little effect. Sargon slammed the front of his forehead into the other man's mouth and nose, prompting shouts and screams. Two men, one in a galabeya and one in slacks and a blazer, grabbed Sargon's arms and pulled him back, but not before he kicked the bearded man in the crotch.

"Hey!" Muhdad had come around the counter and was trying to get to the fight, his rings and perspiration glinting in the dim light. "Hey! Quit that!"

"Syrian ass," the man in the blazer grunted. He tried an uppercut to Sargon's jaw and made a mess of his knuckles, Sargon's mouth, and the harness that let him play harmonica hands free. The man in the robe punched Sargon in the ear just before Amy smashed the edge of Sargon's guitar against the top of his head. He looked up and snarled at her and she scampered back, dropping the broken instrument and grabbing a heavier mic stand.

"Please stop!"

Fuad plucked at the sleeve of the man in the jacket and caught an elbow-smash to the eye socket entirely by accident. He cried out and staggered back, stepping heavily on someone's foot as he did. (The fellow he stepped on had been lifting a bottle to crack onto Sargon's head, but Fuad had no way of knowing that, because his heel was enough to break three bones in the man's foot and drop him sideways across a small table, gasping and hissing.)

Sargon turned to the man who'd punched him and spat blood into his face just as the robed man let go to try and climb onstage and grab Amy.

"Miserable pimp!" He wiped the blood with his jacket sleeve, clearing his face just in time for Sargon's knuckles to crush his nose. He stumbled away into Fuad.

"Get off!"

"Stop! Please!"

Amy's scream was incredibly loud as the swung the mic stand. The man in the robe grunted as it hit his ribs. He grabbed it and the two struggled over it until Sargon, still on the floor level, grabbed both his ankles and pulled out hard. The man's belly hit the rim of the stage and Amy flew backwards as he lost his grip.

"Son of a lioness!"

"Aaah!"

"We have to get out of here!" Fuad yelled, covering his head and scuttling towards the stage door.

"And don't come back!" Muhdad shouted, waving a fist.

Then the police showed up.

• • •

Sefet Qam didn't open his eyes. He had no eyes. His eyes were dust, centuries past, and he had not yet made a new pair. He didn't open his eyes, but he saw. Mystic energy coursed through him, out into the world, hungrily drawing in light, sound, heat, anything it could take. He could see the cave even in perfect darkness, even with no eyes, even sealed behind six inches of solid ice.

But freshly awakened, sodden with power, the ice was no challenge. Sefet Qam flexed his arms and shoulders, he hunched forward, and it shattered.

He breathed in and realized there was no imperative.

He had been awakened by thieves intruding on his awful slumber, by pleas for help from desperate mortals, by many missions and duties and tasks. But this time there was… nothing?

"A sothic cycle turns once more," he muttered in arch English, "My freedom's joyous open door."

He'd been awakened earlier in 2012, and before falling back into death (after, gallingly, failing to recover a pillaged artifact from his tomb! Failing even to murder the traitor who'd taken it!) he had taken some time to re-familiarize himself with the modern world's calendar. It had pleased him greatly to know that the strange, periodic freedom that overtook him and his kind every 1,461 years was almost upon him. He had taken steps, and now it was time for his very personal ambitions to come to fruition.

Or else fail. He was not the only one of the Arisen to scheme and plot, not the only servant of ancient sorcerers cast into a deathless limbo to serve the immortal Judges of Duat. But he was one of the first. To his knowledge, there were only five who had undergone the Rite of Return before him, only five who would, now, be awake and aware and free to act as they wished.

His plans, then, would have the advantage of early action. But by the same token, his power would wane before his rivals'. So if he was to act, he would need to do so decisively.

Shaking the remnants of ice from his body, he strode into the dim recesses of his cavern tomb and picked up the objects his loyal thralls had prepared for him—the strange 'pants' of this era bothered him little, being less confining than the pantaloons and knickers he'd known at other times, under other names. The shirt (which was, in fact, an Essential Long-Sleeve Crew Neck T from The Gap, in Optic White) was just a shirt, though its texture pleased him. The overcoat was strange to him, with an inscription, mysteriously, on one shoulder blade, but the zipper on it, and on his boots, made him smile. Zippers still impressed him, even after a century and a half.

After all, he had no recall at all of many of those years.

A leather entanglement was filled with scraps of paper and bits of plastic—"Euros"—which seemed as good a currency as any that had no heft to it, and a small thin thing with his image on it that purported to be a Greenland driver's license for "Steffen Kham." He'd been told this was basically an identification amulet, while the "passport" with the image of a crowned shield of lions on its front was a more powerful one. Finally there was the "Discover" and the "Master Card"—talismans whose operation failed to make sense to him, but he'd been assured that merchants who "accepted" them would give him merchandise or provide services in return for an opportunity merely to examine them, and that somehow his mortal assistants in the town of Qaarsut would eventually pay for it.

Finally there was the "smart phone," which he mistrusted but slipped into his pocket anyhow. He had been assured that its ability to let him communicate across vast distances would be of great value in this "twenty first" century, but he was somewhat dubious. He had his own ways to communicate all over the globe.

"I have awakened," he muttered, flexing hands that were inhumanly mighty despite being only bone in dry, desiccated flesh. "Let the mortals… dream."

• • •

In a Washington, D.C. hospital, Chad Colver dreamed. He dreamed of Drake Adams' sweaty grin as he talked about Enid's ass, light glinting off his tie-pin… what was that thing called? That's right, an ankh.

The ankh sparkled, then glowed, then flared even brighter than the gunshot that had taken his sight.

"You have courage, mortal man," said a rich, deep voice. It wasn't his dad's voice: It was the voice he would have picked for his dad, if he'd been given the choice.

"I didn't think," Chad said, and since this was a dream he didn't have that double consciousness that so concerns people about what others will think. He didn't evaluate his words as a performance or worry about the hearer's opinion (even though he wanted whoever had that voice to like him, he wanted that very much). "I just acted. They told us that's how it happens."

“A warrior is a warrior, in this age as in any other. But beware, Chad Colver.”

(How he thrilled to hear his name in that voice! How he quailed to think of the warning he might receive!)

“One who fights is only as noble as the orders he is given.” The ankh was now as big as a mighty tree, glowing like a bonfire, but its radiance didn’t bother him. To bask in its warmth was worth the risk.

“She was going to kill him,” Chad said. “She shot him.”

“Do not be deceived. Do not let yourself be a tool in the hands of evil men.”

“Should I… leave? Dorissa said he was okay… should I trust Dorissa?”

“The future is not yet spun on fate’s loom, but in time your thread and mine are destined to entwine.”

“Cool,” Chad said.

“Follow your heart for now, tempered by your mind’s calm counsel. Wait for me to unveil myself. When the time is correct, you will know right action.”

The ankh had grown mountainous and flared like all the hopes in Chad’s life before it vanished and he sat up in his hospital bed, calling “Come back!”

In only minutes, a nurse was beside him, asking if he could see anything.

“No,” Chad said.

• • •

In Cairo, Amy slept on a sofa in a back room that, really, was a closet. But Fuad insisted that a girl should have a place of her own and had moved his few possessions into boxes shoved under his bed. This night, she took the bed for herself. Fuad was in jail.

Before she slept, she prayed for Fuad’s freedom, and for Sargon, and then she cried a little. She’d been crying less these days, and wasn’t sure what it meant that she was starting again. She hoped it wouldn’t be like before, tears and tears for hours on end, days of sobbing, but still… when the crying had ceased she felt like she’d lost something. Something related to the blues, perhaps.

The blues were about being sad, but about sadness being beautiful. Amy didn’t think her life was beautiful, though sad it indisputably was. She wanted to change it, and if she couldn’t get rid of the sorrows of her dead parents and her lost home, perhaps she could, at least, transform it into a lovely melancholy instead of the ugly kind.

“Goodness of heart can turn ill to well, child.”

She looked up and saw a man. He looked Nigerian to her, though his accent was all wrong for that, almost American but tighter and slower. She trusted him immediately, as one does in dreams.

“Are Sargon and Fuad going to be all right?” she asked.

He lifted his fingers to his lips, considering. “Your first thought is for your companions?”

“Oh yes! I can’t do anything without them, they’re like two fathers. They’re the real musicians. I’m just a girl.”

“Do not ever say you are ‘just’ female. I know a woman who brought an empire to ruin, starting with nothing but a dirty robe and grinding-stone.”

“Still,” she said, “What should I do?”

“Find the Blue Nile,” he told her.

“Blue Nile? But the Nile river is brown,” she said, “It’s always brown.”

“Then the river is not the Nile you must seek,” he said. “Find it and you will know what to do.”

“But…”

“Shh. You have strength you do not suspect. Your fate lies alongside mine, in ways as yet unclear, but if you trust me and show courage, I shall repay.”

“I just want Sargon and Fuad to be well.”

“I have yet to meet a mortal challenge that was my better.”

When she woke, Amy felt strangely light, as if she could flutter out of bed like a sunbird.

• • •

Drake Adams’ dreams were far less consoling. The first bullet had missed his heart by inches, fracturing two ribs and his left scapula. The second had been low and to the right, shredding intestine on its way to the center of his kidney, then out the back through the latissimus dorsi. Drake was a tough guy and he’d been through some bad scenes, but he wasn’t young by a long shot and they’d been big damn bullets.

The drugs diminished the pain, but couldn’t completely eclipse it without the risk of stopping his already-shaky heart. He floated in an abnegating sea of partly-narcotized misery until a black pyramid rose up before his dreaming eyes.

He was in a desert, the desert, under those stars that he’d never seen so clearly since the advent of the goddamn internal combustion engine. The moon was white and the stars glinted like snowflakes and the dust beneath his feet had the peculiar grit he’d felt only in Egypt.

“Wretched worm of a man,” boomed a voice like an angry god. “You dare steal from your betters? We ruled this realm and the world beyond before you were born. We shall rule long after your body is dirt. As for your puny soul, all that could remain after death is as clay to us. I will mold you, mortal, into a fit receptacle for my undying scorn!”

But Drake Adams was not a man easily cowed, especially within the confines of his own mind. (If anything, he was prone to honestly overestimating his abilities.)

"Hah!" He didn't have the wherewithal for a genuine laugh, but he managed to mildly scoff. "I know what you are—a thing of dust and dead time, tied together with dreams and bandages. I've drunk from the skulls of a half-dozen like you!" He imagined spitting at the black pyramid, but even within his dream, it did not occur. The dream would not conform to his will.

"Brag, then, you petty centipede. Boast of the life you drink, like a flea that fancies itself the horse's rider. But the time draws near when your transgressions will face repayment." The pyramid was growing, or no, he was being pulled to it, its unimaginable weight pressing down on him, grinding him into the sand.

"You will pass like fools and sages," the voice intoned, louder than the birth of a world. "Trampled 'neath the tread of ages."

• • •

Sefet Qam himself played no role in these nocturnal dramas, spoke no lines, nor was he even aware of what transpired. Much of what those three living people experienced was borrowed from the future, based on events yet to transpire. Such was the whim of fate: Sefet Qam called upon it and it functioned, without his knowledge or direction. He was, instead, struggling with the cell phone but after prodding it, stroking it and speaking to it, it remained inanimate and without function.

No matter. To one such as Sefet Qam, ice and arctic wind were mere inconveniences. He set forth at a brisk pace from his cold tomb. His withered and eyeless visage was hid by hat, scarf and sunglasses, and heavy mittens concealed his hands. But even with no inch of withered flesh exposed, he moved through the landscape inhumanly. No steam of breath escaped his mouth. His clothes hung on his fleshless frame as if they'd been thrown on some instrument of lifeless movement, like a bicycle or a windmill.

He walked to the road and walked up the road for a few hours before an SUV honked at him, flashed its lights, and pulled over.

"Are you all right?" was the first, incredulous question from the driver.

"I… yes. Cold though."

"Get in the cab, shut the door! Was… did your car crash? What happened?"

Sefet Qam climbed in, feigning chill and misery, as the man continued to babble in Danish, turning up the heater to full blast and rummaging around the back for a sleeping bag.

"Please," Sefet Qam said, "If you could take me to Qaarsut… my cousin Walter lives there."

"Sure, sure. You positive you don't need a doctor?"

"I'll be fine."

The driver made sure he got into Walter's apartment safely and showed every sign of sticking around to make sure. Walter had to be quite rude to get him to leave, so when Walter finally came back to the guest room to talk to his living god, his face was flushed with embarrassment.

"Mighty Sefet Qam, by the temple and… and m-mask we both serve…"

"Relinquish your formalities, Walter." Sefet Qam had removed his hat and scarf once he was out of sight, and his worshipper could not bring himself to look directly on the pursed and shriveled visage again. "I am roused, for once, without dire mission or enforced obedience."

"How may I serve you?"

"Have you performed the task I set upon you last time? Did you find a suitable female?"

The blush had begun to recede, but the mummy's words fanned it back to full bloom.

"Um, I hope that we… that is, I, I think I did."

"Good. When can I meet her?"

Walter bit his lip.

"Mm," Sefet Qam said, "Right. I should wait until I have eyes and flesh. Good thinking."

• • •

Sargon woke suffering, which was not uncommon. Today, though, it was physical pain, and quite a bit of it. His right shoulder was sore, like he'd been tugging something with it, something too heavy to move? Oh, right, the guy in the suit coat. That explained why his left knuckles were punch-sore instead of his right ones. He flexed, wondering if his chords would be affected.

The hand though, the little lump on his forehead—they were nothing. The mild aches of victory, and he'd hit and head-struck plenty of people without any noticeable ill effects. What really hurt was his mouth and his ear. Gingerly, he reached up to check them.

The ear was thickened and split… whoever hit him must have been wearing a ring. The mouth, on balance, was worse. It wasn't just a fat lip, split where his harmonica had slammed it. It was his front teeth, which sent up flares of sharp discomfort with the lightest touch.

"You going to eat that?"

The sound of Fuad's voice distracted him from his wounds (just as his hurts distracted him from that feeling, never far off, that his wife was dead and that he couldn't confirm that his daughter was too). "No," he muttered.

"Can I have it?"

Finally opening his eyes, Sargon looked across a grim jail cell at Fuad, whose eye was swelled completely shut and a shocking violet hue.

"Ah, Fuad, my friend… enjoy."

"I'll eat it. I can't promise I'll enjoy it."

"You should abandon me, my friend. I do not lead you into good places." Sargon sat up, which made his head ache more.

"Even if I wanted to leave you, it turns out the door is locked."

The cell was stuffed with four other prisoners. One of them, burly and pale with blood caked all over his mouth and beard, squatted in the far corner, glaring. The other three were thin, wide eyed and young, all wearing neck scarves, bluejeans and t-shirts. They shared an apprehensive demeanor, and glancing at Fuad it occurred to Sargon, for the first time, that someone who didn't know him and first saw him in a prison cell with a black eye might find the bass player intimidating. The thought made him smile a little, which made his mouth hurt more and his heart hurt less.

"I hope," Sargon said, "I truly hope, that I didn't take a swing at a cop."

"I am pretty sure you did not," Fuad replied, and then a guard came to get them.

"Either we are being taken to something worse or something better," Sargon muttered as they were led out. The big one in the corner took the bed the instant Fuad got off it.

When they saw who was waiting for them, Fuad grinned. "Better," he whispered, just before his brother-in-law put him in a headlock and knuckled the top of his head with brutal force. Fuad's smile turned to a wince.

"You troublemaker! You know I'm busy, busier now than ever, everything in this country is turning to shit and instead of helping clean the streets, I'm pulling out one turd and taking it home, because it happened to have been made by the same woman who produced my wife!"

"Sorry Mehmet."

"The only reason I do these things is for your sister, and the only reason she's doing them is because she feels bad for Amy," he said, breaking his glare at Sargon to give the girl a pitying glance. "Stop being so bloody worthless, Fuad!"

"The crowd at that club was…" Sargon muttered.

"I don't want to hear it!"

"I think some of them were Islamists," Amy said. Mehmet rolled his eyes, but let Fuad go.

"You're just lucky they swept up so many scofflaws last night. Two non-politicals, no one cares."

"I'll write a song for you, thank you for this," Fuad said.

"It better be a good song." With that, Mehmet apparently decided that the scolding part of the conversation was over and turned to looking over the pair of them. As a doctor working for the army, he was dispassionate and brisk, if not overly gentle.

"Ready for duty," he said. "Good luck finding another crappy nightclub to sing in."

When they got to the street, he conspicuously failed to offer them a ride in his chauffeured car. That was fine.

"I got you this," Amy said shyly, holding out an elderly cardboard box.

"Huh? Amy, you didn't have to get me anything at all!" Sargon said.

"Well, but I broke your guitar."

"No, you didn't break my guitar, that son-of-a-shoe who tried to hurt you, he broke my guitar."

"Only because I hit him with it though."

"Amy you know you shouldn't argue with me because you will never win," Sargon said, steering them towards a kahwa at the corner. "Ahwa sada," he told the man making coffee.

"Ahwa ziyada, if you would be so kind," Fuad said.

"Ahwa mazbut," Amy said. He gave her a look, but he made it. Drinks in hand, they moved off so that Sargon could open the box. When he did, he gasped.

"Where did you get this?"

"Azbakiya market," she said. "I saw a man with a cart while I was trying to get the doctor on the phone. A little old crazy man," she added.

Sargon pulled out an oud, its neck charmingly discolored from years of gripping, but still in beautiful condition. The sound hole was guarded by a delicately carved screen, black with varnish and fine as lace. Sargon assayed a chord, and started adjusting the tuning pegs, which were inlaid with tiny chips of turquoise.

"The merchant said it was called the Blue Nile," Amy said quietly.

• • •

By the time Sefet Qam met Nicole, he had his eyes back, and his flesh had muscles (or the appearance of them) under it, and to all outward appearance he

was a human being, albeit an imposing and somber one. Nicole was reminded of Idris Elba.

"You're Walter's…?"

"Friend," Sefet Qam said.

She shifted her eyes from 'Steffen'—who looked like a billionaire in disguise—to Walter, who looked like a slightly overweight half-Inuit fuel-oil deliveryman (which is what he was).

"So how'd you guys meet?"

"Internet," Sefet said, instantly and with total conviction.

"Yeah," Walter elaborated. "We… met in a chat room… for sports."

"Oh."

"That's a lovely necklace," Sefet said. "May I look at it?"

Nicole squinted. The goddamn necklace again.

She'd come to Qaarsut from Aarhus on a climate research fellowship, a generous one. The work had been easy. Suspiciously easy, she now sometimes felt. Everyone had been friendly and polite, which she'd initially chalked up to culture, but she saw the way they watched Walter when he came near her. He'd struck up an awkward conversation her first morning at the diner, and seemed to be there every day thereafter, checking his wristwatch. After a week, he'd tried to give her the necklace.

It was a string of coarse, dull beads with chunky gold forms strung between them. They looked crude, but when she felt its heft and pressed a fingernail into one of the strange little doodads, it had left a mark and she'd realized it was pure gold, or anyhow, purer than anything else she'd ever handled. She'd said no and been a little creeped out.

But it turned out everyone in the whole fucking town really wanted her to take that necklace from Walter.

Her boss on the climate project assured her that Walter "didn't mean anything by it" when she mentioned it. Her landlady encouraged her to accept the gift, going into a long rambling story about what a good, helpful guy Walter was and how hurt he must have been by her rejection. Even the tattooed girl who made shockingly good Turkish-style coffee at the local gas station said she should just take the thing and stop thinking about it so hard.

So, one morning, while everyone seemed to be glancing unhappily at her from under their bangs and ball caps, she went over to Walter at the diner and asked to see the necklace again and, this time, he suggested that maybe she could just 'borrow' it if she liked.

"I have it and no one I know to wear it," he mumbled in weirdly-accented Danish.

When she'd said yes, it seemed like everyone present exhaled at once.

She'd worn it the next day and everyone seemed to have an extra smile for her. Her boss let her off work early. Her landlord asked if she wanted to borrow a snow machine and take it out for a ride. Even the coffee girl smiled past her lip piercings and upgraded her drink to extra large for free.

That had been that, except… she seemed to have trouble remembering, now. Not events. She remembered events just fine, particularly events that hammered home how scatterbrained and absent-minded she'd gotten. Computer passwords baffled her. Phone numbers had to go into her celly right away or they'd fade like smoke. She missed appointments, misplaced her keys and had to get a pill minder for her Fexofenadine.

She couldn't remember what she'd dreamed, which was less of a practical concern but still hell-damn-ass creepy. It was like the whole town had disapproved of her for refusing it, and then approved of her for taking it, even as her mind started to crackle and drop bits. So when a complete stranger asked to see it, she hesitated.

"It's fine," Walter said immediately.

Swearing internally, she handed it over.

"It's as nice as you said," he said, then gave it back.

Nicole never saw Walter's friend again, nor Walter either—her boss said he'd gotten a new job way off in Reykjavik. She took the necklace with her when she left, but it felt different, somehow. It weighed the same, and when she got it appraised back in Aarhus they confirmed that the gold was extremely pure. They put the value at about €1,200, which seemed incomprehensibly extravagant for a fuel-oil deliveryman to give away to a woman he barely knew and had never conversed with for more than twenty minutes. But no one back in Qaarsut returned her texts or emails about it.

It was a mystery.

• • •

Sabxent thrashed, inasmuch as something intangible could. It wailed, or would have, had it the power to make sound. It suffered. It turns out, a thing not real can suffer just as much as a person.

Mistress Perell had commanded it to stay unreal until told otherwise, and though she was dead it was bound to obey. But its new Mistress Sonia Dalca had not issued it any orders at all. So Sabxent was trapped, and helpless, and unable to materialize and feed even if someone dropped a Special Thing (or dropped dead) right in front of it.

Mistress Sonia Dalca gave no orders until she did.

"Sabxent." Her voice cut through its oblivion like sweet air to a drowning man, a path to life and mass and being. "Never harm me."

No! Of all the things she could have said, all the instructions that would let it earn favor (and the reward of being, perhaps) of all the possibilities of action in the world it so craved, she had to say something for it to not do! Had Sabxent been smart enough to appreciate irony, it would have found it in the notion of instructing a not-thing in a deed to not do.

"Sabxent," she spoke again, and the creature yearned, it hoped, and when she said "Appear to me," it did with such enthusiasm that it raised its head and gave voice at the top of its massive lungs.

"Go away!" Mistress Sonia Dalca screamed. "Go back where you came from! BEGONE!"

Snarling its disappointment, Sabxent obeyed.

• • •

Sonia Dalca appeared on the org chart for Last Dynasty Incorporated as a "Project Manager" in the "Advanced Project Research" wing. She spent much of her time in an office, doing quite boring administrative tasks and being a quite boring person.

But Sonia had been raised by her extended family on what could only be called a compound (though for tax purposes it was a 'pecan farm') and had learned to drive before she could legally do so. They'd tied blocks to the soles of her feet so she could reach the pedals because her parents (and uncles and aunts) felt it was important to be able to drive a car, fire a gun, repair a radio and skin an animal with minimal waste. She learned the shooting and skinning even before they started driving.

After the family schism, she struggled with high school but fit in easily in the Navy. (The family schism started with one of her uncles accusing one of her aunts of having sex with the mailman, an accusation that was all the more wounding because he was a Federal employee. It ended with gunfire, two dead, three wounded, and the pecan farm in receivership. Her mom and dad had, quite sensibly, moved a long way east and north, to a place where the name 'Dalca' wasn't associated with 'gun-toting Romanian nut farmers'.) The Navy paid for her so-so grades in a business degree, after which she worked for the Office of Naval Intelligence before getting head-hunted for LDI.

Her confidential Navy psych file indicated a worrying degree of moral flexibility. Or, if you were LDI, an enticing degree. She had proven her ability to keep her mouth shut, and then her ability to tolerate felonies, and, in the fifteen years she'd worked for them, her ability to shoot straight, hide bodies, and accept a high degree of eerie mystical shit.

Dr. Joyce Perell had been a natural ally. They didn't like each other much, but each recognized the other's utility. Sonia's skills at office politics were at least adequate, and she put in the hours and effort, while Joyce had quit academia over

exactly that sort of bullshit. Joyce, on the other hand, understood the weird stuff in a way that took decades and made her rare and valuable… but not in a way that yielded responsibility or leadership. LDI was happy to write checks to Dr. Perell and let her do her ceremonies, but she wasn't considered managerial timber.

By the time they got to working together, they both knew about mummies, and that if an 'adept' (like Joyce) drained certain occult fluids ('the Exudation') out of them, those fluids could make an honest-to-God fountain of youth. They knew Drake Adams had taken at least a couple dunks in that fountain, as had several other people in upper management.

Both Joyce and Sonia were getting to the age where turning back the clock was looking like more of a health choice than mere vanity, and they both realized that they were in an organization where the upper echelons had absolutely zero reason to ever retire. Working as an Executive Vice President at LDI could let you stay in a 20-to-40 year old body indefinitely, as long as you hit your profit goals. What sensible person would give that up?

So Sonia had set up a proposal to lure in and capture another mummy, producing more Exudation, with the understanding that its first two doses would go to rolling back the miles on their bodies' odometers. It had taken two years to get a mummy cultist to agree, and they'd had to share an awful lot of other LDI employee's secrets in the process, but they'd nabbed Natty Henshaw. Joyce's monster had hurt it, Maynard's team had restrained it, Gary had kept it from collapsing and Joyce had been ready to harvest it. Then it had sat up, flooding the truck with an icy darkness. Then, for the first time, Sonia viscerally realized that there was something to it when Joyce talked about 'spaces exterior to normal tangibility.' Then it killed everyone who didn't run.

Four days after Dr. Perell's poorly-attended funeral, a lawyer had delivered a sealed envelope and Sonia remembered that Joyce had, as an element of their haggling over working together, promised to leave her a monster called 'Sabxent' in the event of her demise.

Joyce had explained that Sabxent existed in 'another space,' which Sonia heard as 'in outer space,' at first. Even after Joyce explained (at length) Sonia still thought of Sabxent as 'Joyce's Space Monster.' She'd acted like she didn't really want it because really, she didn't. But the mystic was a bad negotiator, so after the assassin/manager got everything she wanted from the partnership, Sonia had been left with some unmet demands and Sabxent as a bargaining chip. Sonia had agreed mainly so that Joyce would think they were equals and remain easy to manipulate.

But the sealed envelope claimed that Sabxent was not only real, it was probably watching Sonia at that very moment. It very carefully explained that Sonia should not have witnesses around when she said "Sabxent, show yourself." It was also very, very clear that her first instruction should be "Sabxent, never harm me."

Sonia hadn't known what to expect when she let herself into a store-room by herself on a Saturday and invoked the thing. But when it had appeared—a horrid, rotting bull carcass that was somehow moving, gnashing jackal teeth in a jackal jaw, fluttering vast greasy wings—it was all too real. It couldn't exist, and existed, and then it let out a horrid bellow, hoarse and tight, and a few wriggling centipedes flew out of its mouth—and she sent it away.

Later, after half a bottle of Jim Beam, she complimented herself on the way she'd kept her wits about her and had banished it instead of simply curling up in a ball.

• • •

After seeing off Nicole, Sefet Qam flexed his hands, and then the necklace was dangling from his fingers. Walter stared.

"If you're wondering how I made the exchange," Sefet said, "I studied under a master of legerdemain and misdirection in 5th century Portugal." He shook his head. "Horrible man. Absolutely filthy."

Walter nodded.

"If you're curious about the dummy necklace, that was enchantment. I made it from a like weight of ice."

"Ice?"

"Don't worry, it won't change back." Sefet Qam stroked his chin and examined the necklace. "It looks like she fiddled with the clasp, but I'm sure it still works…"

He fastened it about his throat, slipped it under his shirt and gazed off into the distance for a long moment, face blank. Then he pulled out his cell phone.

"Brilliant," he said. "She was perfect."

"We made sure to get someone who knew a lot about… telecommunications."

"Thanks to her, I wish this was an Android instead of an iPhone," the mummy said. "Now if you'll excuse me, I have to book us tickets to Egypt."

"Egypt?"

"It is where I'm from."

"There's been some… stuff… happening there."

Sefet Qam looked up. "Speak you of warfare?"

"…kinda?"

"Fine. Somewhere closer then. Syria? Libya?"

Walter sighed.

• • •

While Sefet Qam was arranging air fare for his high priest, Neter Henxet was being fussed over by her Human Resources VP.

"Aw gee," the Vice-President said, "Are you going to be all right?"

"Stop picking at it," Neter Henxet said, but with no real heat. "I'm as dead or living as I ever am. Tell me about Yalda. The placing worked?"

"Um, yes, inasmuch as she got appointed as Drake Adams' chauffeur…"

"Drake Adams," Neter Henxet grumbled. "That's the laziest false name I have ever heard in seven thousand years. I take it the assassination failed?"

"Your perceptiveness is as keen as ever!"

"Bah. Had it worked, you'd have mentioned it first thing, trying to cheer me up like a puppy begging for dropped meat."

"He's hurt," the VP said, hopefully. "He might not pull through." She had been very uncomfortable with the whole process. Hiring a murderer was not 'in her wheelhouse' and now that it had failed, her discomfort was even greater.

"Too much to hope for," Neter Henxet responded. "The witchery of LDI can overcome anything short of an instant death. You failed, as well, to place someone in position in the hospital?"

"I'm afraid…" she licked her lips nervously. "But our LDI turncoat is still in position. Maybe in a better position!"

"Drake will come back fiercer," Neter Henxet said, and sighed. "I had so hoped to recover the turquoise chisel, but the creature they had tied to it was simply too much for me alone."

"What about… what was her name? Something Rushing-Waters Something Renewal?"

"She's not returning my calls," Neter said pensively. "Besides, her 'crime family' sourced Yalda for us. I can't go back to that well again so soon. She would judge me to lack dedwin…" The immortal trailed off, looking at her employee's concerned expression.

"Are there any other important bulletins?" the ancient one asked.

"Something out of Greenland…"

Neter Henxet immediately leaned forward. "Sefet Qam? Or his miserable little cult?"

"Um, both. He seems to be… around and about."

"What?"

In an instant, Neter Henxet was poring over photos of Sefet Qam and Walter—at the gas station, at the airport, transferring planes in Copenhagen.

"He's getting on Emirates? Where was he going?"

"Egypt, ma'am."

Neter Henxet started to smile.

"He's traveling under the name 'Steffen Kham' and the next leg of his flight was to Cairo."

"The sentimental fool," Neter Henxet said, now positively beaming. "He wants to recover his old seat of power."

"…ma'am?"

"If he longs for the glory days of the African Guild-Hall, perhaps we should… encourage him." She said the word 'encourage' the way a more direct person would say 'flay' or 'dismember.' "Bring Mr. Steffen Kham to the attention of Mr. 'Adams.' If Yalda's attack can be pinned on the Greenland cult, even better. The chisel I was trying to get…" She was smirking, gently tapping her lower lip with her left fingertips. "That belonged to Sefet Qam, so very long ago. Adam Drake and his warlocks have anchored a guardian beast to it… one that fights more fiercely against the recently awakened. If they take it to Egypt to lure in Sefet Qam, well… should he dispose of the creature, that's in accordance with the judges' will. If it sends him back to Duat, the mangy son of a bitch won't reclaim his miserable fucking pyramid." She leaned back, satisfied. "Yes, I like this a great deal. Make it happen."

• • •

Sonia Dalca had a nice three bedroom house in a gated community, and five miles away from it four teenagers were sparking up a bong while the host's parents were out of town overnight.

"Nice," croaked one. It would be the last word he ever said.

Sabxent had no grasp of legalistic reasoning, but its cunning reflected its creator. It had been told it had to remain unreal until its new mistress called for it. Now she had called for it. She had sent it away immediately, and showed no signs of issuing a new summons… but it had stayed unreal until the condition was met. Therefore, it had no reason to remain in its other space.

The house with the bong and the teens also held a Special Thing. Not an old strong one, but something someone had loved so much, so singularly, that it started to vibrate in time with its owner's soul, and then all human souls, and then it made other souls vibrate in time with it. It was a diary, in which the homeowner had put poems and thoughts and sketches when she, herself, was a fifteen. Since then she'd become well-educated, a popular radio news reporter, and her watercolors sold for thousands of dollars in charity auctions. The book, which she could never bring herself to re-read, throbbed with a bittersweet tension of hope and despair. The boys smoking pot didn't know anything about it, didn't realize it was the reason that Jimi Hendrix' "Castles Made of Sand" sounded so friggin' cool on the stereo. They didn't know that at some level, the profound feelings they were experiencing were imposed on them.

They'd never find out. The hum of ideas encased in matter, the blend of the tangible and the conceptual, it called to Sabxent. Even outside the world, the creature smelled the Special Thing the way a shark scents blood. It appeared and, with a snap of jaws and a snake of its neck, tore the book to pieces, sucking in the stored emotional energy. Just a little taste, but enough, enough…

Then it scented human flesh, and turned to seek a second meal.

• • •

Chad's eyes were improving, but not much and not quickly. He'd been treated and his peripheral vision was clearer, but the center of his visual field was still a great, purple-edged black blotch. The doctors had told him, as gently as possible, that tiny bits of flaming gunpowder had gotten embedded in his pupils. Unfortunately, that's not the sort of news that can be explained gently.

His hearing was back to normal though, and a nurse had helped him into a wheelchair to pay a visit to Mr. Adams.

"He's been very eager to s… to talk with you," she said.

"I could probably walk."

"This is easier."

From the corners of his eyes he saw stocky men in black paramilitary fatigues, holding assault rifles, incongruously standing guard in the soothing white hospital corridor. As one squatted to check through his wheelchair, (grunting "Sorry, protocol," as he did) he caught a glimpse of a black beret.

They wouldn't let his nurse in the room, so a third guard had to leave off staring out the window to wheel him inside.

"Chad? Is… that you?"

Chad pivoted his head this way and that, trying to assemble a vision of his new boss from the fragments at the edges of his blindness. It didn't look good. He was left with an impressionistic tangle of tubes, machines, pallid skin and blankets.

"It's me," he said.

"They say you're blind."

"Well, not, like stone blind but… yeah."

"Son of a bitch," Adams said. His voice was labored, but Chad could still hear passion in it. "Unfair. You showed true courage, real grit there, and I'm not the type to forget that Chad. I am a gentleman and I repay debts of honor. We are going to find that little cunt who hurt us and put her paid, you can take that promise to the bank. And I'm going to get you better if I have to transplant one of my own fucking eyes into your head."

"Um…"

"You saved my life, Chad. You didn't hesitate, you acted, and that's not something that can be taught. If you want to get away from all this and retire a millionaire, say the word and I'll buy you an island in a warm climate."

"You don't have to… um, buy me anything," Chad said. "I mean, you've already been generous…"

"That was nothing. Your old medical debts? Wiped out as of 9:15 this morning, my friend. Hell, I even paid off your car. But that's only an appetizer. If…"

He was interrupted by a knock at the door.

"Mr. Adams? Dr. Bonwit is here."

"Outstanding. Bruce, you may go."

The beret-man by the window hesitated, then left as a portly fellow with a black beard and a white lab coat entered.

"Chad Colver, I'd like you to meet Dr. Vadim Bonwit."

"Hey," Chad said.

"Pleased to meet you, Mr. Colver."

"You can… just call me Chad?"

Chad couldn't see Bonwit smirking, but was somehow strangely sure that he was. "Mr. Adams has been quite… effusive in praising your bravery and sang-froid."

"Um…"

"Ah, I've made you blush. Well. I'm Director of Research for LDI. Has Mr. Adams told you much about what we do?"

"Haven't had time," Adams said. "Should've done on the plane, but, well. I didn't know Chad quite so well, then."

"Whereas now…?"

"Let's tell Chad about Nortromadine. Wait, no, better. Let's show Chad Nortromadine. You brought it, right?"

"I brought two doses, as you requested."

"Super. Bottoms up, then?"

"Um…" Chad started.

"It's perfectly safe," Drake assured him. "I'll go first. Watch. Well, I guess you can't…" Bonwit was already fitting a needle full of ice-blue fluid into a port in Drake's IV.

"It should take effect…" the doctor started, but Drake was already sighing in relief.

"Nortomadine," he said, "Costs about five hundred US dollars per CC. I've just been shot up with a middle-class mortgage payment, and I feel better. You can't imagine."

"What…?"

"It's healing in a syringe," Bonwit said. "If you could see, you'd be able to tell how much his color has improved in just. Seconds."

"Can't you hear it in my voice? The edges of the bullet wounds, it's like a tickle, they're knitting. Bonwit! Give the man his shot!"

"Whoa!" Chad said. "No! I'm sorry sir, but I'm not about to have something I don't know anything about mainlined into me!"

Adams laughed.

"Good man! There's that pepper! Hopefully you'll reconsider when I tell you where it comes from. But first: You saw a giant snake with a lion's head, now didn't you?"

Chad gaped. Adams laughed. It sounded easier now.

"Come now, that's what happened in Djibouti. Isn't it?"

"Did… did someone else…?"

"Prentiss Stevens," Adams said. "Oh, and don't worry about talking in front of Vadim here. He's heard stranger things, and seen them too." Despite his damaged eyesight, it seemed to Chad that Adams was moving about a little more in his bed.

"Prentiss Stevens said he saw a snake with a lion's head, the size—and I'm quoting here—of a school bus. Now, Mr. Stevens is in an asylum now, has to be prevented from trying to harm himself, very sad. But the interesting bit is that you, who passed psych tests adequately, said that there was some kind of giant animal involved on the attack on the black site. The tooth marks on your arm were a decent match for a male lion, young adult."

"Black site?" Vadim sounded very interested.

"I can't talk about that," Chad said, glaring.

"It's all right," Adams said. "Vadim's trustworthy, even if he doesn't have all the clearances we have. You wouldn't be interested, doctor. It was only military."

"Ah."

"High value targets were… what was that word? Rendered? Renditioned? Extraordinarily? Anyhow, they were taken to this squalid old Foreign Legion base for water-boarding and cucumber sandwiches."

"I can't be here if you're talking about this," Chad said, fumbling with the brakes on his wheelchair.

"All right, shush, I'll stop talking about all the spook show business."

"I know you were… previously employed by a mercenary troupe," Vadim said.

"Private military company," Chad snapped, reflexively.

"Well, that was what you were doing when you got bitten by an Amkhat."

"You used that word before," Chad said, spinning his wheelchair back. "What are they?"

Dr. Bonwit sighed. "They're monsters. They're what they look like—a dog's-breakfast version of Frankenstein by way of ancient mythology. They are powered by a force we are just now beginning to comprehend, but there are people who have been harnessing it for all of recorded history."

"The drug I was just given," Adams said. "We refined it from a substance we call 'Exudate.' It comes from… beings that look human, but are actually far more unnatural even than the beast that bit your arm."

"I don't… no. No, this is too much. It's too crazy." Without thinking about it, Chad stood and made for the door.

"Stop him," Adams said, voice low but crisp. The guards twitched into place and Chad realized he could see them, even straight ahead of him. His vision still had a big blurry patch in the middle, things right in front of him looked like a newspaper with coffee spilled on it… but it was no longer pure darkness.

He spun and looked at his IV. Bonwit was just pulling the syringe out.

"You were distracted," he said. Chad had been right. He was smirking.

"Isn't that better?" Adams was more visible too.

"Yeah," Chad said. Then he punched Dr. Bonwit in the face, as hard as he could.

"Doesn't make it okay to be a dick," he said, before Bruce butt-stocked him to the ground with one blow to the belly.

• • •

Amy was nervous about singing in public.

"You've performed before people many times," Fuad said. "Three times at the Jazz Club, you were a big hit at The Hibiscus Room before it closed down…"

"Those were different," she said, fingering her hijab and sunglasses. "Those were… enclosed."

"The sound will be better out here, maybe."

"At least we won't have to worry about some bitch-shit sound system ruining everything," Sargon added, tuning the Blue Nile some more.

The Jackal Paw Blues Band was setting up near a bench in Al-Azhar park. It was the first time they'd performed in daylight, for tips, in an open and public area. Fuad and Sargon couldn't help feel that they'd taken another step downward on their careers' trajectory, but Amy (who was usually collected and still) couldn't stop fidgeting.

"The thing is," she said, "People went to those places to hear music, and here, we're just… throwing it at them."

“If they don’t like it, they can walk away.”

She sighed.

“Come. We’ll start strong,” Sargon said. “‘Glad Tidings’ on three.” He started tapping his foot. He counted them in and played a note and it was glorious.

It wasn’t that the Jackal Paw Blues Band sounded better. They didn’t even sound different.

They felt different.

From the first note, people turned, paused if they were moving away, slowed down if they were close by. The sound was plaintive yet joyful, rejoicing in its own sorrow. It was the music of people who couldn’t do anything, and had chosen to do something anyway.

Amy, who felt she ought to be hiding at home but who had no home to hide in but these songs, was the voice of everyone who’s ever been abandoned, lonesome and lost. Fuad, who really didn’t have things so very bad, was the sound of fate, happy-go-lucky but always aware that tragedy and comedy were faces on the same coin, and you had no choice to keep flipping it. But Sargon, fingers caressing the Blue Nile oud, his sound was the great revelation behind it all.

Because he was angry. And he was grieving. And he was mortified by his own state as a helpless puppet on the hand of fate. He was running on fumes of hope that his daughter’s death was all a mistake, a friend-of-a-friend’s uncertain Twitter comment, and secretly wishing he could be one thing or the other, relieved or broken for good, still grateful for the chance to be impatient.

Sargon’s misery could have made him a monster, that was crystal clear. He could have gone mad, killed himself, killed others but…

…but he played instead. He played music and the music said It doesn’t make sense but it can still be worth it. All you suffer and go through, we’re with you. Pain and heartbreak and that low, weary ache are what humans are meant for. Being blue isn’t our curse. Being blue is our greatness.

Everyone had known some taste of that helplessness, that resignation, that defiance inside when the outside world was too big. In a city convulsed by political chaos, it echoed loud, in the park, in the listeners.

Cairo had the blues before they started playing, but with every note, the city woke up to it.

They stopped and there was applause, there was money in Fuad’s bass case, there were people who looked as if they’d sighed, and relaxed, and set aside a heavy weight for the first time in a long time.

“Salaam,” said a man in a sharp suit, with a crisply trimmed beard and mustache. “I must say, I’ve never heard anything quite like that blend… is there someone I can contact about having you play at a private function?”

"We'll have to check our schedule," Sargon said blandly, but he took the man's card.

• • •

"I'm not mad that you punched my nose," Dr. Bonwit said, stepping cautiously into Chad's room.

"I'm still kinda mad that you shot me up with that blue stuff," Chad replied.

"I apologize."

"You don't sound real sincere."

"You can see, can't you? At least a little better?"

Chad glanced over at him. "You have any more of it?"

Bonwit tittered and took a few steps closer. "I'm afraid additional doses are unlikely to help much. There's a diminishment of returns. But I really hope the Nortromadine can let… mainstream medicine, and your body's own resources, get ahead of the injury curve."

"Hmph."

Dr. Bonwit sat, then resettled himself. The hospital chair was not comfortable.

"Mr. Adams asked me to come talk to you some more," he said.

"About LDI and what it does? I'm not sure I wanna hear it."

"It does take some adjustment," the doctor replied. "How old are you, Chad? If you don't mind me asking."

"I'm twenty-four."

"Did you ever play the computer game 'Archons of Atlantis'?"

Chad instinctively turned towards him, even though it didn't help him see the doctor more clearly.

"That was, what, an old Xbox game?"

"Not that old. I was kind of hooked on it for a while."

Chad said nothing, trying to process the idea of Dr. Vadim Bonwit, video gamer.

"Did you at least play it a couple times?"

"I guess. I was more a 'Call of Duty' guy."

"Don't tell Adams. He hates those sorts of games, thinks they trivialize real combat."

Chad shrugged. "I know a few vets who love them because they trivialize real combat. Anyhow."

"Anyhow indeed. Do you remember AoA's basic gameplay?"

"Um you… made gods? You had to build a temple, and get all this cr… stuff for it, magic items for upgrades, lot of running around killing monsters. Pretty standard fantasy shtick."

"Yeah. You built a god, chased magic items, and killed monsters." Vadim gave a weird little half-nervous smile that Chad found much easier to take than his previous smirking. He twisted his head to look more clearly and could see that the doctor's nose was really swollen.

"Hey, I am sorry I punched you," Chad said, surprising himself as well as the doctor.

"Well, that shot was pretty unethical, I guess."

"Your nose hurt much?"

"I'd actually had it broken before? So it's not going to be any more crooked… I got ice on it right away, so I think I'll avoid the dual black eyes. I suppose if I had to be struck, getting hit in a hospital was… the best option."

"The least bad choice," Chad suggested.

"Quite."

Another moment of silence, before Vadim said, "LDI is like a real-life version of AoA, only inside-out. We build monsters, kill gods, and run away from magic items."

Chad frowned. He thought for a moment.

"Huh?" he finally said.

• • •

"This gives me the creeps," Barney said.

"I don't care about your creeps even one little bit," Sonia replied.

"Yeah, I get it." Barney gave her as defiant a look as he dared, which was about the level a typical teen boy would give to his mother—some, not too much. Sonia Dalca was his boss, but barely.

He bent over to pick up the strongbox, and she made no move to help him.

"You know what's in here?" he asked.

"Yes."

The last time Barney had been with her, he'd been driving a truck with Netty Henshaw in the back. On the org chart, he had now been shifted up into Maynard's position and pay bracket, but he wasn't happy with it. He'd respected Maynard too much.

Netty Henshaw! Barney still couldn't believe it. The name sounded like some ignorant barefoot hick from Appalachia with three teeth, bare feet, and a bun in the oven. But then that black smoke had come out of the back and they'd heard screams and they'd run.

"We're taking this to Tunis and then… coming back? Staying?"

"I'm staying. I hope you'll stay too."

He tilted his head back and forth as he hauled the lead-lined case up the steps into Drake Adams' plane. It was about the size of a lunch cooler and extremely heavy.

"I'm not going to fire you if you want to transfer to a less risky division. But given your experiences, you're going to wind up on X-Files duties wherever you go, don't you think?"

"I suppose I could quit LDI altogether." The private jet had been carefully inspected and found to be entirely free of sabotage or bullet holes, but Barney was still unhappy about being involved with a vehicle that had so recently witnessed an attempted gunshot execution.

"And do what? Come on, you'd be wasted doing background checks for a strip-mall detective agency or handling security for some jumped up oil millionaire's third wedding. You've got skills. That's why I wanted you in the truck in the first place," Sonia continued, eyes flicking from plane to hangar door to pedestrian exits. She had a loaded 9mm XDm pistol in a shoulder holster, and its strap was unsnapped. She was jumpy.

"Yeah well, I figure our department got a black eye when things went haywire and we cheesed it."

"On the other hand, everyone who stuck around is dead." Her lip curled. "Did you see the pictures of Gary when they found the truck? The others, it was at least quick."

"Gary was kind of a loose cannon," Barney muttered.

"Look what that got him. Shame about Maynard."

"No doubt. Hey, didja see the news thing about the rest stop? They got some cam-phone footage of the smoke. It's friggin' unreal. Looks like someone set every tire in the lot on fire."

Sonia relaxed a little when they had the door shut and the walkway up. She conferred briefly with the pilot while Barney secured the cargo.

"What're they saying happened?" she asked. "Blaming it on 'terr'ists'?"

"They went with chemical fire."

She shook her head. "Liberals."

Barney didn't know the monster that had savaged Netty Henshaw was right there with them, but he still felt like something was staring at him. Something with big teeth and foul breath. Sonia knew damn well that Sabxent had to be drooling over the chisel in the case.

"Sabxent," she whispered, "Do not materialize on the plane."

"Did you say something?" Barney asked.

• • •

Drake Adams had thoroughly reviewed what he called "The Henshaw Episode" in time for his meeting with Colonel Speery. He had no intention of telling the man from DARPA everything he knew about the undead creatures masquerading as humans, but he wanted to get his scare tactics straight.

"Adams," Speery said, coming in with a somber, concerned expression. Drake made a little production of getting upright in bed and shaking the officer's hand, but he made sure his grip was still firm and manly. "I really appreciate you talking to me under these conditions."

"These conditions are part of the reason I wanted to push up our meeting. If someone's willing to shoot me—try and kill me—to keep me away from you then by God Almighty, meeting you goes to the top of my agenda."

Speery sat, hat in lap, and ran a palm over his baldness. "Dorissa has given me some background," he said. "We've all been very concerned since Djibouti… about Djibouti. You say you have a new perspective?"

"I've gone back to Colver."

"He was… army? Ex-army. Working under contract, right?

"I see your briefing was thorough. Yes, Colver was there on the ground, one of the five survivors. One of the two who actually experienced contact with the enemy. The only one still sane," Adams said.

"There's some debate about that."

"I pride myself on judging character, Colonel. He's as sane as you or me. Possibly more than me." His expression offered a chance to laugh. Speery's face declined it.

"I've heard some pretty outlandish stories out of that whole situation."

"Outlandish how? Outlandish like 'one man gets nabbed from Iraq and hustled out in a sack, has no idea where he even is, and manages to get rescued within twenty-four hours'? Or more like 'tightly guarded secure site gets discovered without anyone even suspecting anyone was sniffing around'?"

Colonel Speery was starting to turn red, but Adams kept going.

"Or what about 'no one can find a sign of a leak even after the site's been pried open like an over-ripe banana'? Or 'secret fortress is entirely overrun even though there's no sign of a sufficient force being infiltrated into the region'? Honestly Colonel, those all sound 'pretty outlandish' to me."

"Do you really believe a giant, lion-headed snake broke into the base and freed the HVT?"

"I have seen things that incline me to be less skeptical. I have seen creatures of that type." He gestured modestly at his tubes and medicines. "I hope you won't

blame this on my painkillers, but at LDI we have, at great personal risk and expense, constructed such things."

Colonel Speery gave him a long, level look and then said, "I think I've heard enough." He started to stand.

"But Colonel, you haven't listened to Mr. Colver." He gestured towards the door guards. "Bring him in!"

"Sir," Chad said, offering a salute. Speery stood and returned it, muttering "At ease," with a suspicious squint.

"Tell him what happened," Drake said. "Tell him what you saw."

"Please son," Speery said. "Have a seat and just let it out. This isn't in court. Everyone in this room has the clearances. Tell me."

"Well… I was working at Fort 490. Security stuff—walking patrol, watching the cameras, minding the remote weapon systems, sometimes going out and strolling around the neighborhood. Nothing real formal, just… keeping an ear to the ground, y'know?"

"You speak Arabic, right?"

"Uh… I studied Arabic. I never said much, other than, like, buying stuff. Sir. I couldn't pass for a native if I opened my mouth. I understood some French and some Arabic, but there was a lot of Somali, too… anyhow, I never picked up any chatter or anything." He shrugged.

"Tell me about the high value target," Speery suggested.

"I only saw him a couple times. I know his name was 'Ali' and that he looked… I dunno, ordinary. Skinny guy, Arabic. Pretty beat up." Chad fidgeted. Drake narrowed his eyes.

"We kind of split ourselves up, the guards, you know? Inside and outside. Those of us who didn't mind patrolling and being bored and watching the screens, we did perimeter duty. Those who… I dunno, preferred working with the prisoners? They got those jobs. We weren't trading shifts or anything, but Commander Beuchard knew who didn't like searching the cells and, um, enforcing the rules and who… who did."

Colonel Speery made a noncommittal noise.

"So things were pretty boring, really. Ali came in on a stretcher late Monday night, I was on the door when they pulled up with him. We had maybe five or six other guys in the music boxes, we put him in one but left it off until he woke up the next day. Tuesday. That's when all hell broke loose."

Chad plucked at his sleeve a little before continuing.

"There was a bad feeling though. Like before a storm breaks? Everyone was tense, uneasy… spooked. Nobody was being lazy on the perimeter watch, that was for damn sure. We were like… what's the saying? About cats? Nervous as a

cat in a rocking chair? Anyhow, we were all swivel-eyed, nothing got in. Nothing crossed the boundary or went on the cameras or… anything. Until the panic button went off."

"That was the alarm that an escape was in progress?"

"Yeah. I mean, that had never ever happened except in drills, but no one was surprised. We were startled, we all jumped half a foot, but that was because we'd been expecting it. I mean, I just… I can't communicate that sense that something was coming."

"Many people react that way in the presence of a dephased Amkhat," Drake said quietly.

"What?" Chad asked, but the Colonel gave the injured industrialist a sharp look. "Let the man tell his story."

Chad continued. "We all locked down the gates and the doors and tooled up and that's when we saw something on the monitors from the cell floors. There was no mic—I mean, all you'd hear on them would be 'Expendable Youth' or whatever other song we were blasting—but I saw Chris fly back onto the screen and something blurry jumped on him. It was fast, just a smear, maybe quicker than the camera could really keep up with? I don't know how that works, but it moved… it moved smoothly, like cloth flowing. It was weird. And it threw him right into the camera, just picked him up in its jaws I guess and whipped him back and up."

They were quiet for a bit.

"That was Chris Walton?"

"Yeah."

"So then what happened?"

"We went in guns up. Prentiss was point and he started screaming when he turned the corner out of the staircase. He screamed first and then he opened up. Burst burst burst and howling all the time, dropped to a kneeling stance and I went around him, went prone to shoot and… and…"

Chad was shaking. He was staring down at the floor and his breath was quick and shallow.

"Excuse me," he said.

"Take your time."

He put his head between his knees for a few seconds, then sat back up.

"So I was prone and I started shooting it didn't do a damn thing. I mean, I wouldn't say the size of a bus, but that thing filled up the whole hallway. We could not miss. All the rounds we were cooking off? We didn't miss. Those were seven-six-two hollow points, but they didn't even leave holes. We hit and it would twitch. That was all it did, all our shooting, it made its moves less smooth." He

wrapped his arms around himself and said, “Then Prentiss came up dry and he broke, he dropped his gun and fled, and it bit me while I was trying to get up and fall back. It would’ve killed me if Hoover hadn’t come around and fired at it point blank. I’m surprised he didn’t put one through my arm, that’s how close to its head he was. It blinked, when he shot it it blinked but didn’t bleed. But he must have pissed it off because it let go of me and bit him and I ran.”

He took a deep breath and blew it out.

“I just ran up the stairs past the B-squad and unlocked the doors and got in a jeep and peeled out. Was that dereliction of duty? I don’t know.”

“I think you did all you could,” Adams said.

“You just don’t understand how wrong it was. I mean, it wasn’t right, wasn’t natural! It didn’t belong there. It didn’t belong anywhere!”

Speery looked at him, then turned to Adams.

“You believe this?”

“I do, because I’ve seen them. They are powerful weapons, Colonel. And like every weapon, you don’t want your enemies to have them when you don’t.”

• • •

“That’s the deal,” Muhdad said. He didn’t twitch, didn’t shift his posture, didn’t jiggle his leg. He very carefully did none of those things.

“I don’t know,” Sargon said. “When you yelled ‘don’t come back,’ that… that was hurtful.”

Amy elbowed him in the shoulder. Muhdad considered claiming that he’d been yelling at the guy in the galabeya, wondered if Sargon would be more insulted by that lie, or if Muhdad didn’t appear to care enough about his feelings to lie.

“I was yelling at the guy in the galabeya, not you!” he said, briefly nostalgic for the simpler times as a driver.

“Uh huh.”

“Extra security comes out of your end of the money?” Fuad said.

“You’re bleeding me dry!”

“You could always find someone to play Mahraganat,” Sargon said.

“I like the room,” Amy said. “It’s not too big. It looks nice.”

“We’ve completely revamped the sound system,” Muhdad promised, and it was at least sixty percent true.

“I just hope we can help you attract a better class of custom,” Sargon said. “We can start the 17th… wait, no, we’re spoken for. The 18th.”

Muhdad had heard rumors about the following the Jackal Paw Blues Band was developing. He thought about the money, and it let him smile with some sincerity. “Welcome back to Cool!”

• • •

“Your new boss,” Colonel Speery said. “Are you going to be offended if I say he’s kind of a jackass?”

“You’re entitled to your opinion,” Chad replied. He’d been discharged from the hospital and put up at the Watergate on LDI’s dime. Speery had asked him to meet privately, and they’d eventually settled on lunch at Micho’s Lebanese Grill. They were both drinking black coffee.

“Doesn’t mean we can’t do business,” Speery added. “You can’t be in the defense game if you’re too finicky about who your friends are. Who are you under? Adams keeping you close, or did he put you under Trombley, or Dalca or who?”

“Sonia Dalca. I’m going to be joining her in Egypt, now that my eyes are healed up.”

“How are they, anyhow?”

Chad took off his glasses and polished them. “As good as they’re going to get. I can drive, but I have to read stuff off a screen so I can blow it up. Otherwise I get headaches.”

“Sorry to hear that.”

“You didn’t propose this lunch just to ask after my health, did you?”

“Did you hear about this chemical fire, happened at a rest stop on I-95?”

“Uh uh.”

“Google ‘rest stop fire I-95’ and,” Speery sighed, “‘Chemtrails.’ That gets you a good collection of the phone videos. You’ll see a big explosion of smoke, people running… and then it all dies down and there’s an unmarked white panel truck at the epicenter. But we’ve got the fire department and State Police reports, and there’s no mention of the truck. So it must have pulled out some time between when people stopped filming and when the troopers arrived.”

“What makes you think this has anything to do with LDI?”

“The very next day a white truck was found fifteen miles away from that rest stop. It was registered to one Maynard Calhoun, who was found dead in the back from a self-inflicted gunshot wound to the head. The same gun killed one Leonard Aster, who was also dead in the back of the truck. Spatter from Calhoun, however, indicates that he died before Aster. But what’s really interesting is the two other bodies in the truck.”

“Jesus.”

"One was a middle aged woman wearing robes covered with occult symbols from pre-dynastic Egypt. She had her neck broke, though not before she puked all over herself. Judging from the lividity, whoever did it had tiny hands, but according to the bone splintering in her spine, there was a lot of force applied. Her name was Dr. Joyce Perell. She was an anthropologist."

"And the fourth?"

"He was an MD from Baltimore, Gary Angstrom. Little hand marks on his jawline too, but his head was pulled off."

"How's that… that sounds impossible."

"Well, he was chained down on some kind of slab attached to the floor of the truck." Speery leaned back and crossed his arms.

"Still don't see how this connects to LDI," Chad said, taking a big sip of coffee. His mouth felt suddenly dry.

"Oh, didn't I tell you? They dusted it for prints, found some in the cab. Got a hit in the military database." Speery matched Chad's drink with a smaller one. "Did Sonia Dalca tell you she'd been in the Navy?"

"Wait, that… that can't…"

"Well, we'd like to question her, of course, but she's in Egypt. Near that Sphinx statue. Which looks like a mix-up critter of the sort that you say bit your arm, and that Adams wants to sell to my units."

"I haven't seen the LDI Amkhat," Chad said. "I still don't… I'm not sure what to think…"

"Me either," the Colonel replied. "But here's my card if you ever find anything you just have to tell me. Keep your eyes open."

"For all the good it'll do me," Chad murmured.

• • •

"I'm in Egypt," Dr. Vadim Bonwit muttered into a pay phone receiver. It had been hard to find and seemed antiquated in the age of burner phones, not to mention unsanitary. But his security briefing had insisted that it was more secure, as long as he took the right precautions—dialing first into an absurdly expensive anonymous re-dialer operating out of a 670 country code, using a voice scrambler that made him sound like a Cylon from the old 1980s "Battlestar Galactica"—so here he was at an airport, shielding the device between his mouth and the receiver with his body so that no one would get suspicious, hoping that the small gap was enough to keep germs at bay.

"Do you know why?"

"No one's told me, but I can guess. They wanted to make sure I was confident in my ability to drain Exudate."

"You're there with Dalca?"

"Yes."

"Any idea who, if anyone, is holding the reins on the Amkhat?"

"I don't even know if they have one here. It's probable, if they're planning something like that I-95 debacle. Not planning for it to be a debacle, of course, but…"

"I understand. If they want to grab… one of…"

"Yeah," Vadim said.

"Then they'll want an Amkhat."

"And me to drain it afterwards."

"Do you know what they're using to lure it?"

"No clue. Anything else you need from me?"

"No," Neter Henxet said. "I'll be in touch."

• • •

Chad flew to Egypt in a first class seat that was almost a self-contained apartment, cradling him to sleep and cocooning him with movie choices, while flight attendants coddled him with drinks and moist towelettes. It was something of a shock to deplane to the crowded chaos of Cairo International Airport. He'd been thoroughly interrogated by Homeland Security on his way out, repeatedly warned about political instability, but the customs and immigration process on arrival was brief, almost desultory. He wandered into the crowd of extremely diverse humanity, all reduced in his eyes to a blurry stream of brown and black and gold above the pastel blurs of their clothes.

But one face was clear and he stopped cold. He began pushing through the crowd, his jet lag forgotten.

"Hey," he called, then louder, "Hey!" But the visible man ignored him, turning away and starting to walk. Chad started to shove more aggressively, desperately trying to track which close-cropped black hair belonged to the one man he could really see. Someone snarled at him in Afrikaans but he ignored it, pushing past men in robes and women in jeans, stretching his hand out to grab his quarry by the shoulder, when someone seized him and propelled him back.

"Schei uit!"

The man who'd grabbed him was husky, drenched in sweat, with a deep tan, straight black hair and broad features.

Chad edged right and left, trying to get around him, and then the black man turned, murmuring "What?" with an accent that could have been Anglo or Scandinavian.

"I know you," Chad said, straining forward while the big man continued to interpose himself.

"I fear I do not know you," the man replied, brushing his finger over his mustache. "But be easy." He said something to the big fellow, something that ended with "…Walter."

"I've seen you… I can see you right now."

"I'm right in front of you." The man seemed to be enjoying himself. Peeking out of his shirt was a necklace of round beads and gold shapes.

"You don't understand, I was blind. My eyes, they're injured, but you I can see clearly and I know you from somewhere but I don't know where!"

Chad couldn't seem to help himself. He was fully aware of how crazy he sounded, but the words seemed to be speaking themselves without any input from his brain.

"What is your name, friend?" That voice, so warm, so confident…

"Chad Colver."

"That is not familiar to me. What brings you to Egypt?"

"It's… I can't talk about it."

"Ah. A man on a secret journey. What would you have of me, Chad Colver?"

Chad opened his mouth, then shut it.

"You are confused," the man said, his voice kind and somehow, not at all condescending. "It is a feeling I know well. But destiny has a way of bringing clarity to those who are worthy. Let me give you… my phone number…" he said, producing a pen and gesturing, without looking, for a piece of paper. His bulky companion fumbled about, glaring suspiciously at Chad, then produced a small and much-abused notepad.

"Yeah, sure, um… I've got… a business card."

In its own way, the mundanity of fishing out a business card was just as weird as being able to see this guy, whose precise, blocky printing named 'Steffen Kham.'

"You're here in Cairo on behalf of…" the clear man squinted and said, "Global Finance United?"

"Yeah," Chad said, feeling like a liar. He'd been told that was on the card for security reasons. He could not escape the sensation that the man before him knew he was being untruthful.

"Perhaps once we are settled in our hotels, we can meet for drinks."

"Yeah."

The silence between them seemed especially pregnant amidst the hustle and squawking of the airport crowd.

"I am going now, Chad Colver."

"Um… yeah. Sure. Of course."

Chad watched him go, then retrieved his own luggage (still the one duffel bag he'd taken to DC on Adams' plane) and squinted at the rows of drivers with large-font name signs on laser-printer paper.

"Mr. Colver?"

"You can call me Chad. Hi. Miss… Dalca sent you?"

"She did. Name's Barney Mullins. I'll be driving you."

• • •

Emerging from the airport, Walter said, "That was exceptionally strange."

"Strange are the ways of fate, Walter. There was purpose to that meeting. More, advantage, that man will…" Sefet Qam stopped, stock still.

"What is it?"

"Walter, remember that movie you showed me? The 'Star Wars'?"

"It's… just 'Star Wars,' Mighty One."

"Remember that part where Darth Vader says something like 'There is a presence I have not felt since…' and it turns out it's that old man with the sword of light?" The version Sefet Qam had seen had, of course, been translated into Dutch.

"…I remember."

"I am having a moment, Walter." Sefet Qam's smile was very white in the sunshine, set in his night-black face. "My chisel is nearby. This is a fated day, indeed."

• • •

"Ever been to Cairo before?" Barney asked.

"No. Where are we staying?"

"Nice quiet house. Garden on the roof, walled in." He told Chad the section of the city it was in, which meant nothing to him.

"You jet lagged?"

"Not too bad. I've been doing one of those sleep and diet adjustment things. As long as I don't nap this afternoon or hit the sack too early, I should be reset."

"Yeah? You like blues music?"

Chad shrugged.

"There's this band," Barney said. "Everyone's talking 'em up. Some kinda middle-eastern blues fusion thing called the Jackal Paw Band, something like that. Miss Dalca got tickets for tonight. Should be a treat."

• • •

There was a Special Thing nearby, Sabxent could nearly taste its wealth of reality, and it was hungry for it. Even though it had barely spent any of the realness it had gnawed out of the Delicious One in the truck, though it was still saving some from the four teens and the diary, it was never enough. Being real was all Sabxent wanted, but when it was, when it spent its precious moments in the world of light and color and sensation, there was always urgency, forever, moments and instants ticking by, never the luxury of rest. But so much better than unrealness.

This Special Thing was very special indeed, and Sabxent prowled the radius of its power. It couldn't light up the darkness of where Sabxent was, couldn't warm the nothingness, but it was like it could, it was the idea of color and heat in a space that was defined by having nothing, being nothing. Sabxent itself was little more than an idea, commanded into immateriality, denied its feed.

It considered (to the extent permitted by its feeble mind) materializing and killing someone nearby. The Special Thing made it possible for Sabxent to know when there were people, if they came close enough—down the street, in the building next door. But it suspected that Mistress Sonia Dalca would order it to remain unreal until summoned if she realized it was doing that. Did she know about the teenagers? Sabxent couldn't even begin to grasp how the Mistresses knew things, but it understood they were far, far more clever than it.

If only there was someway that Mistress Sonia Dalca could die without ordering Sabxent away. Without giving it a new Mistress.

Then Sabxent could kill and feed and find Special Things and be real without any restrictions on it.

After all, it wasn't as if she had ordered it to protect her from harm.

• • •

"Sabxent," Sonia said, mouth dry, "Appear before me. Silently."

With no noise, no disturbance of the things around it, Joyce's Space Monster beamed down. Sonia flinched, her lip curled as it fluttered its gross wings, as it ground its face into the ground before her like an eager dog.

She wanted booze, or a pill, but she was pretty sure you didn't want to be drunk when giving orders to something that could fly through walls, vanish at will, and fight as an equal against something that had done what Netty Henshaw did to Gary Angstrom.

It wasn't as bad, seeing it the second time. She was more prepared. She didn't break down and sob and lose her composure. But it was still bad enough. Way worse than bad enough, frankly.

"Sabxent. There is a… thing, in here," she said, pointing at the lock box at her feet. She was in the garden on top of their rented apartment building, a lovely private refuge, and the brutalitarian efficiency of the strongbox looked especially

ugly next to the fountain, between the plants. “Do you understand? An important thing.”

The creature’s dead, gelid eyes rolled in their sockets. A centipede felt out of its nostril. She couldn’t decide if that meant it understood.

“A creature is going to come for this thing. Like Netty Henshaw, a thing, a creature like her. Netty Henshaw? You remember her? You bit her?”

It started to pant. Creepy-crawlies writhed over its teeth and tongue.

“When that creature comes, you materialize and bite it, but don’t kill it. Don’t kill it. Like you did with Netty Henshaw. Don’t kill the creature but fight it, make it weak. Do you understand?”

It fluttered its wings, bent forward on its forelegs, snorted.

“The creature is named Sefet Qam. This is a picture of him. This is Sefet Qam. Fight Sefet Qam when he comes for the thing in this box. Fight Sefet Qam but do not kill him. Those are your orders. Show me you understand.”

Sabxent lunged forward and Sonia let out a shriek, but it had only gone after the photo. It had snatched the image—almost delicately, for all its bulk and clumsy construction—shaken it once, then dropped it to the ground and pinned it with a hoof.

“Good… Sabxent. Good job.” For the first time, it reminded Sonia of a dog, a big puppy that just wanted to please. But for all that, there was no way she was going to pet it.”

“Good Space Monster.”

It snorted and panted. Centipedes flew. No fucking way she was going to pet it.

• • •

“Wait,” Amy said, “I can hand out tickets, right?”

“You want to comp someone?” Fuad said, surprised.

“Give me one! Give me a ticket!”

He fumbled with his pockets, and she snatched the paper token out of his hand with a rudeness he’d never seen in her before. She raced down the street. As he watched, she accosted two foreigners, one black and slender, one a dark white, portly and sweaty. She pressed the ticket on one, standing on her tiptoes. Every movement of her body, every posture as she was still, bespoke frantic excitement. When the black man took the ticket, it seemed that it was all she could do to keep from clapping her hands in joy.

When she came back, Fuad was still watching, bemused.

“Just who was that?”

"I have no idea," Amy said. "But he's coming to the show!"

• • •

"Who are these people who just come up to you and give you things, or want things from you?" Walter asked.

"They are part of my destiny." If Walter hadn't been raised to regard Sefet Qam as an inscrutable, incalculably powerful and horrendous deity, he'd have found the statement a little smug.

• • •

"So… you like your room here?"

"It's adequate."

Chad paced back and forth. The big guy, Walter, watched him through narrowed eyes. 'Steffen Qam' was sitting in another chair, looking like a professionally posed and lighted ad for the The Gap t-shirt he was wearing.

"Chad, you seem uneasy."

"I've been in a lot of… weird stuff lately."

Walter looked back and forth between the two others, clearly not understanding much of the English.

"It is a weird world and a weird age."

"See, I'm not sure who I should trust. I think I saw you in a dream. You know? What's that about?"

"Was there a golden ankh?"

Chad looked away. "I don't really remember."

"Chad. Here."

When Chad turned back, he was shocked to see golden light spilling from between the man's black hands, as if he was holding a cluster of brilliant LEDs only… the light was sourceless. It just was.

And it was in the shape of a looped cross.

"Chad, the ways of Fate are strange. But they drew you to me for a reason. I don't know it, any more than you do. But trust me, when I say to trust it."

The gold light flared, then died. Chad blinked, then slowly pulled off his glasses.

"You fixed them," he said. "You fixed my eyes."

"Tell me about the weird stuff, Chad."

So Chad did.

• • •

“This place is seriously called ‘Cool’? Wow. How’s this guy think he can get away with that?” Vadim asked.

“I dunno. Maybe he’s not relying on Google to steer custom his way?” Barney suggested.

Sonia didn’t say anything. She was biting her fingernails and flinching whenever someone touched her, which was often, because the club was packed. It was an enviable collection of women in heels and Parisian dresses, men in tailored suits with thick gold wristwatches, half of them drinking, half of them pawing at late-model smartphones.

“Where’s the new guy?” Barney continued.

“His name’s Colver,” Sonia said.

“Just call him Chad,” Vadim said, as if ‘Chad’ was some sly and hilarious insult.

“He said he’d be here. Wants to stay up late enough to reset his internal clock or whatever.”

At that moment, the Jackal Paw Blues Band came onstage, to a cordial roll of cultivated applause.

Their sudden success had not yet built up enough momentum for a recording contract, but they had splurged on clothes. Amy’s dress was bright, but of conservative cut, and her complimentary headscarf was from Hermès. Fuad’s brown suit and brogans were old, but the shirt was blinding white, tailored to make him look imposing instead of portly, and his maroon scarf was Milanese silk. Sargon, on the other hand, had gone in for sharkskin shoes, a tan linen houndstooth suit, a black shirt with a vermillion tie and matching pocket square, topped by a pork-pie hat.

All three of them had matching black Ray-Bans.

“Hello Cairo. We’d like to welcome you to our… triumphant return to Cool!” Sargon announced.

“I don’t think we have any return clientele, Sargon,” Fuad said.

“Let’s give ‘em something to wanna come back for. One, two, one two three…!”

Then the blues happened.

All those prosperous Egyptians who were counting on their money or connections to keep them safe during the chaos got an earful of songs about lying women, lost hopes and levees breaking. They got more quiet and less self-satisfied, but there was a paradoxical comfort in it too. “You got it good,” the music said. “That’s no guarantee it won’t all be dust tomorrow. But like while you got it, and when you lose it… well, you can always sing about it.”

They were two songs in when a handsome black man slipped in, and Amy's soulful warbling hitched dramatically and came back twice as intense.

Sonia glanced over, blinked, and turned pale.

"That's the guy," she said, jabbing an elbow into Barney's ribs.

"What?" He squinted. "Could be… are you sure?"

"That's the guy!" she insisted. "Vadim, you have your tools?"

"They're back at the apartment, you can't… I don't haul them everywhere they're gold, they weigh…"

"Shush!" She was chewing on her own lips. "Barney, you're armed?"

"…yeah, but you can't be serious about grabbing him right here…"

"Trust me, this place will empty out fast if I make my move. Crap. Crap. Where's the strongbox?"

"Back at the building with my gear," Vadim said, rapidly looking between the two of them. "You know, why don't I go get set up?"

"You're not going anywhere," Sonia snarled, dragging out her phone and feverishly poking it.

"Calling Colver?"

"Yeah."

• • •

"Look," Chad said insistently, in his sub-par Arabic, "My friends are in there."

The response was extremely rapid and fluent, but the doorman's skepticism was similar from velvet ropes the world over. Then his phone rang.

"I'm outside," he told Sonia, "They won't… yeah, come to the front and explain things to the doorman."

When she'd brought him in, he was unnerved by how haggard and haunted she looked. "Okay," she said to him, pulling him aside in the cramped entryway, "The target is here, the friggin' living god is right in this room and we are not ready but I do not want to explain to Adams that we were right by him and didn't try anything."

"Who's the guy?" Chad asked, though he felt a sinking sensation of certainty.

"End of the bar, black guy, blue shirt."

Yeah.

"Have you considered asking him over to the table?"

"…what?"

"Look, this place is crowded, he's a good looking guy, go up to him and bump him and see if he speaks English. If he does, act like that's real special, ask him to come over and meet the guys, maybe give him a line like one of us is trying to hit on you—blame me if you have to—and he'd be doing you a favor."

She stared at him. “You think that could work?”

He shrugged. “Does he know any of us? Has he seen any of us? We’ve got cover stories.”

“You stay back at the bar,” she said. “Wait, no, you go to the table and I’ll pretend I don’t know you guys. Watch me but don’t make it obvious… I’ll try to get him alone.” With her bitten nails, chapped lips and harried expression, Sonia was an unlikely candidate for seductress, but they were improvising.

“She’s doing what?” Vadim asked, goggling, when Chad arrived to explain.

“That’s not ever going to work,” Barney said, calmly using the screen of his phone as a makeshift mirror to watch her approach at the bar.

“All she has to do is stay by him during the show and keep an eye on him. We can dry-gulch him in the street outside and drag him into an alley,” Chad said.

“You really haven’t seen how these things operate at all, have you?” Barney replied.

“Doesn’t she have… one of those things?” Vadim asked. “One of those chimera monsters?”

“Above my pay grade,” Barney said.

Incredibly, Sonia seemed to be relaxing at the bar, chatting a little with the mystery man and then listening to the blues. And they were good blues. The men of LDI, Barney and Chad and Vadim, they all listened and enjoyed and the music let them let go, stop anticipating, and accept that the world played rough and things changed suddenly, but that was all right as long as you could afford a harmonica.

What they didn’t expect was for the singer to jump off the stage at the end of their set and fight her way to the bar, to Sonia and their ‘target.’

As the place began to empty out, Barney’s phone vibed to life in his hands.

“Text from the boss,” he said. “Our guy’s going backstage to meet the band. Sonia’s going to follow in five and kick things off.” Barney rubbed his face. “Looks like it’s on.”

Chad swore, soft and flat.

“Bonwit, get the van, bring it along. Chad, you’re with me if that’s all right.”

Chad nodded. They stood. Vadim joined the crush of people heading out into the late night dim.

“You strapped?” Barney asked, and got another nod.

They headed over by the bathrooms, eyes on Sonia as she watched the stage door, then looked at the exiting crowd, then at the people still hanging around the club, talking, laughing, drinking, their excited gestures indicating how fine the show had been.

“Wait for it,” Barney whispered, then shook his head as Sonia decided that the club was as clear as it was going to get.

"We're on," he said, slipping his hand inside his jacket. Frowning, Chad followed.

"If this happens," Barney said, eyes glued to Sonia as she slowly neared the backstage door, one hand in her unfashionably large purse, "It's going to go down fast."

A heavyset man was by the door, holding up a restraining hand towards Sonia. He said something in Arabic.

"Sabxent," Chad heard her say, "If that man in there is the special one, get him now."

Behind the door, there was a roar, Syrian oaths, and a shriek from Amy's exceptionally loud, clear voice.

• • •

Backstage, things had been quite pleasant for several minutes. Amy's guest had indicated a keen interest in the Blue Nile and was funny and charming, despite the weird tones and rhythm of his Arabic.

Then, with no warning, something simply shambled out of the shadows, out of a corner by a fusebox where there wasn't room for a child to hide, let alone this… thing.

At first it looked like a bull, but the great wings, bigger than any bird, spoiled that outline. So did the snapping, slavering jaw. So did its unwholesome movements, so unlike the natural grace or awkwardness of an animal. It looked like a pile of garbage giving way before a bulldozer's blade, it didn't step so much as stumble, nor flap so much as spasm. Its reek, in the enclosed space, was paralyzing.

Amy screamed, Sargon swore and the monster sank its fangs into their guest's arm. The black man—'Steffen,' as he'd introduced himself—made no outcry, nor did blood flow from his injury. He jerked his arm together, dragging the beast forward a few inches. Despite its frantic wing flutters that sent every loose, light object in the room tumbling through the air, despite a backblast strong enough to send Amy to her knees and knock over Fuad's bass case, his one arm pulled it forward into a crushing uppercut from the other.

The creature staggered back, its jaw unhinged, bleeding… no, it wasn't blood but a cascade of insects, all over the floor and the stranger's arm, Sargon grabbed Amy's shoulder and jerked her back from them while Fuad (always one to eye the exit) charged the fire door and slammed it open.

Then the door to the club opened. A woman and two men forced their way inside, brandishing heavy handguns.

• • •

Sabxent rejoiced. Netty Henshaw was nothing next to this Delicious One! He was soaked in realness, it coursed through him and the pain of getting its jaw knocked hard was nothing next to the creature's lust for more. With a great clap of its wings, it reared up, plunged forward, pinned the Delicious One down and slammed its remaining upper teeth down into his forehead.

• • •

Barney had come in first, then Sonia, and Chad brought up the rear, holding his own gun in one hand and the pistol he'd taken off the security man in the other.

He saw the monster and he knew he'd remember it every time he folded cloth too fast, the hideous sweep of its wings, like the sinuousness of the thing in Djibouti, the wrongness, the wrongness…

…and it was trampling the man that had restored his sight.

"Sabxent," Sonia said. "Don't kill him. Don't kill him! We still need to drain him!"

Chad had thought a lot about LDI and Sonia and what Speery had told him and while the idea that if their enemies had these things, the US needed to get them too… that had made sense, in America, in the hospital, over lunch at Micho's. But the wrongness. No.

He couldn't be a part of anything that was a part of this. So he raised a gun to the back of Sonia's head and pulled the trigger. It was only after she collapsed that he realized he'd used the doorman's weapon.

Barney spun on him, eyes wide, but the smoking pistol was already beside his cheek before he'd brought his arms around.

"Drop it," Chad said quietly.

"You idiot," Barney said. "She was the only one who could control that thing! It's going to kill us all now!" But he obeyed.

None of them were paying attention as the Jackal Paw Blues Band ran out the back door. A van idled in the alley. Its driver watched them go, but said and did nothing.

• • •

Sefet Qam felt strangely detached as the creature, the foulness, the Amkhat, greedily sucked the mystic strength out of his simulated body. He stared into its eyes and could see his own face. He was shocked to see he didn't look angry, just sad.

It was inhuman, abhorrent, an insult to existence… and in that moment, Sefet Qam realized he felt sorry for it. It hadn't asked to be real, in a world it could only insult and destroy. No more than he had asked to be enslaved, eternally, by authorities he still barely understood after thousands upon thousands of years.

In that strange instant, he relaxed his guard. He let go. He stopped resisting and let it drink deep.

The Amkhat immediately let go.

• • •

Sabxent was fighting, and then suddenly it wasn't fighting.

For the first time in its existence, it was not being subject to orders, it wasn't being constrained or banished, it wasn't being made to disgorge its hard-won moments of realness for someone else's benefit.

For the first time, someone was kind to it, and its Mistress was dead.

Sabxent sat back and looked on the Delicious One with adoration.

• • •

"What the shit is it doing?" Barney asked.

"Don't know, don't care." Chad had stepped back and leveled out his aim. Barney had his arms raised.

"Thank you Chad," the man with the impossibly mangled arm and face said. But as Barney watched, the arm straightened and the face knit itself back together.

"You traitorous little shit," Barney said to Chad.

"It takes some balls to say that under the gun, Barney."

"I'm a dead man," Barney said, staring flatly at Steffen, their target. "Might as well speak my mind."

"Treachery to your cause is more honorable than leaguing with those who make such horrors as this," Steffen said, "And there has been enough slaughter this night. Chad, please let this man go."

Chad stepped back. Barney, his expression one of total shock, bolted through the door without a backwards glance.

"Poor beast," Steffen said, laying a hand aside the monster's neck. "You are sinned against most of all. Your existence is the sin. I shall have to destroy you, Amkhat."

The thing whined, an unnaturally deep sound.

"Return to amxaibit, oh wound and wounded one. Remain there until I summon you, please. I shall find others like me to give you oblivion's peace. I fear it is the only peace your kind can know."

Head hanging, the creature disappeared.

Sefet Qam stood. "Chad," he said, "I suspect you and your people have something that belongs to me."

• • •

Two days and nights passed.

• • •

“I still don’t trust this new follower,” Walter complained as they got on the plane.

“Walter, envy ill fits you. He is courageous and has acted righteously in the pinch of desperate action.”

“I wish I had been there.”

“All ended well, loyal priest. Who is to say that your presence might not have changed things for ill?” Seeing the Greenlander’s hurt expression, Sefet Qam put a hand on his arm and said, “Through no fool doing or poor intent of yours! But only because the whims of fate are strange, and any great thing can be made small, or any small thing can become great.”

“What are you guys talking about?” Chad asked.

“Your membership in our endeavor,” Sefet Qam replied. “I was reassuring Walter that you can be trusted and are of great value.”

“Great. And why are we going to Greenland?”

“There are some things I must secure,” Sefet Qam said, and managed not to reassure himself by patting the turquoise chisel that rested in his suitcoat pocket.

“The guitar, right?”

“Not only that, but yes. That’s why it’s in carry-on luggage.”

“What’s so special about it?”

“I’ll explain later. But let us just say the Blue Nile was lost, and I am returning it home.”

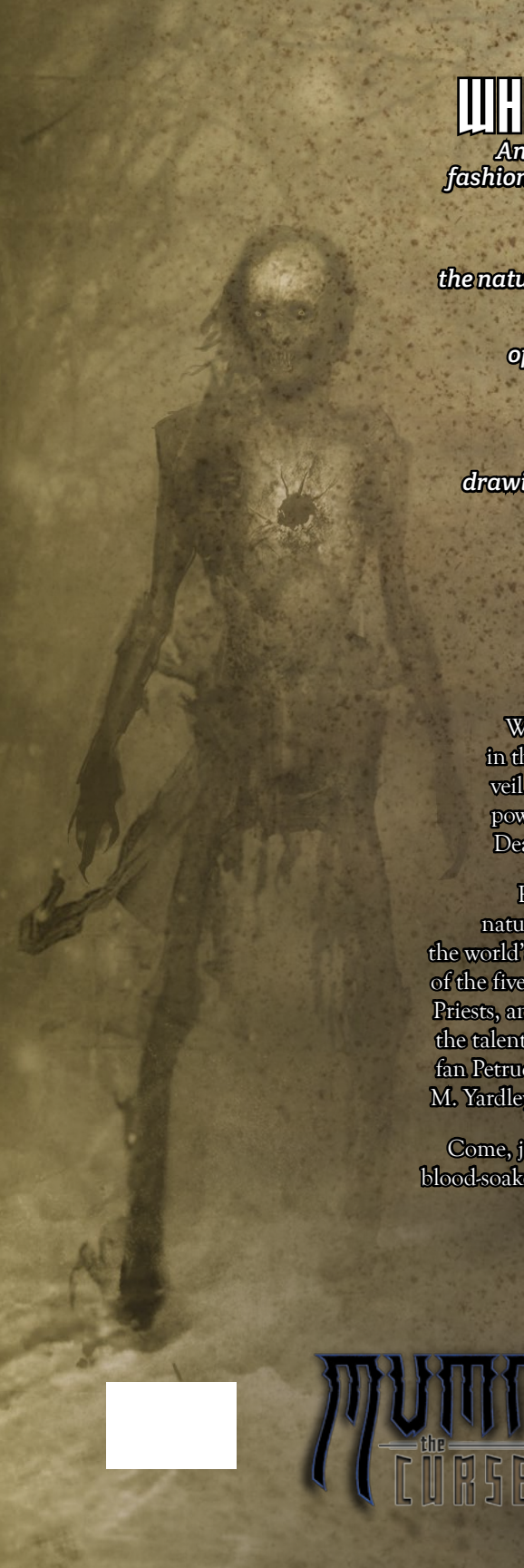
Once they were wheels up and he’d had a beer, Chad asked what was really on his mind.

“Are you sure that thing can’t come back?”

“Certain,” Sefet Qam replied. “It… cost me to tame it. Cost me greatly. To treat such a thing as anything other than a distress to the world is… anathema among my colleagues. I assuaged their suspicions somewhat when I gave it over to be destroyed, but…” he sighed. “I will never more be guildmaster.”

• • •

Across the border, Dr. Vadim Bonwit finally found a pay phone.



WHAT IS THE BLUE NILE?

An image of rare beauty and terror,
fashioned of the unbound portion of an angry,
deathless soul.

A very special child who violates
the natural laws of the living and the dead alike.

An ancient sculpture that
opens pathways of glory to anyone
who dares possess it.

An instrument of profound
sound and meaning,
drawing the ever-hungry to its prescient wave.

TO KNOW THE NILE, KNOW ITS CURSE

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Each tale is a novella, spooling out the unique nature of the Blue Nile within its encapsulated view of the world's setting, and each story touches on a different one of the five Arisen guilds: The Alchemists, Laborers, Masons, Priests, and Scribes. Five dark turns at the wheel, helmed by the talented hands of veteran talespinners Lisa Morton, Stefan Petrucha, Malcolm Sheppard, Greg Stolze, and Mercedes M. Yardley.

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