

Tomb Of The War Goddess

By Mantrid Brizon

What lurks beneath the sand?

Table of Contents...

Page 1. Chapter One: The Find

Page 8. Chapter Two: Tomb

Page 14. Chapter Three: Creature

Page 25. Chapter Four: The Master

Page 40. Chapter Five: Seek And Destroy

Chapter One: The Find

A man stands over a pit, overseeing diggers who sing in Arabic as they shovel out the soft golden sand of the Egyptian desert. Mohammed watches his men as they move bucket after bucket, unearthing an ancient home that has not seen the light of day for many thousands of years. The home is part of a larger village, which has already been excavated. Captain Saeed Ayad patrols the

grounds with his men while Professor Ubaid Hamid scours over bits of pottery with several of his students. His remaining students aid the diggers, making sure that they don't break anything as they pull the sand from the pit that was once someone's home.

Professor Hamid is an Egyptian Archaeologist in his mid-50s, with short salt-and-pepper hair and a dark complexion. He has brought his six best students with him, all in their mid or late twenties. Cheryl is a dark-haired British national. The thin girl seems quite out of place, with her bubbly and somewhat vain personality, who is as dedicated to her work as she is the sheen of her fingernails. Asim is a native-born Egyptian who, although friendly and polite, seems to suffer from an anxiety disorder. Mason is the sole American of the class, and a competent artist, often drawing the temples and homes as he imagines them to have looked in the past. This ability is perhaps the only reason Professor Hamid even brought him along.

Alexei is a tall Russian, who seems to enjoy sweating in the pit beside the diggers. He envies them for being the first to lay eyes on tombs and temples that have lain beneath the sands for centuries. Nolan is a French national and the oldest of the students, at twenty-eight years old. The only thing Nolan seems to like more than excavating tombs and studying artifacts is insulting Mason and Alexei. The last student chosen by Professor Hamid is a French woman named Simone. Though talented and eager to learn, the active and spirited brunette seems to think that Lara Croft and Indiana Jones are the epitome of archaeology, even adopting Lara Croft's long braid and khaki shorts; Ubaid hopes to reeducate her.

Professor Hamid removes dust from a broken clay pot with a small brush. His best students, Simone and Alexei kneel beside him, carefully removing bits of reddish-brown pottery from the corner of the room. Mason catalogs the artifacts beside Asim, while Cheryl and Nolan assist the diggers. As the diggers draw their picks and shovels close to the floor, Mason and Asim steer them away, carefully pulling the dirt and sand away by hand. As Asim drags his fingers through the

crusty earth of packed sand, he feels something strange against his fingertips. He hesitates, his heart racing as he carefully feels the hidden object.

"Why did you stop?" Nolan turns to Asim.

"I-I felt something." He answers.

"So, dig it out!" Professor Hamid barks at Asim.

"Yes sir!" Asim nods.

Nolan kneels beside Asim and the two men slowly unbury the artifact. As they pull the sand away, the lid of a small urn peeks through. To their amazement, the urn looks pristine, as though it were purposely buried after being placed in the corner. Professor Hamid joins the two, standing behind them and watching over their shoulders as they pull the urn from the soil. He holds out his hand, demanding the artifact. His eyes grow wide as he stares in amazement at the beautifully crafted pot, the lid bearing the image of a mastaba. The students crowd around Professor Hamid.

"Amazing! It's untouched!" He exclaims.

"Is that a seal around the lid?" Simone asks.

"Yes. It looks intact." He says.

"Should we look inside?" Asim asks.

"Are you mad? We need to study the urn's exterior first, and then carefully remove the seal. We can't just break it!" He snaps.

"What if there's a treasure map inside?" Cheryl jokes.

"We already have the treasure." Professor Hamid grins.

He personally catalogs the artifact and climbs from the pit. Tagging the urn, he sets it on a bench inside of a tent that is full of countless pieces of pottery and assorted artifacts. They continue

their dig as planned, but Simone can't stop thinking about the pristine urn. What could be inside? A preserved heart of a temple priest or noble? Gold? A lost scroll? She can't pull the jar from her mind; it's buried as deep as the ancient home. After hours of digging and cataloging their finds, the students and diggers quit for the day, retiring to their tents or spending time together.

Mason and Alexei sit in front of a tent that they share together, already firm friends; they are the two most recent additions to Ubaid Hamid's program, and the only American and Russian in a field with many Egyptian, British and French students. Nolan continues working, looking over the artifacts. Asim sits with the diggers, some of whom he grew up beside. Cheryl and Simone share their own tent. Simone eats cold food from a tin can with a folding fork, while Cheryl very carefully files her nails.

"God, I'd love to see what is inside that urn." Simone thinks aloud.

"So why don't you?" Cheryl jests.

"You think I should?" Simone turns to her.

"No! The Professor would mummify you alive." Cheryl laughs.

"Yeah... Then someone would be digging me out of the sand in two thousand years." Simone chuckles.

She sits atop her cot for several minutes, looking over to her earth brown M1936 style Musette bag. She imagines the mysterious contents of the urn, fantasizing about the wonders it could hold within. Would Lara Croft be so gentle with a big discovery hidden beneath the lid of a clay jar? She rises from the cot and walks toward the flap of the tent.

"Hey, where are you going? It's late!" Cheryl calls out.

"Just for a walk." Simone answers.

“Well, be back soon.”

“Why? Are you scared to sleep alone?” Simone teases.

“No, but us women need our beauty rest.” Cheryl says.

“I’m French. I’m naturally beautiful.” Simone laughs.

“Whatever.”

Simone leaves the tent and wanders around the camp. She sees Mason sketching in his leather-bound book, while Alexei sits near him, shuffling a deck of cards.

“What are you two doing?” She asks them.

“Nothing interesting.” Alexei replies.

She stands beside Mason, peering over at his sketch. Her eyebrows raise as she sees the anthropomorphic cat woman on the sheet of paper. She sits in a chair, legs crossed with a hand brushing her long, human-like hair from her eyes and snout as she gazes at the viewer rather seductively. He pulls the book toward him.

“She’s not done!” He says defensively.

“I didn’t say anything.” Simone laughs.

“You didn’t have too. I could *feel* it.” He retorts.

“Really?” She smirks.

“What are you doing out anyway?” Alexei asks.

“Oh... Just taking a little walk.” She replies.

“Well, be careful if you go near the dig. It’s surprisingly hard to see a huge hole in the ground at night.” Mason says.

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Simone says as she walks away.

She heads for the tent where the artifacts are stored, ducking behind another tent as she sees Nolan leaving. He walks past her without noticing her, stopping by Mason and Alexei's tent first. She looks toward the artifact tent, but she can't resist standing there and listening for a moment.

"Well, well. American and Russian. My two favorite enemies!" Nolan chirps. "I'm surprised, Russian! Where is your vodka?"

"I left it with your mother, beside her bed." Alexei retorts.

"And how are you, American? Still drawing your little animal whores? How do you find the time when you are already so busy telling everyone else in the world how to live?!" Nolan teases.

"What is your problem?" Mason barks as he stands from his chair.

"Careful, my friend. If you scare him, he'll surrender." Alexei chuckles.

"How can I, if he pulls out a gun and kills me?" Nolan remarks.

"Piss off. Go somewhere else to have your wine and cheese." Mason growls.

"I'd love too, but I can't ever turn my back on you; you'll stab it and steal my oil, or sick your dumb bear on me!" Nolan snaps.

"What did you say?" Alexei mutters, rising from his chair.

"You heard me, puppet."

"Men..." Simone giggles quietly.

She slips into the artifact tent as they argue in the background, drawing the attention of the other students, diggers, and Professor Hamid. She looks through the artifacts as she can hear the diggers breaking up the conflict outside. She finds the urn sitting in a packing crate, lovingly wrapped in bubble wrap and straw. She pulls the urn from the crate, looking back to make sure that no one is about to enter the tent. She brushes off the straw and peels away the bubble

wrap as quietly as possible, soon holding the urn in her hands. She looks at the lid, placing her palm over the mastaba that adorns it.

“Let’s see what secrets you hold.” She grins.

She twists the lid, breaking the delicate seal. A puff of smoke escapes from within. It smells musty and causes her to sneeze. She removes the lid, setting it gently on the table. She peers into the urn and gasps. Inside is a papyrus scroll, pristine and crisp, as though it were made only days ago. She reaches inside, pulling the scroll from the urn as she sets the jar on the table beside its lid. She unrolls the scroll, revealing a detailed map of the terrain. Though thousands of years out of date, it appears to described the locations of several tombs, with depictions of ancient gods and goddesses beside the structures.

She can’t believe what she is seeing. She walks out of the tent to share the discovery with the others. Professor Hamid scolds the young men, but quickly looks to Simone.

“Where did you find that scroll? We did not uncover any scroll!” He barks, pushing past the men as he approaches her.

“It was inside the urn.” She answers.

“You opened the urn?!” He yells.

“Yes, but look at what was inside!” She exclaims.

He takes the scroll from her hands as the others crowd around, trying to get a glimpse of the ancient parchment. Though Professor Hamid is furious, he can’t help but smile as he reads the contents of the scroll. It claims to be a map of the tombs of the gods and goddesses. As the ancient Egyptians deified their rulers, he wonders what they may find in unopened tombs. The fame and wealth of such a wonderful discovery makes him shiver in excitement. Even empty

tombs bring recognition. Though Professor Hamid is already a well-known figure, this discovery will make him a house-hold name in the archaeological community for centuries; immortality that only the pharaohs have known.

“I’m sorry. I just had to know what was inside.” Simone apologizes.

“It’s alright. This discovery makes up for your blatant disregard for the sanctity of my artifacts.” He replies.

“Can we explore some of those sites?” Simone asks.

“Of course! This tomb here is marked by the symbol of Bastet; it’s the closest. In the morning, we will travel there and see what we can find.” He says, turning back to his students, Mohammed and Saeed.

They all return to their tents to rest as Professor Hamid personally catalogs the scroll and packs it away. Though they try to sleep, few manage such a feat. Their minds race as they imagine opening undiscovered tombs, something that hasn’t been done in any of their lifetimes.

Chapter Two: Tomb

As soon as the sun peaks over the horizon, Professor Hamid gathers the digging crew and his students together. Accompanied by Captain Ayad, they drive across the desert to a large cliffside in an exceptionally desolate area of desert. Following the directions on the map, they find the cliffside, which is drawn in superb detail. As they circle the area, they find nothing. No tombs, or even hills that look like they may be covering tombs. Everyone seems a bit disappointed. Undaunted and fueled by the glory of the potential discovery, Professor Hamid orders the camp to be shifted to the new location,

immediately putting the diggers to work as they probe the land with an old ground penetrating radar unit.

After nearly a full day of searching, they spot a strange formation beneath the sand. As it appears on the screen of their generator powered computer, it looks a mastaba. The rectangular structure is buried deep enough that it doesn't even leave an imprint on the land above it. The diggers work double shifts as they pull sand and crusty earth from the top of the tomb. Soon, some of Captain Ayad's men aid them. Every student, and even Professor Hamid himself works on uncovering the tomb. They dig for days, working tirelessly to uncover the secret hidden beneath their feet.

On the ninth day of digging, they finally uncover a corner of the structure. It takes four more days before they have enough of the structure exposed to determine where the entrance should be. To their surprise, there isn't one. The entire building is sealed without even a hint as to the location of the hall that leads to the burial chamber. Professor Hamid hasn't seen anything like it. Often there is an indent where a sealed doorway should be. Furthermore, large blocks make up the whole of its construction, as though it were a pyramid that was completed at half its intended height.

They scour the building for clues, trying to decipher the location of the door. It isn't until the next day, when Alexei notes tool marks near a certain block. His find is made easier as the entire tomb's exterior is immaculate, as though it were buried not long after construction, protecting it from the eroding winds of the Egyptian desert. The diggers spend several days chipping into the stone, first trying to pull the block from its place, and then opting instead to cut through it. After several days of hacking and cutting, they near their goal.

As they burrow a large hole into the sandstone block, some of the diggers suddenly take ill; they are stricken with a severe case of

food poisoning from a crate of damaged tin cans of food. Though the soldiers and students don't share the digger's rations, Alexei suffers the same fate, having eaten several cans of fish from their stores due to personal preference. The Russian is not present when the remaining healthy diggers punch through the block and into the tomb. They begin working in the morning and cut through the block around noon, as Professor Hamid did not want to wait to explore the tomb.

Professor Hamid is the first to enter. He wouldn't ever allow any of his students to claim such an honor. The excited Simone follows behind him, as do the remaining healthy students. Once inside the tomb with his students, they turn on flashlights and activate several bright green military grade glow sticks; they will stay lit for several hours without losing their potency. Cheryl holds a satchel full of supplies to help them navigate the tomb, given to her by Captain Ayad as a precaution. They walk deeper into the tomb toward the shaft that should lead down into the burial vault.

The entrance looks like many tombs, with a notable exception; the vertical tunnel that should take them to the sarcophagus is replaced with a diagonal staircase leading deep into the earth, as though it were intended for routine use. The tomb's hall leads to a perfectly square room that is twice the width and length of the passageway. The staircase lies in the center of this room. Professor Hamid looks down the steps, which seem to stretch on forever. Simone holds a powerful flashlight, standing beside her mentor. As Professor Hamid takes his first step, he is startled by Cheryl letting out a brief scream. He quickly spins around, nearly losing his balance.

"What's wrong with you, girl?! I almost fell!" He yells.

"Look!" Cheryl points.

Lying near the leftmost corner from the students is a skeleton, its head turned to face the wall it lies beside. Professor Hamid rushes toward the skeleton, as the other students gather around. They are

left in awe at the sight of the being, which does not appear as any creature that they had ever seen. Though it would appear to be a human, the skeletal structure is bizarre. The skull looks like a smaller version of a lion, with the body, arms and legs of a human, and digitigrade feet like a wolf. A skeletal tail extends from the pelvis and runs nearly as long as the span of the creature's legs.

"Amazing!" Professor Hamid exclaims. "This must be a priest, who's had animal parts sewn to their body to imbue them with powers in the afterlife!"

"Is that your theory?" Mason asks.

"What is yours?" Professor Hamid snickers.

"You don't want to know." Nolan chuckles.

"Why isn't he in his sarcophagus?" Simone asks.

"Someone must have moved the body from the sarcophagus. It was also poorly preserved." The Professor thinks aloud.

"Uh... Professor..." Cheryl begins.

"What is it?" He turns to her.

Cheryl points toward the wall. Simone turns her powerful flashlight to where Cheryl is pointing, revealing the dull glint of metal. Professor Hamid examines the object, which is a small copper dagger stuck deep into the body cavity of the skeleton. The blade is bent and caught between the creature's ribs. Mason takes out his sketchbook and flips through several pages containing drawings of ancient temples, homes, and anthropomorphic animals living and acting as humans. He quickly begins a simple sketch of the body as it lies. Simone examines the skeleton more closely, kneeling beside it as her eyes scan the old bones.

"The skeletal structure looks natural. The way they seem to fit together... And the way it's laying... It looks like someone killed it, dragged the body here, and left it just out of sight." Simone theorizes.

“Are you suggesting that the hieroglyphic people with jackal and crocodile heads were real?!” Cheryl scoffs.

“I don’t know, but what do you think this is?” Simone points at the body.

“Perhaps the answers are inside the tomb.” The Professor says.

The team returns to the staircase, leaving the body behind. They explore the tomb, led by Professor Hamid. Simone walks beside him, lighting the way with her flashlight. Cheryl breaks several more glow sticks as they descend the stairs, walking at least one hundred meters. When they finally reach the base of the stairs, they are amazed to find that they are not in a tomb at all. They stand in a grand hall lined with passageways that spread out like a Japanese fan. Simone counts seven passageways in total. The tunnels are illuminated by the faint blue glow of bizarre crystals that are affixed to the walls in copper sconces. Cheryl looks back up the stairs, barely able to see the faint glow of the daylight at the top.

“I don’t like this place...” She murmurs, activating another glowstick.

“Fascinating!” The Professor exclaims.

He looks over the selection of hallways before them when something catches his eye. He turns and looks toward the walls of the grand hall, noticing the glint of a glossy paint that covers it. Approaching the paint, he touches it. It feels new, though it is not damp. He turns back to the hallways, and then his students.

“Pair up. We’ll need to explore this place in groups.” He tells them.

“I thought only American pigs suggested such terrible ideas.” Nolan snickers.

“Fuck you.” Mason snaps.

"You will show me some respect! In fact, I want you to walk with Mason!" The Professor barks at the Frenchman.

"What?!" Nolan exclaims in anger.

"Or would you rather I not include you in the list of students who helped make this discovery possible?" Professor Hamid smirks.

"... Fine! Let's go, pig." Nolan mutters to Mason.

"Whatever. Just don't go running away on me." Mason teases.

Professor Hamid points the men toward the leftmost tunnel, then directs Cheryl and Simone to the rightmost tunnel. The nervous Asim he takes along with him, walking through the central tunnel. His original plan is to walk to the tunnel's end, return to the hall, and repeat this for three more tunnels, before the entire group explores the last tunnel together.

"That sounds like a solid plan, Professor." Simone says.

"Yes. We will be back together shortly!" The Professor confidently exclaims.

"Yeah, what could possibly go wrong?" Mason murmurs sarcastically.

"Nothing, so long as you resist your natural urge to conquer every new discovery." Nolan says snidely.

"Isn't there a love triangle somewhere that you can join?" Mason retorts.

"That's enough out of you two!" Professor Hamid barks at the men. "In fact, there will be new teams. Asim will walk with Nolan, Cheryl with Mason, and Simone will come with me."

"Thank you, Professor." Nolan says happily.

"Ass hole." Mason mutters as Nolan walks away.

“Nolan and Asim will go right, Cheryl and Mason go left, while Simone and I will take the center. Walk the length of the tunnels and return here as soon as you are finished.” The Professor orders.

Chapter Three: Creature

The teams split off and take their respective tunnels. Though Cheryl tries to pass out glowsticks to everyone, Professor Hamid assures her that the tomb couldn't be large enough to get lost in, and rejects them; Simone follows her mentor's lead. Nolan disregards the offer and drags Asim off before he can accept them. Without the others cooperation, Cheryl decides to forgo the glowsticks herself, following Mason down their designated hall. Asim looks nervously around at the walls, which are elaborately painted. The artwork depicts an anthropomorphic lioness in battle, wielding a copper axe and slashing at her foes with sharp claws, severed heads at her feet.

“I don't like this place.” Asim nervously mutters.

“Is there any place you *do* like?” Nolan snickers.

“My home.” Asim replies.

“Hah! Until the lights go out, right?” Nolan chuckles.

Asim lowers his head as the Frenchman walks quickly down the hallway. The hallway is quite long and bends several times until they aren't sure what direction they are going. This structure is already far larger than any tomb they have ever seen or heard of. The tunnel soon opens into a large room that is lined with more tunnels and filled with stone furniture. Animal skin coverings are horribly damaged and faded, as though they were used to the point of being worn away. It looks eerily like a living room in a modern Egyptian home, minus any electronics.

“What /s this place?” Asim thinks aloud.

He examines a stone bench that bears a cheetah skin. Only small patches of fur remain on the hide to identify the animal. As he touches the covering, Nolan gasps and stumbles back. Asim turns as Nolan tries to speak, but his words are caught in his throat. The Frenchman spins around and races down the tunnel that he and Asim had just come from, desperately trying to return to the main hall as he abandons the Egyptian. Nolan’s heart races as he hears Asim scream, only for it to be quickly muffled and then silenced altogether. Nolan gasps for breath as his side begins to ache.

“Oh God. Please!”

He hears strange sounds quickly approaching him from behind as he runs as fast as he can. He is terrified of being caught by the bizarre shadowy figure that stood in the opening of one of the tunnels. The sounds grow closer and closer; the growling of a powerful beast, accompanied by a person running on hard dirt, but much softer. As he sees the end of the tunnel in the distance, he falls forward, slammed hard in his back. He falls face first onto the ground, splitting his lip. He tries to crawl away from whatever is following him but is held down by something draping itself across his back.

The creature quickly begins strangling him, it’s fingers wrapping around his throat and preventing him from calling out. Its powerful grip closes off his airway, sharp claws digging into his flesh. His vision fades as specks of black appear before him, dotting randomly before enveloping his sight entirely. In the opposite tunnel, Mason and Cheryl walk deeper into the tomb. Their passageway also twists and turns several times, making it difficult to discern their true direction.

“How long is this tunnel anyway?” Cheryl complains.

“Tired already?” Mason turns back to her.

“A little. That, and my back teeth are swimming.” She remarks.

As if on cue, the tunnel turns one last time, opening into a large room that is lined with several more tunnels and also filled with stone furniture. Near a wall is a stone table and several stone chairs, covered in horribly worn animal skins. Opposite that wall are several stone counters and a copper basin that looks suspiciously like a sink, sans a faucet.

“Is... Is this a dinning room?” Mason asks.

“I don’t suppose we’ll find a bathroom down one of these halls.” Cheryl remarks.

“Look, if you have to pee that badly, just pick a corner.” He chuckles.

“Are you daft?” She asks in shock.

“What?” He raises an eyebrow.

“Maybe you pioneers can squat behind trees, but I’m a civilized woman.” She continues.

“Hey, take a corner or fill your boots.” He laughs. “I won’t look. I’ll even step back into the tunnel if it makes you feel better.”

“But what about the tomb?”

“I don’t think the mummies will mind.” He smirks.

“... Fine... Go away and I’ll tell you when I’m done.” She grumbles.

Mason steps back into the tunnel they had just come through and walks until it turns. As he walks away, Cheryl sighs in frustration and begins to unbuckle her belt. She takes a corner away from all of the artifacts and faces the wall. Sliding her pants and panties down to her ankles, she squats in the corner and uses the wall to brace

herself. Mason crosses his arms and leans against the wall, impulsively looking at his wristwatch as he hums quietly to himself. He waits and waits, but Cheryl never calls him back into the room.

“Cheryl? Are you done?” He calls out to her.

He doesn't receive an answer. He checks his watch and sees that over five minutes has passed.

“Hello? Cheryl? ... Okay Cheryl, I'm coming back inside. If I see anything, you rescind the right to smack me; you should have answered.”

Mason walks back down the hall and turns the corner, returning to the room. To his shock, he doesn't see Cheryl anywhere. In the corner is a damp spot where she had relieved herself, but there are no other signs of her. He spins around, looking over the entire room, wondering if she is examining one of the artifacts in the room. He looks down the halls that are lit by the blue glow of the crystals, but she isn't visible in any of them.

“This isn't funny, Cheryl!” He calls out. “Come on!”

He looks over the tunnels, unsure which one she could have taken.

“Damnit...” He mutters.

He walks between several tunnels for a moment before finally settling on the tunnel to his right. He follows the passageway as it leads out of the room and into an unknown direction. He is certain he

can remember his path as he approaches a fork in the tunnel, choosing to take the right path. He calls out to Cheryl as he wanders the halls, hoping that she will be right around the next corner. He looks over the paintings on the walls, admiring the figures adorning them. He can't help but notice that every image depicts graphic violence; beheading, disemboweling, flogging and various forms of torture. The creatures on the wall delight in the gore, which unnerves him.

After taking a third fork, it opens to another room that looks more akin to a study. As he looks around the room, Mason finds Cheryl's bag of glow sticks and other assorted supplies. Some of the contents have spilled onto the floor, though the strap is pulled sharply in one direction, as though she let go while dragging it behind her. It sits near the entrance to yet another passageway, accompanied by a dab of blood. His heart begins to beat faster as he hears a shuffling echo throughout the hall. He clutches the bag tightly in his hands, looking down the hall where the sound emanated from.

"Cheryl? Are you hurt?" He calls out.

He doesn't receive an answer. He steps toward the hallway and focuses his eyes on a shadowy figure. The dim light from the glowing blue crystals ensconced on the walls only faintly illuminate the being. A bent elbow and hand just from around a corner. His pulse quickens.

"Stop playing games! It isn't funny!" He yells.

He takes step closer but stops in his tracks.

"This is the part in every horror movie where the audience yells at the dumbass to turn around and run..." He thinks quietly aloud.

He slings Cheryl's bag over his shoulder and takes a step back. Without saying a word, he turns and walks back down the tunnel he came from. As he approaches the fork, he is startled by a strange noise, like the patter of feet but much softer. He turns and his back bumps the fork. He spins around in a panic and loses his bearings. He can't remember what tunnel to take; they are all identical and the fork is perfectly symmetrical.

"God damnit..." He mutters.

A deep growling makes his heart race. Without rhyme or reason, he picks a tunnel and bolts, running as fast as he can. As he approaches a second fork, he takes a left turn, trying to retrace his steps. He hears the light patter of what sounds like bare feet a short distance behind him. The adrenaline flows as he sprints through a room that he never saw before. He knows that he is lost and traveling down the wrong passageway, but he can't stop now. He takes another left and runs through the hall, hoping to lose whoever is chasing him; they are not far behind.

His eyes grow wide and his heart sinks as the passageway spits him out into a small room with no other tunnels. The room is lined with stone cut chests and capped with stone lids depicting a lioness lying on her stomach. He spins around the storage room, desperate for any means of escape. He can only hope that he lost whatever was chasing after him. He turns around to retrace his steps and take a different tunnel, but gasps when he sees a shadowy figure standing just outside of the blue glow of the strange crystalline lamps. Mason stands frozen in terror.

It steps closer, revealing itself as it stands beneath the pale blue light. Its fingers and thumbs are capped with sharp claws, each at least an inch long. It stands nearly eye level with the American, who is five feet and ten inches tall. The humanoid figure has a feminine and slender frame, a subtle hourglass figure, and a modest

bust. The creatures' legs are humanoid until the knees, where they suddenly become digitigrade, with large paw-like feet like a dog or a cat. It wears traditional Egyptian female clothing, often depicted on artwork and in hieroglyphics. Her kalasiris is oversized at the base to facilitate quick movement. Her visible muscles on her arms and legs are well toned for a woman; she must be quite strong.

Her elongated skull is like a lion's, with triangular ears on either side of the top of her head. Her snout is short and broad, with a series of long whiskers on either side. Her head contains no hair, though she is covered entirely in a coat of shiny, golden colored fur. Her eyes glow an eerie dark blue, as if he were looking at a cat peeking out from underneath a bed. As she steps toward him, he can see that her actual eye color is a vibrant yellow, with round pupils. A thick tail sways behind her, tipped with a speck of white fur, which also appears as a tuft on her chest. Her visible flesh is light-pink.

His mouth hangs open as he stands in awe of the animal-woman, who is unlike anything he has seen before, except in artwork, games, and his own dreams. He takes a step toward her, now far more curious than afraid. She steps closer to him, mimicking his movements. She flexes her fingers as he they look each other over, her eyes scanning him from head to toe.

"Uh... Hello." He says to her.

She growls faintly and takes two more steps, the pads of her feet making a soft patter on the ground.

"My name is Mason. What is your name?" He continues.

He waves to her, but she suddenly rushes him. He stumbles back, bending his arms at the elbows as he holds up both hands. She

closes the distance between them in a matter of seconds. His back strikes the hard surface of the wall behind him, the cold stone sending a shiver up his spine as his heart begins to race once more. As she lunges at him, he turns his head away from her, his eyes closing tightly in anticipation. He hears a thump as her palms strike the wall. He opens his eyes slowly, his hands still in the air with her arms just over his. He turns to her, noting the short coat of golden fur that shrouds her flesh.

He slowly turns his head, gulping nervously. Her nostrils flare as she exhales hot breath on his face, their noses only centimeters apart. She growls like a jaguar, revealing long and sharp fangs like a lion, but proportional to her jaw. She opens her toothy maw which appears omnivorous. She glares menacingly at Mason and emits a subdued roar, as if trying to intimidate him. Her figure and face give her a youthful appearance, like a young woman in her early twenties. Though unnerved, he is far more intrigued.

“Do you have a name?” He asks her in a soft voice.

Her ears shift as he speaks, as though she were focusing on his words. Her sharp brow softens and her narrowed eyes widen. She closes her mouth, concealing her fangs. She leans closer to him and sniffs his skin, her warm nose brushing his flesh. She moves toward his neck as she seems to take in his scent. He turns his head nervously, inadvertently revealing his jugular to her.

“I don’t even know why I’m talking. If you can speak, it probably wouldn’t be English.” He thinks aloud.

At this point, he is talking to calm his own nerves as much as he is trying to communicate with her. She pulls her head back and shifts, moving her face before his so that he is looking at her. Her head turns slightly to the side while her eyes focus on his lips.

“Well, at least you’re cute.” He chuckles, certain she can’t understand him.

Her brow raises, as though surprised. She pulls her palms from the wall and stands before him.

“Why are you not afraid?” She suddenly asks him.

He can’t believe his ears.

“You... You speak?” He asks in amazement.

“Yes.” She answers.

“You speak English? How is that possible?!”

“I learned from your mind.” She replies.

“Wha? How? I...” He is at a loss for words.

“I read the meaning of your words as you spoke them; I learned what I needed.” She explains.

“So, you can read my thoughts?” He asks, suddenly feeling embarrassed.

“I am not allowed to delve so deeply into mortal minds.” She says.

He can’t believe what he is seeing and hearing. He is so curious that it morphs into a physical sensation beyond his ability to describe. He has so many questions, so many things that he wants to say to her.

“Wow...” He mutters.

“Why are you not afraid?” She asks him again.

"I uh... I am afraid." He admits.

"Yet you do not tremble or plead." She says.

"I am very curious. I have never seen someone like you before."
He begins.

"Someone?" She asks with a confused look.

"Yeah. You're beautiful; you're right out of a dream." He blurts out.

He feels his face flush with embarrassment as he sees her expression change from curiosity to utter surprise. He sighs, hanging his head as he looks down at the floor.

"My master demands that I bring you back." The woman begins.

"Master?" He looks up to her.

"Yes. You must come with me." She says, flexing her fingers.

"Okay. Lead the way!" He chirps.

He extends a hand, presenting the passageway that lies behind her. She blinks in surprise; fully prepared to take him by force, as she did his companions. She looks down at his hand and tilts her head, unsure of his meaning. She reaches out and takes hold of him, gripping his hand rather gently in hers. He feels his face flush as she grabs his hand, leading him down the halls. Her fur is soft, a pleasant warmth emanating from her skin. She walks at a steady pace, with long but slow steps. He walks beside her, repeatedly glancing over to her. Every so often, she glances back, even when he isn't looking at her.

"So, uh... Do you have a name, miss?" He asks her.

"Hemetre." She answers.

He recognizes the phonetics; an ancient Egyptian name that he has read on pottery and hieroglyphics. It dates back at least to the forth dynasty. As young as she appears, can she be so old? Perhaps this tomb hides an entire civilization? He wants to know all that he can about this woman.

"Hemetre is a nice name." He says with a smile.

"Thank you. Mason is a strange name." She remarks, glancing over to him.

"So, Hemetre... Who are you?"

"I am Hemetre." She replies, raising a brow in confusion.

"No." He chuckles. "I mean, tell me about yourself."

"I was once mortal like you, but I was given the gift by my master, whom I serve." She says matter-of-factly.

"... That's it?"

"Yes."

"What about family? There must be more like you." He asks.

"There are more. I have a sister, Seshemetka." Hemetre replies.

"Was she the body at the front steps?" He asks cautiously.

"No. That was Semat. She served my master with me but died when we were sealed within. Seshemetka lives in the Land of Two Fields. Only my master and I remain here." Hemetra explains.

She looks back at Mason, who is eager to get to know her. Though he asks several more questions, she remains reserved and reveals little. Her eyes glance down to their hands. He holds onto her gently, as if worried he might hurt her. His expression is pleasant as he tries to maintain a dialog. It is at that moment that Hemetre realizes how oblivious Mason is to his predicament. He follows her lead as she moves through passageways and walks from room to room. Hemetre makes no less than seven turns and tunnel changes as she takes him

to her master. Mason knows that he could never find his way out of the labyrinthian maze of the tomb without her aid.

After leading Mason for several minutes, they eventually come upon a large chamber. He gasps as he looks over the magnificent room. It appears to be a grand hall, lined with massive crystals that illuminate the floor and up to four meters high. The ceiling is vaulted and reaches at least four stories. At the center of the room and toward the rear wall is a large pedestal with scores of steps. Atop the pedestal is a large and hooded throne made of dark wood, with a being seated just within the shadows. Hemetre stands Mason before her master, and the being stands from their throne. It wears a hood that shrouds their face. The being's appearance feels very ominous to him. It walks slowly down the steps until it stands before him, leaving him in awe.

Chapter Four: The Master

Professor Hamid and Simone sit in the main hall. The central passageway led only to a single room with no other tunnels; an armory containing racks of ancient and disintegrating leather armor, and copper weapons from roughly the second dynasty. Though they were both eager to examine the find, they returned to the main hall to wait for the others so that they may explore the rest of the tomb.

"How long have they been gone?" Simone finally asks.

"Nearly twenty minutes." The Professor replies, checking his wristwatch.

"Don't you think that's long enough?"

"Yes, it is. These passages can't be *that* long. We should pick a passageway and look for them." He suggests, rising to his feet.

“Alright... Which one?”

Professor Hamid looks back and forth between the leftmost passage and the rightmost passage.

“This one.” He says, stepping up to the rightmost passage.

“Why not the left one?” She asks, raising an eyebrow.

“I have a better feeling about this one.” He replies.

“Okay. Let’s go.” She says, standing up beside him.

Professor Hamid leads them as he takes the right passageway. After following it for some time, they are surprised when it opens to a chamber that looks like a living room with stone furniture. Shifted dust on the floor appears to be a trail. Simon kneels down, looking at the path in the dust as it moves through one of the tunnels attached to the chamber.

“I think someone went this way!” She exclaims.

They follow the trail into the tunnel, jogging through the passageway. As it winds around, they stop when they hear a strange sound echoing through the hall behind them. They wait for a moment, but the sound doesn’t repeat.

“Did you hear that?” Simone asks.

“It could be a breeze flowing through the tomb.” Professor Hamid remarks.

“It sounded like an animal...” Simone murmurs.

“Don’t be ridiculous.” Professor Hamid chuckles.

They turn back as they hear pattering in the hallway behind them, accompanied by a low growl.

“L-lets move on.” Professor Hamid stammers.

Walking through the hall, they soon leave the tunnel and find themselves standing in a large room. They are amazed to find a large copper frame, like that of a bed. Ancient and worn looking cushions sit on the frame. A wrinkled blanket made of several animal hides sewn together gives the bed the appearance of having been recently slept in. A stone carved rectangular chest contains several drawers and a large tarnished copper mirror. The mirror is mounted on a copper base that sits atop the box; it looks strangely like a modern vanity, sans the lights. The entire chamber appears to have been built as sleeping quarters for whoever resides there.

“This is *not* just a tomb.” Simone thinks aloud.

As she examines the bed more closely, they hear the low growl, now much louder. They simultaneously turn to the tunnel they had just left, only for a creature to swiftly leap from the shadows. It tackles Professor Hamid and slams him onto the ground. Simone lets out a shrill scream as she stumbles back, scrambling to her feet. The creature grabs Professor Hamid’s hair and bashes the back of his head onto the floor, knocking him unconscious. Simone runs through the nearest passageway, the pattering of feet growing louder behind her. She wants to look back, but is too afraid to turn her head.

Suddenly, she falls to the floor as the creature slams into her back. She slams her elbow into the ribcage of the creature as it straddles her back, knocking the wind out of it and pushing it off of her. Simone rises to her feet and dashes down the hall, which enters a single room of storage chests. She spins around, but finds no other way out; she’s trapped, the creature blocking the passageway back

to the bedroom. As the pattering grows louder, she grabs the closest object to her, a large copper pitcher. She grips the handle and turns to the passage, ready to defend herself, but the creature is incredibly fast. It's already caught up with her.

It tackles her, slamming her down to the ground. The copper pitcher clangs loudly as she drops her only weapon. It rolls away from her as she struggles with the being, looking up in terror at her attacker. Hemetre straddles Simone's belly, gripping the girl's throat and squeezing tightly with incredible strength. Her claws press into the back of Simone's neck, piercing her flesh as she struggles to breathe. The cat woman looks down at the human with a twisted grin, as though she enjoys dominating her. Simone tries to push Hemetre off her, but her vision begins to fade. Within moments, she falls unconscious, her hands releasing Hemetre's arms and falling limp beside her body.

Simone comes too, her eyes slowly opening as she lifts her head. She immediately feels the tension of leather bindings on her wrists, which are tied behind her back. A large pole sits vertically along her spine, driven deep into the group. She turns her head, looking around the room. She appears to be in a grand hall with a series of steps in the center of the room and to her right. A series of eight poles sit on either side of the steps. The entirety of the archaeological team is tied to poles alongside her. The bizarre cat woman suddenly appears from behind her, checking the leather bindings that hold the others.

Aside from Simone and Mason, all of the others are still unconscious, some with blood seeping from head injuries. Simone coughs as she swallows, her throat sore from being strangled; she bears the marks of Hemetre's hands on her neck. Mason somehow looks untouched. He turns his head toward her, but glances at Hemetre as she checks his bindings. Hemetre grips his bindings, looking around the pole at him as they gaze at each other. Simone is shocked by their expressions; Mason appears far more upset than afraid, while Hemetre's brow softens, as though ashamed.

"I really wanted to be your friend." Mason laments.

"I am sorry, Mason. It was not my choice." Hemetre replies, bowing her head.

"What an adorable sentiment." An unseen voice chuckles.

Professor Hamid begins to come too, groaning as his head hangs low. The blood drips over his ear as his eyes slowly opens.

"It appears that some of our guests are awakening." The mysterious voice chuckles.

Professor Hamid looks up as he realizes that he's bound to a pole. He struggles against his bindings, looking frantically around the room. His eyes land on Hemetre as she walks from behind Mason, kneeling beside the American. Hemetre stares at Mason, who stares back at her.

"I have done as you asked." Hemetre speaks to the unseen voice.

"It can talk?!" Professor Hamid exclaims.

"Who? Hemetre? Of course she can!" Mason replies.

"It has a name?!" The Professor gasps.

"Yes, *she* does." Mason grumbles in frustration.

Hemetre's lips curl at the corners of her short snout, as she appears to smile. She looks down at the floor as she kneels beside Mason, as though she hiding her face from him.

"You are so defensive, Mason." The unseen voice says.

"Who is that?!" Professor Hamid calls out.

The being walks down the steps to the right of the bound explorers, revealing itself to them. It wears a flowing and hooded robe made of high quality linen, dyed a very faint purple. A long and thick tail sways, jutting from a slit at the buttocks of the robe. The being reaches for their hood with dainty hands, pulling it down and revealing a face and head similar to Hemetre's. The being removes their flowing robe, dropping it to the ground and exposing her female form, which is covered by a traditional network dress. The cordage does little to conceal her body, except for breast caps that cover her nipples. It is far more revealing than Hemetre's oversized kalasiris.

The anthropomorphic lioness looks at her prisoners, grinning sinisterly as she scans them with her gleaming yellow eyes. She bares her teeth as she stares at the terrified Professor. She walks slowly back and forth, examining the explorers. It doesn't take long for the others to begin to wake up.

"Are you Bastet?" Simone asks the being.

"Yes. I am known by that name. I prefer Bast, though." Bastet replies.

"Why are you doing this? You're the protector! The ancient Egyptians worshipped you!" Professor Hamid exclaims.

Bastet approaches the Professor, taking a knee before him as she reaches out a hand. Her tail coils over her waist and rests on her bent knee as she grips his clean-shaven face with her thin fingers, her claws pressing into his flesh. He tries to turn away, but she clenches his chin, turning his head and forcing him to look at her. She growls, bearing her sharp fangs.

"I am a goddess of war. I was *never* a protector. My servants must have changed that in my absence. It's good to hear that people

still know who I am. The priests did not succeed after all.” Bastet laughs.

“What priests?” Simone asks.

“What do you believe this place to be?” Bastet turns to Simone, still gripping Professor Hamid’s face.

“We thought it was a tomb.” Simone answers.

“You are wrong. This was my fortress. I was to conquer the lands of Egypt, and all that lay beyond. This was where I would spearhead that war. Unfortunately, my priests did not share my ambition and betrayed me. They killed Semat, one of my loyal subjects, and sealed us within. It feels good to know that I will soon be free.” Bastet explains.

“You will never escape. There are soldiers just outside with weapons you couldn’t comprehend.” Simone retorts.

“I’m not leaving the fortress, foolish girl. I’m going back to my realm! Several millennia of being trapped in this dusty crypt have made me realize that I don’t belong here anymore. I just want to go back home, so I will take my minion and return from whence I came.”

“So then why are we tied up?” Asim asks.

“I need energy to open the portal to my realm, but I have none left... I used it to place myself and my minion in a form of hibernation. Your collective sacrifice will be sufficient!” She chirps as she stands to her feet. “It will be quite nice, too. I haven’t had a sacrifice since just after Djoser’s rule... I so enjoyed the sacrifices made to me before the two lands united.” Bastet reminisces.

As Bastet speaks, the crew begin to panic. Professor Hamid and Asim both pray in Arabic as Cheryl weeps. Nolan beats his head against the pole he is tied too, muttering to himself to wake up. Simone tries to comprehend what is even going on, while Mason sits in silence. He looks to Hemetre, who is still kneeling beside him. His melancholy stare makes her repeatedly look down in shame, before glancing back up to him almost impulsively.

"It's time for the first sacrifice... Hemetre!" Bastet calls out.

"Yes?" She turns to Bastet.

"Why don't you choose the first sacrifice?" Bastet grins.

"Yes, master." Hemetre nods.

Hemetre turns back to Mason, before glancing over at his companions, considering her options. She looks back to Mason once more. Resigning himself to his fate, his stare softens and he smiles pleasantly at her. She smiles faintly back.

"Hemetre." Mason calls out softly.

"Yes, Mason?"

He motions with his head for her to come closer. Hemetre leans in, her face resting beside his.

"I'm sorry it didn't work out. I just want you to know that I'm not mad at you. It's alright." He says.

Hemetre leans back, unable to believe her ears. Her eyes turn glossy, watering as he forgives her for condemning him to death. She reaches out, gently stroking his cheek with the backs of her fingers.

"Of course he forgives it! Why wouldn't he?" Nolan grumbles.

"This is not her fault. We came in here on our own." Mason says.

"Her?" Nolan chuckles.

"She's sentient. She has a name and feelings, you ass hole!" Mason barks.

“Stop trying to be so altruistic because you want to fuck it, you sick bastard. It should do us all a favor and kill you first!” Nolan snaps.

Hemetre turns her head to Nolan. Her brow lowers and her eyes narrow as she snarls, pulling her hand from Mason’s cheek. She stands to her feet and steps in front of Nolan.

“You die first!” She growls.

“Mad that I insulted your lover?” Nolan snickers.

Hemetre swings her hand, smacking him across the face and gashing his cheek with her claws. Her cries out in pain as she moves around to the back of the pole. She removes his bindings, quickly grabbing him by the throat as she releases his arms. She drags him to his feet, his back sliding along the rough wooden pole. Mason can’t help but silently chuckle as Hemetre drags the Frenchman to her master. She slams him down onto the stone altar as Bastet takes a solid copper axe with a blade shaped like a pendulum. The axe was stashed within the altar itself; it bears dark stains on the blade and handle.

Hemetre climbs up onto the altar with Nolan, kneeling on his back. He struggles to breath as Bastet stands to his right. Hemetre’s tail sways side to side, flicking almost gleefully as Bastet swings the axe, lopping off Nolan’s head with a single swing. Blood spurts from his exposed veins as his head rolls onto the ground. Cheryl lets out a shrill scream and Asim prays loudly. Hemetre quickly hops off of the altar and takes Nolan’s head, grabbing it by the hair. She shows the head to his twitching body, before turning it to face her.

“You brought this on yourself.” She growls at the head.

Bastet giggles at Hemetre's intriguing behavior. She has never seen her minion act so offended by a mortal's words. Nolan's head blinks, as though it can comprehend her. Hemetre throws the head into the corner, then returns to the prisoners. She looks to Mason, who silently mouths 'thank you' to her. She smiles warmly at him. Simone reaches around at the base of her pole, looking for anything that can help her escape. Her fingers brush a broken piece of pottery, which she quickly hides between her fingers. She coils them and tries to saw through her bindings.

"That was quite the show!" Bastet exclaims. "But now it's time for the others to join him. I would like to take Mason next."

"What?!" Hemetre turns back to Bastet.

"You heard me. He was going to join them eventually."

"Can he go last?" Hemetre asks.

"Are you disobeying me?" Bastet narrows her eyes. "I should remind you that I now have power from the sacrifice."

Bastet raises a hand, which glows with faint blue sparks that seem to jump between the claws that crown her fingers. Hemetre bows her head and turns back. The expression on her face reveals her feelings to everyone; she does not want Mason to die. She kneels beside him and leans in. She rests her snout alongside his face, as though nuzzling him affectionately.

"Do you know where a mortal's soul goes when they die?" Mason asks her in a whisper.

"I do not." She whispers back.

"Oh..." He sighs sullenly.

"Why do you ask?"

"I was hoping that it was wherever you and Bastet are from, that way after I am dead, at least I would have you to talk to in the afterlife." Mason answers.

Hemetre leans back, a tear escaping from one of her eyes.

"It was very nice knowing you."

As he speaks, she decides that she cannot let him go so easily. She leans in and kisses his cheek before resting her snout alongside his face again. She rubs her snout gently against his cheek while making a faint purring sound.

"Sometime today..." Bastet sighs.

"I will do what I can to save you, but you must trust me. Will you trust me?" Hemetre whispers to Mason.

"Yes." He whispers back.

Hemetre moves around the pole, kneeling behind Mason as she takes hold of his bindings. She grips the leather strips and begins to remove them. She trembles in nervousness as she unties his wrists. As soon as the bindings are removed, he rubs his wrists and slowly stands up on his feet. He does not try to escape. He walks beside Hemetre, approaching Bastet as she waits with her copper axe. All of the remaining explorers, and even Bastet, watch in amazement as Hemetre presents Mason to the goddess. Hemetre does not attempt to restrain him.

"What is the meaning of this?!" Bastet growls.

"Forgive me, Bast, but I wish to ask something of you." Hemetre bows down before her master.

"You may speak." Bastet holds up a clawed hand.

"I ask that you consider granting your gift to Mason!" Hemetre quickly and nervously asks.

Bastet giggles, looking down at her prostrate henchwoman.

"You like him, don't you?!" Bastet exclaims derisively.

"I... He's different." Hemetre murmurs.

"He must be. The others you attacked on sight, except for him. You talked Mason into following you here. Now why would you do such a thing for a mortal man?" Bastet teases her, resting a claw on her bottom lip.

"Please consider it, master. I have never asked you for anything before, in several millennia of service." Hemetre pleads.

"You really don't want me to kill him..." Bastet's brow raises in shock.

"I like Mason, Bast. I do not want him to die. I want him to become like us; I want him to join us in our realm." Hemetre admits.

"Do you even want my gift?" Bastet turns to Mason.

"I do." Mason nods.

"What are you doing?!" Cheryl yells.

"She'll take your soul to Hell!" Asim exclaims.

"What about your friends?" Bastet asks.

"What friends?" Mason scoffs.

"You don't care about your companions?" Bastet presses him.

"I have two friends. One didn't enter the tomb, and the other lies at your feet." Mason replies.

Hemetre smiles as he speaks, looking over to him. Bastet scratches her chin with her claws, considering the possibility.

“Well, I did lose Semat... Pledge loyalty to me and I will grant your request; you’ll have all eternity to spend with Hemetre in our realm. She has served me well for thousands of years and deserves a mate anyway.” Bastet says with a sinister grin.

“Don’t do it!” Professor Hamid shouts.

Ignoring the others, Mason bows before Bastet, prostrating himself beside Hemetre.

“I pledge to serve you in this realm and the next, so long as I live, or until you release me. I will be your right hand, unless Hemetre is your right hand, then I’ll be the left.” Mason makes an impromptu oath.

Bastet giggles.

“Clever and amusing. I accept your pledge. Rise to your feet, Mason.” Bastet says.

Mason obeys and Bastet steps back. Hemetre knows what is about to happen and quickly rises to her feet as well, moving away from Mason. Using Nolan’s energy, Bastet charges a ball of lightning in each palm. Simone finally cuts through her bindings.

“You will make a very good left hand.” Bastet remarks.

Bastet throws the two balls of lightning at Mason, a small blast of brilliant bluish-white light illuminating the entire room. The light glows brightly, blinding everyone within for several seconds. Simone takes the opportunity to cut both Professor Hamid and Cheryl free, who are tied to the poles on either side of her. As the light begins to

dim, she finds Asim. She struggles to free him as the light grows dimmer, but there isn't time.

"Go." He quietly urges them.

Though initially reluctant to leave him behind, Simone and the others know that there is nothing they can do, and they can't trust Mason to help them. Leaving him bound to his pole, they dash through the room, staying close to the wall and entering the first corridor that they find. Asim looks on, his eyes wide and his mouth hanging open in awe as Mason is revealed. Still wearing his clothes, which grip his fur covered body, his shoes slip off as he steps out of them with a new set of digitigrade feet. Hemetre and Bastet watch him with little smiles, amused at how excitedly he examines his new form.

He turns back, admiring his new tail. He makes it sway, then briefly wraps it around his own waist. He looks at his clawed hands and feels his new snout. He runs his hands over his head; his hair is gone, with triangular ears at the top corners of his skull. He has a head with the appearance of a maneless lion.

"He's more excited than you were when I changed you, Hemetre." Bastet turns to her minion.

"Yes. It's cute." Hemetre murmurs, her tail swaying.

"Wow. This is amazing!" Mason jovially exclaims.

"I'm glad you are pleased." Hemetre says.

"Of course I am! So, am I pretty?" He jests, winking at Hemetre.

"Very." She coos.

They share a gaze and step before each other, while Bastet merely watches them in quiet amusement. Suddenly, Mason's ears prick, and he spins around. He hears the footsteps of his former

companions escaping through a tunnel. He growls and approaches Asim. Bastet and Hemetre already know that they have escaped, but have not said anything. They are both testing his enhanced senses, and his loyalty.

“Where are they?” Mason asks, kneeling before Asim.

“How should I know?” Asim snickers.

Mason smacks the Egyptian across the face, gashing him with his claws. He grabs Asim’s bearded chin, turning him to face him.

“Wrong answer.” Mason snarls.

“Go to Hell, demon.” Asim grumbles.

“After I drag you and the others back with me.” Mason says in a low and sinister tone.

“Go with Hemetre and track them down. Follow her lead. I’ll take care of this one. Once I recharge, we can all return home.” Bastet says, approaching Asim.

“You’ll like our realm. It’s much more beautiful than this world.” Hemetre adds.

Mason stands as Hemetre approaches him. She gently takes hold of his hand, drawing his attention. He turns and smiles warmly at her. Hemetre smiles back, leading her companion down the tunnel.

“Come! It’s time to hunt!” She happily exclaims.

Bastet stands before Asim, glaring at the bound Egyptian and bearing her copper axe. As her minions dart off and down the nearest corridor, Bastet forgoes the altar. She brings up her weapon as Asim sits tied to the pole, looking up at her with utter contempt. She grins

wide, bearing her teeth as she brings the axe down on the defenseless man.

Chapter Five: Seek And Destroy

The trio stick together as Simone leads them. She picks new corridors at random while trying to always stay in a relatively straight line. They dash through a small bedroom, and then a study. Cheryl begins to run out of breath, her pace slowing as she falls behind. Simone stops to help Cheryl, but Professor Hamid has no intention of risking death for anyone. Fueled solely by adrenaline, he shoves the girls over as he abandons them. Professor Hamid runs through a randomly chosen tunnel, quickly disappearing. Simone slips one of Cheryl's arms over her shoulder, helping her along.

They hear the patter of large paws echoing throughout the passageways. The beasts must not be far behind them. Simone and Cheryl move through the study, trying to keep up with Professor Hamid. As they approach the tunnel, they are suddenly thrown to the ground. Cheryl cries out as Hemetre straddles her back. Simone turns to the cat woman, but doesn't see Mason with her. She grabs the nearest object, a clay pot, and throws it at Hemetre. She blocks the pot with her forearm, the clay artifact shattering before her. Simone tries to tackle Hemetre, but the cat woman jumps up and dives to the side.

Hemetre spins, her palms on the floor as she kicks Simone's feet out from under her. Simone slams her head on the ground as she falls. Hemetre grabs the woman by her armpits and lifts her up. Simone can't believe how strong the cat woman is. She heaves Simone down the hall, who lands on her back which slams hard onto the ground. Simone groans in pain as she struggles to move. She looks down at Hemetre, who hisses at her and bears her teeth. She rests a paw-like

foot on Cheryl's back, holding her down as the beast glares at Simone. Hemetre points a claw at her, grinning sinisterly.

"I will return for you." Hemetre taunts her.

She leans over and grabs Cheryl by the throat. Hemetre pulls the terrified woman to her knees.

"Oh god, no!" Cheryl chokes out.

Simone can barely move, watching helplessly as Cheryl is dragged away by Bastet's loyal minion. She can only wonder where Mason is. Professor Hamid dashes from one room to the next, gasping for breath as sweat beads on his forehead. His side aches and his muscles burn as he finally enters a familiar room, the large bedroom where he was first captured by Hemetre. He stops to take a breath, glancing behind him.

"Hello, Professor." Mason calls out.

Professor Hamid looks over at the tunnel that leads back to the main hall. Mason stands in the entrance, his arms crossed as he leans against the wall. His tail sways as he glares at the Professor with golden eyes.

"Mason... How did you find me so quickly?" He asks.

"Part of the magic that transformed me also imparted me lovely memories of the fortress. I know this place like the back of my hand now... There's no escape, Ubaid." Mason grins.

"You don't have to do this!" The Professor pleads.

“Yes, I do. Bastet gave me immortality, an awesome new body, and a chance to see her realm. If handing you assholes over is the price, then so be it.” Mason chuckles.

“Please, Mason! You know me!”

“Yeah, well...” Mason smirks and shrugs his shoulders.

Professor Hamid takes a step back, slowly regaining his strength.

“Don’t make me chase you, Ubaid. You know I will.” Mason says.

He takes a step toward his former Professor, waving his fingers to show off his razor-sharp claws. He grins, bearing his teeth and narrowing his eyes. Professor Hamid spins around and races down a hall. He dashes through the corridor and into a large room that appears to be a workshop where clothing was once weaved. He turns back to the passageway, expecting to see Mason behind him. He sighs when he sees only an empty hall. He turns back to continue his escape, screaming as he sees Mason standing before him, his tail swaying. Mason quickly grabs Professor Hamid by his sides and lifts him off of the ground, slamming him into the wall as his feet hover nearly a foot over the floor.

“How did you get here so fast?!” Professor Hamid asks.

“I’m much stronger and faster now. You wouldn’t believe how incredible this feels.” Mason chirps.

“Please, Mason.” The Professor grunts in pain. “Pease just let me go.”

Holding the Professor up with only one arm, he reaches out a hand and grabs his throat.

“That’s not going to happen.” Mason says in a low growl.

He squeezes his throat, strangling Professor Hamid until he falls unconscious. Back in her hall, Simone slowly rises to her feet. She braces herself on the wall as she moves slowly down the corridor, a hand clutching her aching back. She takes a second tunnel, soon entering the large bedroom where Professor Hamid was first captured. Though she is in immense pain, the fear of death drives her to continue. She stays close to the walls, her shoulder leaning on the stone as she moves slowly through the bedroom. She enters the corridor, her legs weak as she finally returns to the living room.

She turns back, looking at the passageway behind her. She can’t help but feel guilty for failing Cheryl. She continues on through the long and winding tunnel that returns to the main hall. It feels like she has been walking for hours, and still Mason and Hemetre have not come for her. As she exits the corridor into the main hall, she collapses in pain, her head facing the long staircase to the surface. She struggles to lift herself up, first crawling, and then stumbling toward the stairs. She gasps and falls back when a dark shadow flashes past her. She turns around, looking for her pursuers.

“M-Mason? Hemetre?” She calls out. “You have the others! You don’t need me!” She cries out, her voice trembling.

She turns back to the stairs, crying out as Mason stands at the base of the steps and leaning onto a wall with one hand. He clicks his claws on the stone, grinning at her; a large fang protrudes from beneath his upper lip as he smirks.

“Please! I won’t tell anyone what happened here! Just let me live!” She sobs.

“I know you won’t.” Mason retorts.

He suddenly lunges at her, slamming her down to the ground and straddling her waist. She can't even speak as she falls onto her already injured back. Her eyes turn up to see Hemetre watching from one of the corridors. The cat woman's eyes are focused on Mason, a little grin on her face. She approaches the two and hands Mason leather strips. He ties Simone's wrists together in front of her chest as Hemetre watches. The cat woman rests a hand on his shoulder.

"I am glad you are here with me." Hemetre says softly.

"I am too." He says, looking up at her.

He rises to his feet and throws Simone over his shoulder like a single strap backpack. She reaches out for the staircase to the surface, watching her salvation shrinking as she is carted off by the beasts. She weeps loudly, occasionally crying out in the hope that someone will hear her; when the stairs disappear from her sight, she emits a shrill scream. An aggravated Hemetre takes an ancient linen cloth from the ground and jams it into Simone's mouth. The foul-tasting rag seems to stick to her lips and tongue, preventing her from spitting it out. The beasts return to their master, and Mason drops the woman onto the ground with a thud.

Simone looks around the room, trembling as she witnesses Bastet holding Cheryl's severed head in one hand, her copper axe in the other. She throws the girl's head in the same direction as Nolan's, before motioning to her minions. Mason follows Hemetre's lead, taking one of Professor Hamid's arms while she takes the other. With his hands bound before him, and still unconscious, they lay him over the altar. Without wasting any time, Bastet raises the copper axe and brings it down on Ubaid's neck, severing his head from his shoulders. She picks up the head and giggles, looking it over before throwing it with the others.

“Last but not least.” Bastet remarks, pointing at Simone.

Mason and Hemetre grab Simone by the arms, dragging her to the altar as she quietly sobs, the linen rag still stuffed into her mouth. She sees only the bloody ground at the base of the altar as Bastet’s shadow lifts its arms high. Bastet swings, cleaving off Simone’s head. Simone closes her eyes as her head rolls on the ground, wincing as her nose breaks from the impact. As Bastet grabs her by the hair, she opens her eyes to see her headless corpse atop the altar. Within seconds, her vision fades away, as does her life. Bastet chucks her head with the others, forming a small pile in a corner. She cleans the blade of her axe before returning it to the compartment in the altar.

“I have enough power to open the portal.” Bastet says excitedly.

She lifts her hands in the air as though posing, a large ark of bluish-purple lightning flashing between her palms above her head. She aims her palms and a jagged stream of energy emerges, forming into a ball. The ball flattens vertically, as though by an invisible rolling pin, morphing into the shape of a two-dimensional oval. The dark blue portal, with sharp and waving cyan edges, opens before the three creatures.

“It has been so long since I have gone home.” Bastet murmurs.

Her voice trembles as though she were about to cry. Hemetre stands beside her, and Mason beside Hemetre. He reaches out a hand, taking hold of Hemetre’s. She turns her head to him, her lips curling into a smile as he grins back at her. He gently interlocks their fingers together, softly squeezing her hand. Hemetre looks down at the simple display of affection, her heart fluttering in her chest.

**“Do not worry, Mason. Everything will be much better now.”
Bastet tells him.**

“It already is.” He remarks, his gaze fixed on Hemetre.

“I’m glad you are with me.” Hemetre says softly.

“So am I.” He chirps.

Hemetre leads Mason to the portal as Bastet holds it open. They step through it together, vanishing through the event horizon as their bodies touch the swirling blue light. Bastet enters behind them, the portal shrinking into nothing only moments later. The room is still and the lights from the glowing crystals fade, leaving the entire fortress in absolute darkness. They had been feeding off of Bastet’s energy the entire time. The musty air and blood leave the throne room fetid.

“Something isn’t right. Professor Hamid should have been back long ago.” Mohammed says to Captain Ayad.

“Alright. Put together a team. We’ll go in and find them.” Captain Ayad replies.

A crew of diggers enter the tomb, led by Mohammed. Though Captain Ayad does not go with his men, he sends his best and most loyal soldiers to accompany them. They find the strange skeleton immediately, and a few of Mohammed’s diggers flee in superstitious terror, calling out to Allah as they run away. Undaunted, the remaining men explore the amazing labyrinth, moving from room to room and marking their way with green and light blue glow sticks. After nearly thirty minutes of searching, they find the throne room, and the mutilated corpses of the remnants of the archeological team.

Clearly no one entered the tomb, as Captain Ayad and his men were guarding the entrance the entire time. The diggers were not responsible for the deaths, and the team did not behead themselves. The remaining diggers believe the tomb to be cursed by evil, and the

soldiers, with no evidence to the contrary, are inclined to agree. The soldiers and diggers remove the bodies and heads, returning them to the surface. Captain Ayad personally joins the search team when they reenter the tomb. Though they scour every centimeter, covering all corridors as they move through, they can't find Mason's body anywhere; he has simply vanished.

Even the stalwart Saeed Ayad is unsettled by Mason's disappearance, and the deaths of the team within the tomb. Everyone believes the tomb to be shrouded in evil. Captain Ayad prays for strength and guidance, and comes up with a plan. Entering the tent of collected artifacts, and without contacting his superiors, Captain Ayad's men destroy the ancient map to the various tombs, starting the fire on the corner bearing Bastet's symbol. The diggers blast the entrance to the tomb and cause a cave-in, sealing it forever. They don't even bother to remove any artifacts, thinking them all to be cursed with evil.

The diggers and soldiers work together to rebury the tomb beneath the sand, agreeing to blame the team's deaths on a terrorist attack. Alexei, the only one who did not enter the tomb, is persuaded by Captain Ayad and his men to stick with the story. They quickly pack up the dig sight and leave for the nearest Egyptian military base. Alexei sits in the open bed of a truck, waiting to be driven back to the base, where he will head for the nearest city and then back home to Russia. He doesn't want to stay in Egypt anymore, not after what happened.

He sits in the back of the truck, watching the wind blowing the sand into the partially filled hole above the tomb. It will soon be unrecognizable to the dunes. The only evidence remaining is Mason's sketch book. Alexei examines the drawing of the strange skeleton. His eyes well with tears as he closes the book. He knows that he cannot keep it. With sorrow in his heart, he tosses it from the back of the truck like a frisbee. It lands in the sand, a strong breeze blowing golden dust over the book. Like its author, it will never be seen again.