

Submission Beneath the Sands

by Kolik

I

Elynna looked over the airship's railing as it began its descent into Luxor. Normally she loved flying by air, watching the pale desert dunes roll away beneath her and trying to spot every shimmering oasis scattered across the sand like sapphires. She loved the feeling of a warm breeze blowing through her long white hair and across her coat, ruffling the dark rings that stood out from the white-gray fur covering her tall, statuesque physique. She loved turning heads as the men and women aboard tried to hide their stares, transfixed by the sight of both her and her weapons – sometimes a bow, sometimes a sword, always a few knives within easy reach. Beastmen weren't unusual in Egypt, but a snow leopard like herself was exotic and alluring, inspiring whispered guesses at what had brought her so far from her people's mountain homes.

Today was not normal. Elynna drew out an envelope from a pocket, joylessly reading the letter within it for the hundredth time.

Elly,

I'm off on another trip to Egypt, this time solo. Hell with those stuffed jackets at the H.S. and hell with their funding. I've been doing this long enough I can poke around a dig site without a hundred signatures giving me permission.

I don't expect this to be dangerous work, but I'm sending you this note on a clockwork pigeon and you should get it the day after I complete my survey. I trust no-one else with this knowledge or responsibility.

But in my estimation, the next time I see you it'll be me buying the beer for a change.

—Thomas

The word *permission* had been scrawled so hard it had nearly torn the paper, which made Elynna sigh. Thomas Gladstone was a man who took exactly one answer for important questions: an enthusiastic Yes, followed by a toast to the generous patron of archaeology for having such good sense.

He was handsome and gregarious, which helped him make friends, and absolutely devoted to the pursuit of ancient history, which helped him lose them.

There was a map scrawled on the back of the letter that showed four sites scattered along offshoots of the Nile northeast of Luxor. Three of them were less than a day out from the city, but the fourth worried Elynna. It was nestled in a crook of the Red Sea Hills, nearly a hundred miles from anything resembling civilization.

The letter had reached her home a day ago, and she had called every hotel in Luxor trying to get ahold of Thomas. It had taken a day to travel to Egypt on short notice. Perhaps already too late – in his line of work “missing” was usually a polite way of saying “didn’t leave a body.” The leopard woman shook her head. Her hair billowed in the breeze.

The airship touched down with a jerk, knocking everyone but Elynna a few steps to the side. She put the letter back in her pocket and strode to the gangplank. There was work to do.

Luxor was an ancient city that had been revitalized by modern technology – the power of steam and gasoline had transformed much of the surrounding desert into fertile farmland in a few short years, and there was population boom underway. Every street was crushed full of hurrying and shouting people who weaved around camel- and horse-drawn carts full of goods tied with precarious strings.

Elynna was meeting a contact on the far side of the city, and she wanted to run there with every fiber of her being but the zig-zagging streets and alleys had been built, maintained, demolished, and rebuilt over centuries. She could scarcely cover more than twenty or thirty yards at a time before being interrupted by a cluster of market stalls that forced her to adjust her course. After an hour of steady walking, she stepped around a rickshaw and nearly bumped into the solid brick side of an old military fort, covered with posters in flowing script that fought for any scrap of attention. A bazaar.

The building lay directly between Elynna and her destination, and there was so much commotion she couldn’t even see to the foundation’s corners on either side; there was no telling how long it would take to circumvent. She took a deep breath and pushed through the damask curtain, standing inside and

allowing her vision to adjust to the smoky gloom. The smells of food, coffee, cooking oil, and spice hung thick in the air. Particles of sand and dust drifted lazily through colored beams of light that pierced the red and purple silk covers a few feet overhead. Luxor's commotion faded away as Elynna cut through the center of the bazaar, ignoring outstretched hands and the enticements they held. It was the work of minutes to find her way to the far side and the blinding sunlight beyond the curtain. She prepared to step out.

"A lovely leopard walks past me, does she?" Elynna stopped and glanced to her left. Nestled in the corner next to the exit was a stall that looked little different from the rest lining the sides of the bazaar. A man sat behind it, canine and unassuming. She couldn't place his species. "The leopard stalks mountains and high snows, but today she is blinded by sweet-smoke and candy glass." He met eyes with her and winked.

"What are you selling?" Elynna walked over, puzzled enough to be distracted for the moment.

"The leopard will learn I am only a seller of needs, and she needs little." Elynna looked down and realized the wooden surface which should have been filled with trinkets and jewelry was bare. That didn't make sense. She could have sworn she saw it covered in loose objects out of the corner of her eye when he had first hailed her – but she wasn't sure she she could name any single one.

"How . . . ?"

"The leopard has been too long away from clear ice, she has." He smirked with a jawline that didn't quite make physical sense, carnivore on one side and herbivore on the other.

Suddenly Elynna knew. She leaned forward and grabbed ahold of his shoulder. "You're a jackal."

The man broke into a sharp laugh as his fur and body melted, shuffling through canine species before arriving at a solid russet with a black stripe down his back. "The leopard has eyes to pierce the snow and sands alike, she does." He rummaged beneath the stall and brought up a strange object: a silver rod about a foot long and no wider than Elynna's finger, with a glass bubble on the end a few

inches across. The bubble was divided into four parts, each filled with grayish oil shimmering in slightly different colors.

Elynna raised an eyebrow. “What is this?”

“The leopard will find a bright sky in her hand, if she can strike true.” The jackal man tapped the rod against his knuckles, jostling the chemicals to a turbulent shine before letting them settle. “Does she see?”

Elynna took the rod and looked it over. Obviously some kind of old world chemistry that had not survived the advent of the flashlight – hit it against something solid and it lights up. An antique at best, to set on a mantle and inspire stories for grandchildren. Not worth her time or attention, least of all in a desert where the “bright sky” was an ever-present danger.

Yet the old ways had their own appeal. She brought out her coinpurse. “How much?”

“The leopard does not know the dance of prices and words. She limps.”

“I’ve no time for haggling. *How much?*”

The man seemed sad. “For the running leopard, five Ducats.”

Another oddity; she was a hurried customer with too much money and he had asked for barely enough to cover a day’s worth of food, but Elynna’s curiosity had run dry and she wanted to get moving again. She counted out the coins and stowed the skyrod in her pack before walking into the sun and leaving the darkness behind.

II

Elynna's contact was the owner of a motorcycle and car lot, part mechanic and part salesman. She had told him she'd need to rent a bike and buy several days' worth of supplies, which he had been happy to provide – his costs were steep but Elynna knew from experience that any other dealer would be twice as expensive. She had almost been free of him when the man had casually inquired as to the cause of her obvious hurry. She had told him.

He had bristled at the suggestion of her riding one of his best machines across hundreds of miles of open desert and demanded she pay extra for the wear she would be putting on the bike. She had thrown her coinpurse at his chest hard enough to knock him breathless and driven straight off the lot.

Going straight across the dunes was impossible, so she was forced to follow the Nile and its offshoots. She had to make frequent stops to orient herself using both a real map and Thomas's scrawl, and the sensation of hours ticking away wore at Elynna as much as the merciless sun. The first two sites were barren, with little more than some bootprints and what might have been the remnants of a firepit. The next site was more fruitful, containing enough water to support a tree which had fresh markings cut into its bark.

It was a simple arrow barely four inches across, but there was no misunderstanding: it pointed directly into the Red Sea Hills and the fourth site buried somewhere within them. Elynna got back on her bike and rode off. The leopard woman arrived at the Hills with perhaps an hour of daylight left, either enough time to make a sturdy camp or to investigate a few square miles. She chose the latter, climbing to the top of a tall rocky berm to get a look around. There was nothing but ocean to the east and desert to the west, while the north held the same hard, featureless mountains that defined the Egyptian coast.

The south was similar to the north with the addition of a sandstorm roiling its way towards her. Elynna peered through a set of binoculars – it wasn't a big enough storm to flay her skin off, but without proper shelter it would choke her to death and render the bike useless. She descended quickly,

but the storm was nearly on her by the time she twisted the throttle and sped off into the interior of the Hills. She could only hope to find cover.

The steep, winding valleys that had been hewn into the recalcitrant Hills mostly led nowhere, doubling back on themselves in snarls. The air billowed with sand, obscuring Elynna's vision and forcing her to slow down lest she miss her only chance. Then, at last, clutching her collar to her mouth and rubbing sand from her goggles, she saw it.

What *it* was she couldn't say, but there was some kind of flash or sparkle – maybe a trick of the sun's bloody rays catching on something in the rock. Elynna veered closer and found a tall crevice before her that led to a pitch black cave with a lantern hanging from a piton set into the rock, long since smashed to sparkling shards by the fury of the storm. The lantern was obviously new. Thomas had been here. She didn't even wait a heartbeat before lighting a flare and tossing it forward, then dismounting the bike and walking it in.

Elynna was a tall woman, well above six feet not counting her ears, and the cave was perhaps five feet tall at its highest steeped point. She was forced to hold her breath and walk at an uncomfortable angle to get through. Leaving the bike and its supplies at the entrance was simply not an option, so she pulled the machine and well over a hundred pounds of water and food deeper into the cave. The sounds of scratching metal and burlap mixed with her own grunts and echoed forwards and back, punctuated by a short clatter whenever she got near enough to the flare to kick it deeper.

The walls pulled away, opening into a larger space. At last the howling desert wind relinquished her. She was exhausted but safe. Elynna had a quick look around the room: there was the roughly triangular exit behind her, but the opposite wall was unnaturally flat. In it there was a tunnel that reached from ground level up to her waist.

Elynna crouched in front of the tunnel and examined it. It was no more than three feet in diameter, too even to be a natural formation in the pitch black stone. A bit of blazing red light from the flare bounced off the smooth walls, showing the tunnel curved gently to the left a few feet in. The

leopard woman held the flare forward and frowned, watching smoke collect against the roof. Cheap chemicals, probably stored in a wet box somewhere – but that hadn't stopped the dealer from charging her for the "robust first aid and emergency kit." Elynna snorted. She would choke soon enough if she brought it with her, and her entire pack would be too bulky. Her sword, bow, and arrows were out of the question.

She tossed the flare outside the cave, then removed all her gear and clothing except for a thin shirt, pants, and a knife strapped to her thigh, with the skyrod hanging through a belt loop on her opposite hip. She secured a rope around the bike's front fork and let the slack dangle from a hook on her belt. Lastly, she brought out a pendant from beneath her shirt. At the touch of a button, a small light bulb lit up, providing a weak but warm yellow light that ventured a couple feet. The light wasn't ideal for spelunking, but as she knelt and crawled into the tunnel her feline vision was more than able to make do.

The walls and roof were smooth but the bottom had been worn to a rougher texture over the years. Elynna figured the tunnel for an aqueduct or some kind of sewer system, and her adventurous mind couldn't help but wander as she imagined what architecture lurked above and below her. To carve through the interior of a mountain was no easy feat, and the people who had done it must have had priceless secrets of stonecutting and other crafts stashed away deep within their vaults. The allure of plumbing so deep beneath the earth and emerging a rich and renowned man was obvious – no wonder Thomas hadn't wanted to share his hunch with anyone.

Then a soft, rasping sound came to her ears. Elynna stopped and listened, but there was nothing more. She resisted the urge to call out. It could have been Thomas heaving his last breath, but this place was ancient – no telling what kinds of wildlife would have made it their home over the years.

The tunnel curved a couple more times before coming to a room. Elynna stood, letting out a breath she hadn't realized she had been holding, and encountered a new problem: more tunnels. The room was a junction, a perfect cube eight or nine feet across. The tunnel Elynna had just come from

was the only one in its wall, but the other three were pockmarked with dark portals that led off in different directions, some vertical and some horizontal. Any markings that indicated where one might lead had long since worn away. The leopard woman frowned.

In the following hours, Elynna stood up to her full height once every twenty minutes at most. The rest of the time was spent kneeling and crawling through tunnels, mentally mapping out their connections and trying to keep straight the relative location of each junction room. Every new one she crawled into was identical to the last, branching off countlessly into God only knew where, and her rope only allowed her to explore two hundred feet in any direction before she was forced to retreat. When she had tried to scratch a few cursory markings into the stone her knife had come back chipped with nothing to show for it. At the very least she wasn't worried about cave-ins.

Finally, Elynna stopped in a junction to catch her breath and stretch her cramped limbs. The tunnels leading outward were unremarkable except for one which seemed to be going north-east as near as she could tell. It was completely straight, and if she strained her vision she could just barely see the far end. It must have been at least seventy feet. She had nearly looked away and begun to catalog the other offshoots when something caught her eye. She squatted in front of the tunnel, peering into its depths. Even her impressive vision could just barely make out the far room, and trying to guess what might lie in it was impossible. Nothing was moving, so what had she seen? It came again, a flicker of some pale, warm color. But this time the whatever-it-was in the far room didn't go back out of sight, instead staying in the center of the tunnel. Was it quivering, or was that just a trick of the distance? Impossible to say for sure with the dangling necklace light coloring everything yellow.

She felt a tug at her hip. She blinked and look backwards. The rope had reached its end again. Elynna pulled herself out of the tunnel and took stock of things.

Fact one: it was unthinkable dangerous to go off-line, especially on a rescue mission in ancient and unmapped caves. Fact two: she had more branches to explore in the previous junction, which

wouldn't require her to go past the end of her rope. Fact three: for all she knew, the pale color was some kind of poisonous bioluminescent fungus and best avoided.

Fact four: it was the closest thing to a clue she had found in all her searching.

Elynna brought one hand up to her brow, normally fair but now creased with worry. There was one conclusion she was drawing from these facts: the pale pink thing she had seen could have been Thomas's hand, grasping up at a handhold while he lay exhausted and dehydrated in some forsaken cave just out of her view. Was it crazy? Maybe, but she would need to rest soon and the thought of compressing herself into another winding black vise just to backtrack empty-handed was abominable.

She knew Thomas. He wouldn't hesitate in a situation like this if she were in trouble.

Elynna untied the rope from her belt and draped it along the floor, just reaching the mouth of the tunnel. Elynna folded herself into a crawl and began to move forward. The pink of Thomas's hand was no longer visible, and she began to hurry as best she could. The stone near the cave entrance had been cold but this deep beneath the mountains it was like ice, sapping her body heat even through her clothing and her warm body fur. By the time she reached the other end, she had actually begun to shiver – her energy must have been lower than she thought. With a huff, Elynna heaved herself through the tunnel exit and sprang onto her feet in the far room.

It was empty. The leopard woman poked around, carefully examining every square inch of the floor, walls, ceiling, and other offshoots – but no details emerged. She had no idea what had made the colored light. She turned back the way she had come with a heavy sigh, berating herself for being so optimistic and naïve. The first day of searching had come to an end fruitless, but she had a clear plan of action: rest, document her findings, and tackle the caves with a renewed sense of responsibility. All that she needed to do was follow the rope back to her bike and allow herself a few hours' sleep.

But when she returned to the room where she had left it, the rope was gone. Elynna was too stunned to get to her feet. She just knelt in the portal's mouth, staring at the ground where she knew she had left it not more than five minutes ago. "What . . .?"

That was all she managed before the rasping sound came again, much louder and much closer.

She looked up and saw a large, serpentine head emerge from the wall across from her.

III

Elynna froze. In the light bulb's dim glow, the snake's pale white head threw wavering shadows onto the ceiling as it peered this way and that. The beast should have seen her instantly, but it seemed to be searching for something, casting all around the room aimlessly. It took Elynna a moment to realize why. Of course – it was blind! There was absolutely no light within the ruins, so its eyes must have atrophied over the years spent in blackness.

And indeed it must have been years. The serpent was massive, its head easily three times the size of hers. White scales were pulled taught over the skull, standing out against the mute black stone that encased the rest of the snake's body. Elynna could see it disappear back into the tunnel, thicker than her leg and heavy enough to sag where it touched rock. She would be in deep trouble if it caught her.

The snake's tongue flicked out and Elynna cursed herself. It might not be able to see her, but it would certainly get her scent if she didn't do something. She held her breath and began to inch forward.

"You clamor in the dark, searching for something dear." Elynna hadn't expected a voice but she shot to her feet, no longer needing to pretend at stealth. The snake slithered forward, exposing a neck, a collarbone, and a very human-looking set of arms. Another foot and Elynna saw a pair of large, pendulous breasts swing down, then the curves of a distinctly feminine waist.

The snake woman descended to the floor and "stood" roughly at eye level with Elynna. Her breasts were each as large as Elynna's head, and they sagged when she moved upright. A cobra's hood flowed down from her head, giving the impression of hair, while her torso invited the leopard woman's eyes to roam over her scales, shifting and reflecting little motes of light on every scale.

Elynna had heard stories of the snake people of Egypt but had dismissed them as ancient legends. "You're a naga," she breathed, drinking in the contrast between the creature's reptilian and human qualities. This was the discovery of a lifetime.

Her pale, empty eyes made her expression inscrutable. "I am called *Sssilthra*."

Elynna cleared her throat. “My name’s Elynna. I am sorry to enter your home without announcing myself. I did not realize there was anyone living here – I feared there might be wild animals or some other danger.”

“Such thoughts are only normal. The slitherways are cold and distant from my kingdom’s heart.”

“Slitherways? These rooms with all the interconnecting tunnels?”

Silthra nodded. “Yes. They run deep into the stone at the mountains’ roots, connecting the far reaches below.”

Elynna looked around herself with newfound awe. “So these are causeways that your people used for travel. No wonder I had such a hard time navigating them.” She blinked, reminded of her current predicament. “Silthra, I was using a rope to find my way back to the entrance. I left it here a short time ago, but now it’s gone.”

“The tunnel beasts crawl within the cold, snapping up heat and noise. I have known them for many ages of slumber. You are lucky you were not bound in the rope when it was dragged off to their nests far below.” The naga swept her head down to the floor, flicking her tongue out and roaming across the stone tile with her hands. “Yes, your mark is strong here. But there is another.”

Elynna glanced behind her into the straight tunnel. “What is this other?”

“The mark of a man.”

Elynna leaned down. “I’ve been looking for a man! Do you know where he is?”

Silthra raised herself to the tunnels near the top of the room, swaying from one to the next and flicking her tongue curiously. Elynna watched, then blushed and averted her eyes – the naga obviously didn’t share her standards for modesty, letting her breasts hang down enticingly as she moved. After a few blushing minutes, she had finished. “Yes. His mark is faded but still close.”

“That’s wonderful news! Let me get some supplies from my camp and we can head out—”

“No. You must follow him now.”

“Why?”

“The tunnel beasts took your rope, but a rope is not full of warmth and light. They will be around to try again if you wander.”

Elynna chewed the inside of her cheek. So, her lifeline to the outside world had been cleanly cut by a mindless beast, and moments later a member of an ancient lost race of snake people appeared, *and* if Elynna went back to camp she was liable to be ambushed by some horrible tunnel-dwelling monster, so she had to forge deeper into a labyrinth of ancient ruins with nothing but the clothes on her back.

Not implausible – it made sense that anything moving around in the tunnel network would be able to detect something else easily. But surely the minutes it would take to return to camp and get some water and rations would be safe enough. Elynna fixed her eyes on the naga and took a few steps towards the tunnel where the rope had gone. She knew how to find her way back to the entrance from there, and she wanted to test something. “. . . Right. What did you mean by *ages of slumber*? How old is this place, and how old are you?”

“The world has awoken and slept many times, an endless coil that feeds itself with water and stone and sand. Each day, a new tribe wakes to rule while the sun passes overhead, and the rulers of the elder days lie down to shroud themselves with night. When I hatched, there were only *yumah-skerit* in my shape. But I can tell you are different. You must be of the tribe that walks through the day.” She reached out, caressing Elynna’s face and shoulders. The leopard woman shivered at the touch, strange but delicate enough to send tingles from her neck down to the tips of her toes and tail. The naga gave every impression of friendly curiosity, like she had encountered a new type of show animal.

But she had blocked Elynna from reaching the tunnel to the entrance, a fact not unnoticed by the leopard woman. More of the naga’s scaly body flowed into the room, gently herding Elynna into a corner. She grabbed Silthra’s hands and pushed them away. “I’d be happy to talk more, but I need to get back to my camp. Can you let me past?” She set her jaw sternly.

Silthra held up a hand to her mouth, curling her tongue around her fingers. “You would leave your friend?”

“I am . . .” Elynna suddenly thought better of revealing how tired she was. Her fingers closed around the hilt of the knife on her leg. “I need to get some tools. To track where I’m going.”

More of the naga’s body cascaded into the room like a spool of white syrup, leaking endlessly from the wall and gathering in great rolling curves that surrounded Elynna on every side. “You need no tools. I have found you. I will bring you where you must go.”

“Silthra, let me—” A pale white band lunged out at her from the left edge of her vision. Elynna leapt up, clinging to a high tunnel. She only took an instant to reach for a handhold with her knife arm but that was all Silthra needed. Elynna felt the naga grip her ankle and jerk tight, pulling her backwards out of her only hope of escape and into a strong, scaly embrace. The naga quickly grasped Elynna’s knife arm with both hands, twisting it until the leopard woman cried out and the weapon fell away harmlessly.

“You are so *untrustworthy*,” said the naga, clamping her arms across Elynna’s upper body and leaning backwards, stranding her atop a roiling white ocean. Her off-hand quickly became her only free limb as the naga twisted in on herself, throwing wide loops of muscle around Elynna’s hips and chest, weaving into a crushing ball. The pair came to rest with Elynna belly-up, legs and arms pulled down painfully as the scales beneath her constricted. The leopard woman flexed with all her might and managed to wrest herself up a few inches, straining not to lose them. Silthra grabbed at Elynna’s chin and drew her head up.

“Let me . . .” Elynna’s snarl turned into a gasp. Silthra’s eyes were no longer cloudy. Tender bands of deep red and lighter pink flowed out from their centers, passing seamlessly to the edges. Red and pink came the soft strobes, comforting and reliable. Elynna felt her mind being pulled away from her, tethering to Silthra like the harness of a tame animal. “What . . .” she breathed, slumping down into the naga’s welcoming coils. Her strength had turned to air.

The naga’s tail tip made a smooth, deliberate circuit around Elynna’s shoulders, rustling silently across her fur and covering the pendant’s weak light beneath implacable white scales. Silthra’s eyes

became the only source of illumination in the room, glowing and bobbing side to side. She spoke in a primal, hissing way, articulating sharp syllables with her tongue lashing and contorting into arcane figures.

Somehow Elynna knew what she was saying. It was obvious. Silthra nodded and the leopard woman nodded along with her captor, stiffly but surely. The naga's grasp no longer felt dangerous or painful. Silthra's body loosened around her limbs, allowing her to lie at rest and move her arms. Elynna tried to blink but couldn't close both her eyes at the same time, never allowed to break her contact with the overpowering haze that fell down from Silthra and made her feel fuzzy and weak and good. The naga's tail finished its easy journey around Elynna's collar and neck. It pulled snug.

"Ghlk!" The rosy hue left Elynna's vision for an instant. It was enough for her feral instincts to take over, a wire of panic pulling taught inside her. She slammed her eyes shut.

Silthra's voice was very close. "You will *open* your eyes."

To her horror, Elynna felt one of her eyelids begin to lift up, letting the cursed wonderful red-pink lights back in. She struggled like a wildcat in a snare, muscles and veins standing out under her skin, but the naga was many times her match in body and mind. Silthra's tail cinched tighter around Elynna's neck as one eye reopened fully. The numbing haze flowed back in like an old friend.

"N-no," Elynna sputtered, betrayed by the demented grin forming at one corner of her mouth.

"*Both* eyes, she-cat." She began to obey.

Gasping for breath, her free arm floundered for anything she could reach, finding only cold reptilian skin until her hand brushed against something hard and metallic. The skyrod. Frantically, with her last fleeting thought, Elynna gripped the rod and held it aloft. It was just enough to get Silthra's attention and dim the light emanating from her eyes, letting Elynna twist her head away and throw the rod across the chamber. It shattered against the stone. A blast of light and heat filled the room. Silthra screamed.

IV

Elynna felt like her body had turned to heavy mist. She floated through a murky series of strange cramped spaces, spilling downwards through cracks and crawlspaces. Things became rougher the deeper she went, with crooked slabs and piles of rubble obstructing the path, but she always found a way to press through. Ever downwards. Ever towards the deepest, darkest pits. After a long time, Elynna felt herself enter an open place. Her body no longer felt misty, and there were aches beginning to form in her limbs. She slid to a stop, curled up, and lay still.

She spent minutes drawing in air with long, shallow breaths before she began to try moving. Sensation returned to her by inches, starting from her chest and moving through her limbs. More time ticked by before she could flex her hands and toes to confirm she was not injured. She opened her eyes.

White scales covered her body in tight loops from the neck down. Silthra's coils spread out in a heap on a large stone dais, easily fifteen feet across. Elynna hadn't realized it before but Silthra was massive – her serpentine body must have been at least sixty feet long, running over itself in knots and valleys three or four layers deep. She couldn't see the naga's torso until she turned around and inhaled sharply: Silthra was only a few feet away from her, lying face-down with her head on her arms and her eyes closed. Elynna let out a soft sigh once she realized Silthra was asleep.

The details of the last hour clicked into place: the naga must have been the one to steal the rope to present herself as a trustworthy guide. When Elynna had seen through her charade she had pounced and used some kind of hypnotic magic. The skyrod had saved her from becoming a mindless puppet but Silthra had still been able to drag her deeper within the ruins.

The leopard woman suppressed a shudder. The sheer overwhelming pleasure of Silthra's gaze had been more frightening than the crushing strength of her body, and even now some part of Elynna's mind desired nothing more than to lie back and let the naga claim her, mumbling agreements into the haze. Elynna knew she had to escape before that part of her grew any larger. She looked around.

The room was large, a square about forty feet across just as regular as the tunnel junctions above. The ceiling was lower, though not quite within Elynna's reach if she had been standing up, and covered in a grand, faded tapestry of strange hieroglyphics and markings that centered on the dais. Crystals were set into the walls, glowing with a steady light that was not quite enough to eliminate all shadows. One wall had a tall, ominous-looking archway in its center. Across from it was a tunnel entrance that looked very similar to the ones Elynna had seen above.

That was her way out, then. She would do no good to Thomas trapped here within the naga's coils. Elynna began to adjust herself, worming her shoulders and chest out from within her scaly prison one inch at a time. It was torture going so slowly, so close to Silthra's head, knowing that if the naga so much as turned in her sleep she would be spotted. But Elynna kept her cool, stretching out one arm, then the other. She had come out of her little cocoon horizontally with a few coils between her and the floor and most of her legs still trapped. Gently, delicately, she laid one hand on the naga's alabaster skin and began to descend. It seemed impossible that Silthra would not notice such a disturbance to her own body but Elynna's luck seemed to be holding. She took another hand-step, inches from the ground.

Then her light bulb pendant fell out of her shirt, twinkling and dangling. Elynna snatched it up and turned it off with her free hand, not daring to move while her heart hammered in her ribcage like an alarm bell. She forced herself to look at Silthra, searching for any disturbance in the naga's slumber. Nothing seemed any different. Elynna remained stock still, barely breathing. After thirty seconds of excruciating silence, Silthra moved. Just a twitch, one nostril widening slightly. The kind of thing anyone could do in her sleep.

Elynna tossed her pendant over Silthra's head to the far side of the dais and bolted for the tunnel. It was a desperate ruse that would never work but she had nothing else, betting everything to reach the comforting darkness. The leopard woman raced towards the opening, just a few steps away.

“Halt.” Elynna stopped dead, nearly toppling forward from the momentum. “Return.” She wanted to scream as her body stood up, turned around, and began to walk slowly back to Silthra, who sat on the dais like a fat slug on a garden leaf.

The naga’s tail reached out and casually grasped Elynna around her waist, lifting her to sit on a wide, heavy coil within arm’s reach. Elynna lunged forward and slashed at Silthra’s face – but she never made contact. Despite the fury and hatred roaring inside her, the leopard woman’s claws had simply stopped a few inches short of Silthra’s scales. “Why can’t I . . . ?”

Silthra tugged her captive back to her seat. “In the old speech, you are *skerit to-lan*. More than halfway full of my essence but not yet submitting to me.” Her tone was smug and imperious. “It is forbidden for servants to strike their masters, or to abandon their duties.”

“Your essence? You mean that light in your eyes. You did something to my mind.” Now that Elynna looked closely, she could see Silthra’s eyes were very different from before. The naga’s left eye was almost pink, shifting to a deep blood red in the middle, while the right eye was covered in a sickly gray film. Her right eye had been the one closer to the explosion, Elynna remembered.

Silthra paid no attention to Elynna’s curious glances. “It is no mere light, it is the way of the *yumah-skerit*. We project our essence out, and our servants welcome it in.”

“But you were blind and sniffing around.”

“The eyes of a *yumah-skerit* can shift as we please. I appeared sightless to allow you to believe you could escape me. A servant is most malleable on the heels of a good hunt.” Without giving Elynna a chance to answer, Silthra put an arm around her shoulder, pressing her breasts to the leopard woman’s face. She tried to strain away as the naga spoke.

“The *yumah-skerit* were the ancient rulers of all under the sun, kings of the sands from where they touched the great water in the north to where the jungles rose like walls in the south. Like all things, their time came to an end – but they refused to shroud themselves peacefully, fighting the natural cycle of scouring and growth. The kings were so greedy, so *prideful*, they thought the sands

would not touch them beneath their mantle of stone, and so they worked their servants to death digging this great fortress that became their graves. I was barely more than a hatchling when they finally sequestered themselves within the deepest pits – yet I recall when the earth began to roar and shake. It lasted for days, and all was quiet when it stopped. The deep roads to the *yumah-skerit* tombs have been blocked ever since.”

Elynna did not generally believe natural disasters were the result of divine anger, but she had seen some exceptional things today. “If they tried to survive down here and were buried by an earthquake, why are you still alive?”

Silthra smiled maliciously, playing her fingertips over the scales of a nearby coil. “Because I was the omen that told the kings of their impending doom.”

Elynna blinked. “You’re not white from living underground – you’re albino.”

The naga nodded. “A pale-scaled *kzeen-skerit* who couldn’t survive beneath the desert sun. They were terrified of me. They cast me out.”

“So you’re the last of your kind,” Elynna said, getting another nod. “Were they all as deceitful as you?”

Silthra hiss-laughed. “You will soon see I am the kindest of all *yumah-skerit*. The old kings would have flayed your skin from your bones for daring to reject their essence.”

That Elynna could believe. “So what do you plan to do with me?”

“You will be among the first of my servants. You will know the bliss of purpose.”

“I will never submit to you,” Elynna growled.

“All do. The man did.” She pointed to the room’s arched exit. Elynna’s retort died as she followed the naga’s finger.

Footfalls came from the archway, announcing a man before he stepped into the murky crystalline light. He was tall and strong, with a capable-looking frame capped by a head of short, dirty blonde hair and skin that bore a healthy tan from years spent outdoors. Elynna recognized him as Thomas

Gladstone. Gone were the sensible, comfortable khakis he wore on safari – instead he was shirtless but for ornamental pieces of silk hanging from his shoulders in long, flowing strips that jostled with the slightest motion. A golden thread tied his plain white tunic to his waist.

The clothes made him look different, but Elynna had seen him in many strange outfits over the years. Worse were his eyes: his proud and vigorous brow was soft and slack, and his piercing blue orbs had been covered by rings that flowed from pink to red and back. The naga's handiwork had reduced him to nothing more than servant boy who held a golden urn filled with some dark liquid as he approached the dais, looking only at Silthra. "Mistress, I have brought what you requested," he said in a drowsy voice.

Elynna's heart sank. "No . . ."

Silthra smiled and curled a finger. "Good boy. Bring it here and get to work." Her body shifted into a sinuous staircase, letting Thomas ascend to her left side. He placed the urn snugly between two coils, then dipped his hands in. They came out dripping with oil, which he began to slather over her tits. The naga hummed and reclined, Elynna speechless on one side and Thomas supplicating on the other. The soft sounds of his strong hands pressing into supple, scaled breasts was the only noise in the room. As he worked, the oil slowly filled the air with an exotic, spicy aroma.

"This is another secret of my people which survived the ages. An oil that *ex-ssites* the senses." Silthra took deep, pleased breaths as Thomas's hands pressed into each white globe. There was an immense difference in stature between the naga and her captives – each tit was larger than Thomas's head, heavy like a giant pearl, too large for his hands to cover. His dexterous fingers worked the oil into the scales in sections, lifting up each breast to get full coverage before letting it sag back against Silthra's ribs. He alternated from right to left, methodically returning his hands to the urn and never letting the naga's scales dry out, never letting an inch of her go untended to. After enough coaxing her nipples hardened into two perky nubs topping tits as white as snow.

Elynna was forced to watch the perverted display from the crook of Silthra's right arm, far closer than she ever wanted to be. "Thomas, don't listen to her. Fight it!" she cried.

Thomas ignored her, but Silthra fixed her good eye on the leopard woman. "I did not tell you this one's name." Her expression changed to venomous glee. "You know him. This is the man you were searching for."

"N-no. It's a trick. Thomas would never allow himself to be controlled like this."

"*Thomas* is no more. The man is *skerit ko-lan*. He has embraced his position beneath me."

"I know Thomas. This is all part of a plan to get you to let your guard down. He'd never do something like this just because some . . . some *dirty* command came out of your mouth!"

Silthra raised an eyebrow. "Still you choose not to see. I will show you." Her vast body cinched tight around the leopard woman, silencing her protests. "Abandon your thoughts of sunlight and freedom. You are in my domain now, and there are only my commands." She addressed Thomas without looking at him. "Stand."

"Yes, mistress." Thomas stood in front of Silthra and Elynna, balancing on a wide coil.

"Present yourself." Thomas undid his rope belt, letting his tunic fall away into darkness. His cock was soft, exactly as a man would look at rest. The naga snapped her fingers. "Hard." Elynna had been mortified when she saw Thomas disrobe but her emotions were further jumbled when she saw his erection start. He grunted softly, eyes closed in concentration, and within a few seconds his dick had grown to a hefty size. It twitched and throbbed regularly.

The naga grabbed the urn and placed it to her right, settled between her torso and the coils around Elynna. One loop of her tail uncurled from around the leopard woman, who tried to call to Thomas before Silthra placed a hand to her feline lips. "*Husssh*," said the naga, and so Elynna hushed. With her tail unwound, Silthra had enough slack to dip it in the urn and lift the glistening tip into the air, curling it deftly around itself into sinuous loops. "Forward." Thomas took half a step forward, bringing his tip into contact with her inviting scales.

He gasped as Silthra's tail clutched his cock, sliding across it and spreading intoxicating oil where she made contact. The naga wound around his shaft and towards his body, curling down to fondle his heavy balls. She drew back and pressed forward in an undulating rhythm that never seemed to stop – always more slithering pleasure, always more slick coils, always that little bit of friction to tug her servant's cock where it belonged.

Silthra's strokes were disdainful, as though she barely cared about her living toy, twisting her tail into firm knots that slithered over themselves and gathered oil in the winding valleys where her scales and his skin met. She was never in the same shape twice, sometimes cradling his shaft with sidewinding curls that let him twitch up into the air, sometimes writhing over every inch from tip to base like a nest of vipers. Thomas continued to thrust against her when he could, but if he ever missed the mark then a firm tug got him pointed back towards Silthra and her captive audience.

When the oil ran dry, Silthra refreshed her tail in the urn. She glanced at Elynna and chuckled. "And I thought I would have to command you to watch." Elynna barely heard her, staring in agony as the monstrous tail made its way to Thomas's body and began to play with him again. He had grown at least another inch from her ministrations – how was that possible? How was he enjoying this?

But the answers were obvious. Beads of sweat gathered on Thomas's nearly nude body, pooling in the crevices of his muscles and skin. His breathing had become strained, and sometimes he even held his breath in completely – like when Silthra's tail formed a corkscrew that wound around his balls, up his shaft, and covered the head of his cock completely. Oil dripped from her luxurious scales as she began to squeeze from bottom to top in slow, powerful twists. He actually sagged forward into the naga's sinuous grip, limbs trembling. "M-mistress . . ." he sputtered.

"Hmm?" said Silthra. "Oh, I see. You're close, aren't you?" Thomas could only nod. "What a good boy you are, showing such *ressstraint* – unlike some servants." Elynna blinked, realizing the naga spoke the truth. She had endured danger before, but between the carnal display and the strange spices

hanging in the air, a change had come over her and the part that wanted to submit was getting harder to ignore. Silthra's next words were a welcome distraction. "What are you thinking, little she-cat?"

Elynna took a deep breath. ". . . Thinking you cannot bind me to your will with only one good eye." There was a conspicuous silence from Silthra. "Well, am I wrong? You need both eyes to work your wretched magic. Until your eye heals, I'm free – and how long will that take? Weeks? Months? Do you think I won't find a way out of whatever cage you put me in?"

Silthra's eyes narrowed. "And you would abandon your man? The entire reason you came here?" Her tail coiled possessively around his balls, pressing in snugly and letting his tip wobble and drip. "He is obviously the object of your affection, and for good reason. Strong, resilient . . . *virile*. Even now your longing for him wafts from you like a beast in need."

"Mistress . . . mistress!" Thomas gasped. He was beginning to boil over.

"*Stop*." The single word hit Thomas like an iron bar, making him lean back drunkenly with his throbbing, needy cock jutting out from his hips. He gasped for breath raggedly, flexing his entire ribcage to suck in air, until he finally, slowly, came to a teetering halt on the precipice of Silthra's body and his own. "Tricky little she-cat, almost making me waste him. Enough delays."

Elynna didn't bother saying anything. She merely watched as Silthra adjusted herself, revealing the curve of her body where her "waist" became fully serpentine. The naga lowered her left hand to a pink slit there and spread it open, revealing a very human-looking interior. "Breed me, boy."

Thomas leapt forward like a starving animal, burying his shaft in Silthra's pussy and muffling his wild cries of pleasure in the deep valley of her chest. The naga cooed as he entered her and began to thrust, closing his eyes with tension and bliss. Elynna looked to the naga for an explanation – only to gasp as the pink and red rings sprang forth from Silthra's left eye. The serpent stared at the snow leopard, her head bobbing up and down with every wet slap from below. As before, the naga spoke in strange hissing words that hadn't been used in lifetimes.

The (soul in balance) would give his seed to Queen-of-All and she would grow heavy with her clutch. There would be a new breed of (ruler soul) claiming dominion over the sands, in the image of Queen-of-All. They would gather more servants, filling them with Queen-of-All's essence and imbuing them with purpose. They would take the ancient magics lost beneath the sands and rise to a new dawn.

Silthra craned her head forward. “You *finally* see. *Sssubmit* and you will know the joy of true purpose.”

Elynna reeled, trying to look anywhere but the vortex emanating from the naga's eye. But no matter how she thrashed her head, her gaze was drawn back to Silthra like a magnet. The conquered part of the leopard woman's mind was shouting and laughing in delirium, grasping for purchase on the part of her that remained unsunk. Desperate for any kind of anchor, she tried to focus on Thomas. Thomas the man she had come to rescue. Thomas the bright-eyed adventurer who laughed at danger. “Thomas . . .” she gasped.

Thomas who was shuddering against Silthra's inviting body, pressed flat against her waist and weighed down by a wide loop of snow white muscle. He mumbled Silthra's name like a man in love with a dream. He plunged deep into the naga and came, balls tight and pulsing. There was nothing left of him.

The sight broke something inside of Elynna. She ceased struggling. She did not resist as Silthra pressed a finger to the underside of her chin and guided her back to the pink and red rings. Mindless, blissful light crept into every last corner of her mind. A manic smile took over her face. “Thank you, mistress,” she said in a docile voice.

“*Ssstrip.*” The coils around Elynna loosened, allowing her to stand for the first time since her foolish escape attempt when she didn't know better. She began to unbutton her shirt, a task made harder by her mistress's hands reaching out to fondle and prod at her. Mistress was insightful and curious, running her great clawed fingertips over Elynna's sensitive body. Elynna finally bested her buttons, drawing her shirt off and letting it flutter away somewhere. Her breasts were bound in strips of

plain white cloth that couldn't hide her stiffening nipples. Mistress ripped them off with a single clawed finger, cooing at the sight of Elynna's breasts bouncing out. The leopard took a deep, satisfied breath, wobbling and jiggling to show off her muscular body and the prodigious tits hanging from her chest.

"You were made for this. Continue." The praise sent shivers down Elynna's spine. She was barely able to contain her joy at being allowed to ascend to her rightful place as a plaything in her Mistress's coils. She bent down to remove her pants and boots, gasping when she felt the familiar scaly fingers against her lacy underwear. "Oh, a decoration? Keep that on. It is befitting."

Elynna stood nude except for her dark panties, nipples hard and tail straight. Scarcely was she free of Silthra's grasp before the naga's vast body shifted beneath her feet, giving her tail ample slack to begin winding its way up between Elynna's legs, pushing her onto tiptoes and pressing firmly against her cunt. The tendril nimbly curved around her ass and thigh, securing her wrists at her waist without slowing, then beginning to work over Elynna's abs. She shivered and trembled as her mistress spun her a new garment, hard as stone and soft as sand. The insistent slithering continued to the bottoms of her breasts, then above them, pressing down gently on each tit.

Silthra positioned herself behind her new toy. Still not speaking, still pressing her tail against Elynna's honey, she reached down and pinched Elynna's nipples. The leopard woman was shocked at her mistress's personal touch, but that lasted only until she felt telltale wetness spread over the sensitive pink tips of her breasts: more oil. The fiendish liquid spread across Elynna's chest, making her writhe and strain futilely within her bonds.

Silthra coaxed Elynna to new heights, forcing from her squeaks and mewls that sputtered to nothing. Each white hand was large enough to cover one of Elynna's tits completely. The naga would draw a finger around one areola for minutes on end, swirling the oil into the skin, then clutch tight and squeeze before returning to her subdued pace. The only indication she cared at all was a small flick of her forked tongue whenever Elynna shrieked. "You are ready," said the naga at length.

Elynna shook her head weakly. Her vision was blurry. “R-ready?” She vaguely felt her mistress move behind her, then suddenly her head was nestled between two vast white breasts. The coils withdrew, letting her slump back against Silthra’s body.

“Tell me what you see.”

Elynna blinked. In front of her a man knelt barely awake, propped up by one of Mistress’s seemingly endless coils. His manhood was messy and hard. “I see another soul in balance,” she said.

“Wrong. *Hot.*” Elynna arched her back at the naga’s cruel command, wracked with bliss as her inner muscles tensed up and reduced her to a puddle. “He is a *ssire*. He requires certain affections when not with me. Do you understand?”

Elynna nodded breathlessly. “I will . . . I will do anything . . . you ask, mistress.”

Silthra’s eye flashed. The man approached. His cock was hard again. He thrust it between Elynna’s breasts without hesitating, ramming his hips against soft white fur and supple titflesh. She could feel the man’s cock as though it were an iron bar so hot it would burn through her skin. She would burn if she needed to, and burn she might. A slap, a gasp – a pair of sounds repeated by a pair of servants for as long as mistress demanded it. Now the man’s thrusts grew fiercer, faster, meeting her oily and eager globes so hard she had to press them together and make a slick entrance for his savage demands. Each proud tit squished like so much candy fluff under the strain.

Elynna’s focus faltered when she felt a strong, sinuous presence slide unceremoniously into her slit. It was Mistress’s tail, coated in the ancient oil and working her insides into molten metal.

“Mistress!” she cried. But Silthra only looked down at her silently, sturdy as the walls of stone.

Elynna tried to resist the growing pit of pleasure in her belly but it was futile. Her Mistress’s supple tail had drawn the man to the top of a mountain and it was doing the same for her. Insistent, staccato writhing filled her and pressed up against her skin from beneath. Wicked serpentine patterns traced themselves inside of her, making wet oily sounds and matting her fur with fluids. Mistress’s tail tip was a hot spike of pleasure wherever it touched and dragged, alternating between tender round paths

outside of her slit and quick thrusts between her lips. She never touched down in the same spot for too long, moving to the sides of Elynna's legs and up to her belly in slick trails.

Suddenly, Mistress withdrew and left Elynna empty and cold. The only things she could feel was the man at her front pushing into the velvety softness of her chest, and the oil smeared across her body making her tingle. Elynna tried to wait. Time passed, with her only measure the number of the man's thrusts. Ten, twenty, thirty. A hundred. Still nothing. Mistress's breasts were pressed so snugly against her head she couldn't see anything but white titflesh, couldn't hear anything but grunts.

"Mistress?" said Elynna.

"*Sssilent.*" A whip crack struck her clit. Elynna's mouth contorted soundlessly as her mind went blank, dimly aware of the man coming to his own peak and pumping load after load onto her chest and collar. Harsh pleasure slicing up from below and crashed against mind's haze like a lightning bolt crackling along her brain stem. She shuddered, flexing and writhing to resist the storm inside her, so powerless beneath her Mistress she couldn't even cry out her ecstasy.

Ecstasy which did not subside. Elynna sensed more of that delirious pink light making its way down from her mind and through her body, demanding she stay like this forever. The notion of being lost in such a sea made her scared and giddy at the same time, two emotions whipping back and forth within her and turning her blood to froth. The man's cock pressed against her mouth. It smelled strongly of him, dripping with heavy white strands.

"If you wish to survive, make him clean."

Elynna's tongue almost leapt out, so eager was she to prove herself and escape the maelstrom. The proud tip was first, suckled in her mouth like a sweetmeat and cleaned with messy kisses. His shaft was long and girthy, demanding she loop her tongue around it and slather her face up and down. She moved to his balls last, taking both of them into her mouth and reaching out with her tongue to fondle the folds of skin around them. When the leopard woman finished, he was clean but for the oil.

Finally Elynna's orgasm ended. Blackness took her. Somewhere above, Silthra laughed softly.

The naga looked down with one good eye. The other was covered in a milky cataract that had never fully healed. “Report.”

“Mistress, I believe the tribe of daywalkers are beginning to suspect our presence. The man I encountered today was overcome with fright, raving about a marauding she-cat with crimson eyes who steals men’s souls. He begged for his life and his freedom when I came upon him.”

“And how did you act?”

Her tail flicked just once. Perhaps a little pride. “He is secured in the training pit, awaiting your essence. Your eldest daughter will prepare him until you see fit to join them.”

Silthra licked her lips greedily. “Very good. I will see to him soon enough – perhaps in a day or two. In the meantime, there is something more urgent.” Her white coils shifted atop her luxurious throne, revealing a stark white egg about a foot long.

Her servant nodded. “I will take it to the nursery at once, Mistress.” She took the egg and descended down through the tunnels, stepping through passages unused since the turning of the last age. The distant impacts of pickaxes and stonecutting tools reached to her feet; the grand treasury had nearly been pierced and the shifts were longer these days. Another strong back would be good.

The nursery was a low, long room filled with sand, atop which sat a dozen eggs like the one she carried. Magical runes on the ceiling kept the room much warmer than the rest of the depths. A pale man turned as she entered. He had been tanned once.

“Oh, a new gift? Put it there.” She placed it in a free spot and turned around to find him very close to her. They shared a kiss, which quickly threatened to become something more serious as his hands roved over her white and ringed fur.

She pushed him back for a moment’s breath. “Mistress will demand your presence soon.”

“I have enough time for you.” He stepped towards his bed tucked into a corner of the room. She smiled and followed him. Truly there could be nothing better than this bliss.