

# THE HALF-MUSEUM ADVENTURE SERIES

## Uncanny Valley



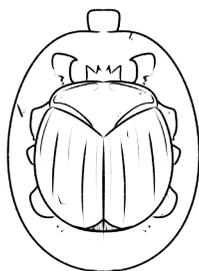
TAMARA TESORIERO

TAMARA



THE HALF-MUSEUM  
ADVENTURE SERIES

Uncanny Valley



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FIRST DRAFT - NOT FOR  
PUBLISHING  
Act II hieroglyphs photo by Jeremy  
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# Prologue

## *Uncanny Valley*

“I’m impressed, Marta.”

The Director hummed in satisfaction. Stalking around his captive, he breathed in the chamber’s musty air. He closed his eyes, letting the familiar scent roll into his lungs – the smell of dust and dirt and days gone by.

It felt good to be back where they both belonged - together.

Marta Vera knew better than to struggle. A lifetime of grave robbing had led to many encounters like these – held captive and bound to some uncomfortable piece of furniture. It came with the territory.

Flaring her nostrils, she withheld a sneeze. Much like him, the familiar scent uncovered old memories. The Director always thought he was clever - that's why she had to keep an eye out for him. After retiring, she let her guard down.

He never did.

He found her now, somehow. Though inevitable, she only wished it came several decades sooner. Now, her eighty-year-old back ached against a rickety old chair. He appeared early in the morning, sedated her in her kitchen, and then had his goons drag her into this ratty little room. The least he could do was give her a pillow. Then again, he never knew how to treat a lady.

Despite her ire, Marta knew that she had to be careful. She knew him well enough to trust that he had covered all his bases – especially now that he was old and mad. Even if she could wrangle herself free, there was a slim chance of getting away unscathed.

She strained her ears to gauge his movement. His footsteps were uneven, an off-beat echo on the stone floor. Following his footsteps was the sound was a solid tap - a cane. Blind in the dark, Marta listened on, waiting for the sound to circle in front of her. *Maybe I can get a kick in*, she thought to herself.

The awkward pacing stopped beside her.

There was the click of a lighter. Then, a flame.

*Clever*, Marta mused. Illuminated in yellow was a familiar face –

a long-lost friend. He didn't quite look the way she remembered. His face was old and withered, dried out by decades of sun.

Standing to her left, The Director puffed away at an old pipe. To him, she looked the same as always – linen clothes and braided hair.

“You've aged.” He spoke through a puff.

The light went out.

“Charming,” Marta scoffed, “you look like a donkey's-”

Another flame burnt her nose.

Marta jerked in her bindings. The Director was in front of her now, his face only inches away from hers. He stared at her, his pale, sunken eyes shimmering with something she couldn't quite describe.

“Welcome to your scheduled programming.” His words escaped with a puff of smoke. The little flame between them trembled and faded, submerging them both in the chamber's darkness.

TAMARA

ACT I

# A HERO'S CALL



SAMIRA HAMAD

STARRING  
LAURA VERA

CARLTON DUBE

## Chapter 1

“Aw come on, Laura! Admit it, Harrison Jones is the best movie series of all time.”

Some people used their hands when they spoke. Carlton liked to use his whole arms. He’d wave them about, completing each sentence with a great arc. Laura and Samira always had to walk a step behind him.

“They’re historically inaccurate,” Laura argued, “that’s heresy, and I’m no heretic.” She huffed, folding her arms dramatically. Though she was only joking, she knew that Carlton would die on this hill.

“What?” Carlton scrunched his nose in confusion. He walked backwards to face his friends.

“Heresy. It means that your opinion is wrong.” Samira rolled her eyes. To her, the only thing less impressive than Carlton’s vocabulary was his taste in films. Harrison Jones was low-budget, poorly written blockbuster garbage; and they had just spent their last two periods watching the latest instalment: *Harrison Jones and the Golden Chalice*.

“Excuse me?” Carlton shrieked, “I am a connoisseur. I know

good movies when I watch them!”

“Really? Spell connoisseur then.” Samira liked to challenge Carlton this way, and Carlton liked to play along. It was their thing – so long as neither took it too far. Laura knew this, just like she knew they were fast approaching each other’s breaking point.

“Look,” she intervened, “the only cool thing about Harrison Jones is the archaeology, and that doesn’t even count since none of it’s real.”

“But what about the magic? And the martial arts? And the booby traps?” Carlton whined, “Those things are *actually* cool!”

“He has a point there,” Samira added, “you have a bias.”

“Bias?”

“A preference.” She clarified for Carlton.

That much was true – Laura certainly preferred dusty artefacts over magic relics and kung-fu. She was walking her friends to a museum, after all.

“Where did you learn all these new words?” Carlton went on.

“They’re on our spelling list.”

“But we only have spelling tests on Wednesdays? It’s Friday!”

“It’s good to be prepared.” Samira shrugged.

“A week in advance? Nobody does that!”

“They do if they’re in the top ten.” Laura chirped, poking Samira in the side, “I saw your name on the newsletter.” She gave her friend a warm smile. Blushing, Samira only shrugged it off. She barely made it onto the list – and that was only after hours of after-school tutoring.

“Ha! You see! You’re the smart one – that means you have to at least enjoy Harrison Jones a tiny bit.”

Laura groaned. He’d go on about this for days if they let him. He’d try to convince anyone of anything – so long as he had enough time to talk their ear off. Fortunately, they were close to the museum now. There, they’d find something else to talk about – or she’d at

least use the displays to prove him wrong.

*History is cool.* She reminded herself, now feeling a little insecure about her comments. Harrison Jones was kind of tacky, but it was also fun to watch. Their history teacher let them watch it as a reward for finishing their section on Ancient Egypt a week early. She, Carlton, and Samira quietly shared a packet of chips while watching – major contraband in Mr Moodley’s class.

She’d remember to tell Carlton she was only joking. For now, she needed to make sure they all got to the museum in one piece.

“I guess he’s kind of handsome.” Samira shrugged.

“Ew!” Carlton gagged.

“Yeah, that’s kinda gross.” Laura wrinkled her nose. Harrison Jones was dad-aged.

They stopped at a small intersection. As usual, the little corner was busy at this time of day. It turned onto the main street, which had a strip of buildings – none of which were the same shape or size. In the middle of the strip was The International Half-Museum – their after-school hangout.

It was taller than all the other buildings, thanks to the extra floor that Laura’s grandmother had built. To make it stand out even more, the walls were painted bright blue, and the window frames canary yellow. There was no way anyone could miss it among the rest of the street’s grey and brown. Even if someone did miss the building, they couldn’t ignore the light-up sign hanging over the doorway.

Finally, the robot turned green.

“Laura!” a shrill voice called down the street. It was Ms Coetzee from the flower shop. Laura cringed. She hoped that they could get past with just a wave.

“Laura, how are you? Are you well?” Ms Coetzee was a sweet lady, she just talked too much about nothing. She quickly hobbled over to the trio, her costume jewellery clanging with every step.

“Hello, auntie.” Carlton was the first to speak.

“Auntie? Do I look like an auntie?” she gasped, her hairdo

ruffling like a crown of feathers “For you it’s Ms. Coetzee.” She rolled her r’s.

“How are you, Ms Coetzee?” Laura intervened, hoping that this exchange would end soon. She wanted to escape the summer heat and knew that her friends wanted the same. They only stayed with her to be polite.

“Oh, I’m well,” she waved her arms emphatically, “how's school? What grade are you in?”

Here we go.

“School is good.” Laura started.

“We’re in grade seven.” Samira finished for her.

Maybe it would go by quicker if they worked together.

“Aw, that’s lovely! High school next year. You know, my son matriculated last year, and he...”

This was too much. They had to take extreme measures.

“Oh!” Carlton gasped, “Oh I need the bathroom!” he clutched his stomach.

“Oh no! We better go inside then!” Samira played along, holding Carlton’s shoulder.

“Here, take my bag!” He slung his overstuffed bag at her, almost winding her with the force of it. Carlton was the type to pack all his schoolbooks at once – even if he didn’t need them.

“Sorry Ms Coetzee, we have to go.” Laura tried to sound apologetic. She wasn’t a very good actress.

“Okay,” Ms Coetzee watched Samira haul Carlton towards the museum, “just remind granny to fetch her flowers. She hasn’t come down yet.” she pulled Laura into a hug.

“She hasn’t?” Laura struggled to breathe through her perfume. That was strange – her grandmother was very strict about her routine. She always collected the entryway's flowers early in the morning.

“Laura, it’s locked!” Samira called from the museum entrance.

“Hurry!” Carlton whined.

“I’ll let her know.” Laura flashed an insincere smile before turning to help her friends. She dug down to the bottom of her bag for her spare keys – the ones she kept for emergencies.

## Chapter 2

Laura struggled to unlock the entrance gate. Her ring of keys was a hefty stack, and none of them were labelled. After some jiggling and jangling, and theatrics on Carlton's part, she finally managed to wrangle the gate open. After that, they only had to push into the entryway through a pair of ancient French doors. Carlton was the first to stumble inside, wailing until he reached the middle of the entryway – a musty little room that served as the museum's makeshift ticket office. Once visitors collected their tickets, they could climb up a staircase to the rest of the museum's exhibits.

Fortunately, they didn't need to buy any tickets, since Laura's grandmother, Marta, owned the place. They had free roam of almost the whole building – only the back alley and roof were off-limits, for safety reasons.

"You should tone it down," Samira shoved his schoolbag into his arms, "otherwise they'll figure out you're just acting."

"Psh, no they won't." Carlton dropped his bag next to the staircase, "Grown-ups never ask questions when you have a belly ache. They just want to avoid a mess."

"Gross!" Samira gagged.

Laura felt her own stomach start to moan. She felt nervous about her grandmother – so much so that she also left her bag next to the stairs and pushed past Carlton on her way up.

Laura’s grandmother was almost eighty years old. Despite her lively nature, she was growing frailer by the minute. She had stopped taking some of her medicines, Laura recalled from a conversation she overheard between her mother and grandmother.

Anything could have happened.

With each step up, her uneasiness rose into her throat. There, it settled as a painful lump, stinging against her windpipe. Laura cursed at herself. Her nerves were already far too high. She swallowed them down. It was too soon to jump to conclusions.

Her grandmother could be just fine.

Maybe she took the day off – though she never took days off.

Maybe she didn’t feel like going downstairs today – was she ill?

Maybe something distracted her – had she fallen on her way out of her apartment?

Laura shuddered. The museum had two dangerously steep and narrow staircases. The one Laura and her friends were now climbing, and another that led up to the second floor. She quickened her pace up the splintered stairway, stomping hard enough to shake the rails. Her friends trailed behind her, their feet also thudding to match her pace.

Laura’s buzzing mind drowned out their bickering.

The narrow steps eventually lead to an archway – the museum’s first floor. A neon sign hung above it:

## NATURAL HISTORY

This was where the exhibits began. Entering this section was always a surprise at first, standing in great contrast to the dark and dusty entryway. Natural light spilt through Victorian windows, flooding the room with a pleasant glow. Here, the linoleum flooring replaced the entryway’s ugly green carpet. The trio’s shoes clicked against the plastic tiles. They were added in the 1970s when Laura’s

grandmother, had just bought the place. Now on even ground, Laura walked even faster on the ugly, mosaiced tiles, sliding her feet as she went. Her friends struggled to keep pace.

Together, their footsteps travelled in a scattered rhythm across the exhibit. Despite the museum's name, it was by no means half-full, half-accurate, or half as interesting. Its name stemmed from its novelty – the tightly packed displays were reserved for only half-artefacts. Half a pot, half a spear, and even half a fabled unicorn horn, the museum was an overwhelming collection of half-things.

So overwhelming that it was easy to get lost in its clutter.

Throughout her career as an archaeologist, Marta accumulated a vast array of different artefacts. She curated the museum to display them, and so had to maximize her use of the space to fit them all. Glass cases and concrete pedestals were packed across its two floors, while its walls were flooded with framed texts and pinned insects – which were almost always split perfectly in half.

Once you overlooked the cluttered, half-artefacts, the museum was like most others: uncanny. Some of the artefacts lived in special displays – tiny dioramas and environments frozen in time. Others were floating treasures – untouchable in their glass cases and illuminated by display lights. One would think it would have an awe-inducing effect – to see such things up close in a time when they no longer existed. In this regard, the Half-Museum fell half short. Despite its enormous collection, visitors were often frustrated by only seeing half of something already old and ruined. Feeling cheated, they never came back.

In this way, The International Half-Museum was a one-time destination for curious onlookers and bathroom-users. It was a quiet place – cool during the summer and warm in winter, and perfect for relaxing after school.

Laura felt anything but relaxed right now.

Her hands were balled into fists, stiffly swinging at her sides while she speed-walked across the Natural History exhibit. By now, Carlton and Samira had stopped bickering and were putting their best

efforts into following her. Running wasn't allowed in the museum, so they had to find other ways to get a hold of her.

“Laura!” Samira’s voice rang out across the quiet space.

“Wait for us!” Carlton finished for her.

Slowing to a stop, Laura looked over her shoulder to her friends. *I should probably tell them what’s going on*, she thought to herself, feeling a little embarrassed for getting so carried away. “Sorry guys,” she said, “I just think we need to check on gran. It’s weird for the museum to be locked up so late in the day.” She gestured around the room. Even the windows were closed, trapping both their echoes and the dusty air.

“I thought so too,” Samira said through a breath, “about it being weird, I mean.”

“Maybe she just wanted to take a break today.” Carlton shrugged, “Or she forgot.”

“I don’t think so,” Laura shuffled backwards among a clump of pedestals, “she doesn’t take breaks. The museum’s even open on Christmas.”

“We should check on her, then.” Samira pushed forwards, now walking close to Laura as they shuffled through to the next floor.

Up, past another flight of rickety wooden stairs, was the entrance to the second floor. Like before, this one also had an archway with a neon sign:

## CULTURAL HISTORY

This was Laura’s favourite exhibit. The preserved animals and fossils downstairs were cool, but this was where the real fun began. Like the previous floor, it was packed full of half-artefacts. These were dedicated to human history. Roman coins, Mongolian swords, Mesopotamian pottery – it was all half-there.

This was also her friends’ favourite exhibit. Though, for slightly different reasons. Right in the middle of the room was a red granite table with matching benches. This was where they spent most of their time playing games, doing homework, or watching movies on

Marta's old laptop. Carlton brushed his hand over the sparkly surface when they walked past. Despite being exposed to the summer sun, the stone was still pleasantly cool.

They continued to the back of the exhibit. Here, there were two niches on opposite sides of the back wall. The one on the left was a doorway to Marta's office – where she did all her work stuff; while the one on the right was a doorway to her apartment – where she watched her shows and prepared their lunch.

“We should check her office first,” Laura felt hopeful, “she might just be in meetings with the university or something.”

This was a possibility. Although Marta was retired, she still contributed to a local university and even hosted seminars from time to time. Sometimes, she'd take on an intern, who was more interested in their cellphone than the artefacts they were cataloguing.

With a last glance at her friends, Laura knocked on the door.

There was no response.

So, she knocked again.

And again, before trying to open it herself.

“It's locked.” She announced. Another lump tickled her throat. Her nervousness spiked, confirming her earlier suspicions that something might be wrong. Quickly, she crossed over to the other niche.

Sensing her friend's worry, Samira followed closely. Laura and Marta were close – they spent almost every day together. If something really was wrong, her friend would need all the support she could get.

They were at the second door when Carlton spoke, “Um, guys,” he was still several paces behind them, “I think you should see this first.”



### Chapter 3



Although the museum’s layout was chaotic, Marta had enough sense to at least categorize her collection. Laura, Samira, and Carlton stood at the edge of the Egyptology display – a section on the far-right hand side of the Cultural History exhibit. This section housed the largest part of Marta’s collection. Now, it was also the biggest mess. There was glass all over the floor, pooling in shards around toppled sculptures and pedestals.

Someone had broken into the museum.

Laura stood frozen, staring at the shattered display case. Inside was an empty wrought-iron stand, partially illuminated by a beam of sunlight. Still and rigid, it almost looked like its own display among all the chaos.

“They’ve taken the scarab.” she was the first to speak.

“The scarab?” Carlton asked.

“The scarab.” Samira confirmed.

“That’s not good.” Carlton swallowed.

The shattered case was supposed to house one of Marta’s most prized possessions: half an ancient Egyptian scarab carved from a piece of lapis lazuli. Suspended by a wrought iron stand, the gold-

flecked stone was a pretty sight.

“Is it expensive?” Samira looked towards Laura.

“Not to anyone else.” Laura kept her eyes on the display, “Whole scarabs are easy enough to find. Nobody would want half of one.”

This was true. Scarabs were popular in ancient Egypt – as emblems, jewellery, even paperweights. Marta’s scarab was half of an amulet, which was likely once worn by someone wealthy enough to afford it.

“Did it belong to someone important?” Carlton also turned his head to look at her.

Laura shrugged, “Gran said she found it in an unmarked tomb. Egypt’s full of those.”

The museum’s silence suddenly felt very loud. *Something’s definitely wrong*, Laura shuddered. Her feet felt like they were nailed to the ground. She had to put in extra effort to turn around and run back to her grandmother’s flat.

Her knuckles hurt from knocking so hard, “Gran!” Laura called through the door. “Someone’s broken in!” she tried the handle. Expecting the door to be locked, she gave it a firm push, only to tumble through the doorway. Although a little smelly, the carpeted floor felt soft against her cheek.

“Are you okay?” she heard someone say while she sat up on her knees.

“Gran, are you there?” back on her feet, she stepped further into the apartment. The television was on, flashing white and blue in the darkened room. A pair of voices blared through the speakers – one a rugged timbre, and the other a rasping whine.

“Check if she’s in her room!” Laura instructed her friends.

“She’s definitely not sleeping!” Samira raised her voice over the cheesy dialogue. Stumbling towards the lounge, Laura tried to turn the volume down. Marta’s tv was a big grey box with a hazy screen – and the remote was so old that all the writing had rubbed off the buttons. To make matters worse, her grandmother had a habit of

losing the tv remote in the mountain of pillows on her couch.

Fumbling in the dark, Laura never found the remote.

What she did find was a yellow note stuck to the blurry TV screen.

*Weird*, she thought, only spotting it after trying to turn the volume down manually. She lowered the volume with one hand while reaching for the note with the other. Laura knew that her grandmother was a little eccentric but leaving a sticky note on her television was a new level of cooky:

*Dear Laura,  
Don't worry, Marta is with me.  
Do me a favour and read this out loud:  
As above, so below,  
Come on guys, let's start the show!  
(A clever spell, isn't it?)  
– The Director*

The light turned on. “She’s not in the bathroom or her bedroom.” Samira tried to sound confident, but Marta’s sudden disappearance started to rattle her as well. “Laura?”

Laura stood in front of the television, staring at the note in her hand, “Someone left a message.”

“A message?” Samira peered over her shoulder to get a better look, “Who from?”

“I dunno.”

Carlton joined them, completing a semicircle in front of the TV. Laura pressed her lips together. Was this a joke? Had her grandmother actually been kidnapped? If that was the case, then this was a really weird ransom note. Usually, kidnappers at least asked for some money – maybe that was only a thing in crime shows.

## Chapter 4

“She’s been kidnapped!” Carlton dug his hands into his hair. He paced around Marta’s pink living room. “Our parents are *never* going to let us come back here!”

“That’s your concern? Mrs Vera is *missing*, Carlton!” Samira hissed at him, sparing a glance at Laura. She sat on her grandmother’s plastic-covered couch, looking so pale that she turned green.

“We have established that, Samira.” Carlton crossed his arms, “What do you suggest we do?”

“Call our parents!”

“And then what? They’ll just call the police!”

“Exactly!”

“We might as well call them ourselves!”

“Then why don’t we?”

“Because we can’t.” Laura intervened with a shaky voice, “She doesn’t have a cellphone. She only uses the landline in the office.”

“Okay, so let’s use the landline.” Carlton offered.

“The office is locked, remember?” Samira replied.

“Aren’t the keys in here?”

“Gran wears the keys around her neck.”

Silence washed over the room. Carlton held his mouth open, bobbing it open and closed like a fish. “And you don’t have spare keys? On that whole keychain of yours?”

Laura shook her head no, “I only have the keys to the entrance. The rest are my house keys.” She explained.

“Well, that’s convenient! Why wouldn’t she give you spare keys?” He waved his arms with every word.

“Carlton, I think you’re missing the point-” Samira kept her voice level. Laura was already upset, blaming her for things wasn’t going to help.

“Don’t tell me that! We’re locked in this museum, which is also a *crime scene* organized by *psychos*! Don’t you see how ridiculous that is?”

“Yes, but-”

“Not to mention that everything’s been laid out so perfectly. I can’t be the only one who noticed the dramatic lighting at the Egyptology exhibit. Or the fact that the TV was left on to creep us out! Look at it,” he pointed to the screen, “it’s even Harrison Jones. How creepy is that?”

“It does seem coincidental-” Samira grit her teeth. Carlton wasn’t letting her get a word in. Once he got like this, it was difficult to stop him.

Laura closed her eyes, trying to sort through her buzzing thoughts. Her grandmother could be anywhere with that psycho, and all they had was a stupid poem to read out loud? Who even does that? Not to mention that they also stole Marta’s scarab, one of her least valuable and most favourite items. It didn’t make any sense.

“The person who took her must have known her well.” She reasoned out loud.

Carlton stopped ranting. He swung around to face her. Samira also tuned in to her reasoning.

“They can’t have taken her for money. Gran isn’t famous, and that scarab isn’t worth much. If they wanted money, they would have taken the artefacts made of gold or precious stones.” She continued, “This is about something personal.” She looked down at the note. The lump in her throat vibrated with every word, making her voice crack in all sorts of places. Still, she swallowed hard. It was too embarrassing to cry in front of her friends.

“See!” Carlton’s voice cracked, “This is a setup! They knew we’d come here.” He crossed his arms.

“Well, then we should call for help.” Samira suggested, “We can ask Ms Coetzee or Mrs Stevens spaza shop.”

“Can I see that note?” Carlton sat next to Laura. He read over it again. “Hm. This feels weird - like we’re in a movie or something.”

Laura took the note back from him, feeling even more unsettled by Carlton’s suggestion. What he was saying did make sense – this all felt very staged. Like they were supposed to find the crime scene and note in the way they did. Now, the only thing left for them to do was read the note out loud.

“Are you hearing yourself? This is a serious problem and you’re suggesting it’s a movie?”

“Well, it’s more realistic than believing in magic! Look, the note even says it’s a spell!” He argued.

“It’s definitely a clue.” Laura held up the sticky note. It was blank on the back, “Maybe we should figure it out before asking for help.” She knew it was a stupid suggestion, but she didn’t trust that the grown-ups would take them very seriously – especially with their theory that this was all some sort of setup.

“What?” Samira was also on the couch now. The plastic cover squeaked when she leaned over to look at Carlton. He rubbed his chin, considering the idea.

“What’s the worst that could happen?” He shrugged. Laura shrugged back. Samira stared on in shock.

“We’d be wasting more time! Magic isn’t real.” She scoffed. She

was right, magic wasn't real, but that only confirmed there was no harm in trying.

"It's only three lines," Laura reasoned, "it'll be quick."

"I'll read it with you." Carlton offered, adjusting his glasses to see the letters better.

"Fine." Samira pouted, "I will too." She didn't want to miss out on anything – especially if it meant she could prove her friends wrong.

Leaning in to read the note, Samira counted to three.

"As above, so below. Come on guys, let's start the show." Their voices jumbled into the short rhyme.

Nothing happened.

Laura was disappointed, though she also didn't know what else to expect. Reading the note aloud wouldn't magically show her where her grandmother was.

"Maybe we need to use more inflexion." Carlton scratched his chin.

"Or maybe it didn't work because magic isn't real." Samira rolled her eyes.

Laura leaned back into the couch. There was a strange itch on the back of her neck. It could have been her anxiety, though it felt more like a breeze. "Hey guys, do you feel that?"

"What?" Samira's voice sounded fuzzy.

Laura spoke again, but no sound came out. It was like the air got sucked from her lungs. A strange rush washed over her, pulling her deeper into the couch cushions. Feeling the need to brace herself, she scrunched the note into her fist.

Then, everything went dark.

ACT II

THE START OF A JOURNEY



WRITTEN AND DIRECTED BY  
GLEN WILSON

FEATURING MARTA VERA  
AND AHMED SAMIR

TAMARA



## Chapter 5

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Laura opened her eyes wide, straining to see in the dark.

The note was still in her grasp, itching the skin of her palm. Was this real? Did the spell actually work?

An incredible force sucked her into the dark, wrapping her body in hair-raising static. For a split second, she felt weightless – as though time had stopped. Then, she fell backwards and landed with a loud crack. The lumpy floor absorbed the static sensation, replacing it with a cold hardness. Winded by the sudden drop, she gasped for air.

Her breath scraped down her windpipe, leaving an itchy trail behind. Her chest heaved, coughing into the darkness. Something coated the inside of her throat.

Dust.

The earthy smell hung in the stagnant air around her. She tried to sit up, fighting through the pins and needles in her arms and legs.

“Guys?” she croaked, “Are you there?”

Silence.

Panic buzzed in her ears. Laura swallowed, still battling with her itchy throat. Blind and vulnerable, she searched for something – anything – recognizable. With the note still in her fist, she used her

free hand to feel the ground. Sand gathered in between her fingers. She squeezed her fingers, clumping the soft mounds into her nails.

“I’m here.” Samira’s voice trembled in the dark. Laura stiffened at the sudden sound, before releasing a shaky breath. At least she wasn’t alone.

“Are you okay?” Laura spoke.

“I think so,” Samira’s voice was close by, “what happened?”

“I’m not sure-”

There was a loud groan, followed by a series of thumps. The girls stilled and held their breath. The thumping continued, rattling the air with each leathery thud, “I hate pins and needles.” Carlton whined, shaking his legs to rid himself of the prickly sensation. The girls relaxed, glad that it was only him. He thrashed as he spoke, “Where are we, anyway?”

“I don’t know. This isn’t anywhere in the museum.” Laura said, also shaking her limbs.

“Oh, God.” Carlton stopped thumping, “The spell worked!”

“Carlton.” Samira hissed, “Keep your voice low. We don’t know if someone is listening.” She turned her head to where she supposed he was.

They heard him slap his hands to his mouth. Samira was right, their location didn’t matter if they were in bad company.

They sat in silence for a bit – waiting a captor to arrive, for something to happen.

Nobody came.

Relieved, Laura was the first to move. She tried to stand. Her legs trembled as she rose, feeling heavier than usual. Alarmed by the new sensation, she felt about herself. On her hips was a heavy belt, weighed down on either side. Dropping the note, she slid her hands over her waist. On her right hip was a heavy cylinder with a dip on the top end. A torch! She hurriedly clasped her hand around it, using the little strength in her still-numb arms to pull it out. After some struggle, she managed to wrangle it free with both hands.

It rattled while she felt for the switch.

“Carlton!” Samira hissed again.

“It’s not me!” he snapped back.

“I found a torch!” Laura’s voice was followed by a mechanical click, and then a bright flash. They all hissed and groaned at the sudden intrusion, blinking away the spots in their vision.

“You were carrying that this whole time?” Carlton said, rubbing his eyes.

“No... well. I mean. Maybe?” Laura blinked.

Although the torch didn’t offer much illumination, it was enough to reveal their immediate surroundings. Samira was the first to recover. She stood up from the sandy floor, noting the dusty ruins around her. With a glance, she caught sight of her friends and almost tumbled back onto the ground.

She shut her eyes hard, worried that she had a concussion. Slowly opening them, she looked again. It was the same picture. She looked down at herself, patting her clothes to confirm what she was seeing.

Their polyester uniforms had been replaced somehow, “It looks like we had an outfit change.” She said, while her friends also admired their new clothes. Wearing collared linen and pleated cotton, they all looked like old-timey explorers.

“How come you get a utility belt?” Carlton sniffed, peering at Laura through a pair of binoculars. Her khaki shorts were held up by a wide leather belt composed of various compartments. On her left hip was a coil of rope, held together by a Velcro strap.

Laura shrugged, turning away from her friends. She steadied herself with a deep breath and aimed the torch around the rest of the room. The miserly light only revealed crumbling pottery and dusty furniture. She set her jaw, willing herself to step forward. Her new boots crunched against the sandy floor, leaving behind a trail of footprints for her friends to follow.

It took a few more steps before it came into view, gently illuminated by torchlight.

Laura paused at first, unsure of what she was seeing. Then she took a few more steps, quicker this time. Her stomach dropped as it grew closer – brewing a strange mixture of dread and excitement. In front of her was a stone sarcophagus, embellished on all sides with Egyptian hieroglyphs. She stared at the structure, panning the torch up and down to make sure of what she was seeing.

A gasp echoed out behind her. Her friends had followed her, not wanting to be left in the dark. They too stared at the structure in disbelief. It was in near-perfect condition – carved from a slab of sandstone.

Despite its archaic design, something stood out against its surface. Laura focused her beam onto the intrusion. It was another yellow sticky note. Glowing in the torchlight, it revealed a neat message:

*Welcome and congratulations, Laura!  
You've passed the audition,  
and got the hero's part!  
Now it's time for the story to begin,  
but first: you and your sidekicks need  
to get out of here!  
– The Director*

Laura stood motionless, frozen by the chill in her spine. The sand shifted behind her. It was Carlton. He pushed past her, rubbing his glasses with the hem of his (already untucked) shirt. She watched him step up to the pillar with an outspread hand, gently pressing it to the carved stone.

“It’s real,” He said, turning towards his friends, “we’re really here.”

Laura also took a closer look. Mind reeling, she snatched up the sticky note and checked the back. It was blank. Her nostrils flared. Stuffing the note into her new shorts, she considered their circumstances. Their location, their new outfits, the unnerving messages – they all pointed to the same thing.

They were trapped in a movie - or something like one.



## Chapter 6

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“This *is* a movie,” Carlton paced around the sarcophagus, “just like Harrison Jones!”

“Please, this could be anything else-”

“Really, Samira? How else do you explain this? We were sucked in here!”

“Well. Um...”

The torch rattled in Laura’s trembling hands. Her nerves were rising. Her friends were speaking, she knew, though she couldn’t hear them past the ringing in her ears. A lump grew in her throat, crushing her windpipe to the point of tears. She tried to breathe, to calm down, but her mind was too busy to focus. It recalled everything she knew about Egyptian tombs, erupting in a downpour of memories – at the museum, of her history lessons, even a documentary she once watched.

'Egyptian tombs are located underground, usually accessible by a corridor that was cut into the surrounding rock. These corridors could span several meters in depth before they reached the burial chamber, which was elaborately decorated with hieroglyphs and packed with

personal belongings, such as pottery and furniture. These items accompanied a sarcophagus, which housed a mummified body, who was embalmed over several weeks, starting with the removal of the brain-

“Laura!” Someone grabbed her shoulder.

They spun her around. Shocked by the sudden displacement, Laura dropped the torch. It bounced off the floor, delivering a metallic clang with each landing. Samira stood in front of her, squinting into her eyes.

“It’s okay.” Her face softened, “We’ll sort it out.”

Laura blinked away her tears, hoping that no one had noticed them in the dark. Meanwhile, Carlton reached for the flashlight.

“We’re in an Egyptian tomb.” Laura cleared her throat.

“As expected,” Carlton scratched his chin, “all adventure movies start somewhere like this.”

“So, what do we do?” Samira asked him.

“Well,” He flashed the torch around the space, “we first make sure we have everything we need.”

“Like what?”

“Dunno,” he shrugged, “Laura’s got that cool belt, and I’ve got these.” He held up his newfound binoculars. “What’d you get?” he pointed the light directly at Samira, illuminating bullseye onto her chest.

She paused, realizing that she hadn’t even bothered to check. Snatching the torch from Carlton, she walked back to where she first landed. Her friends stepped up behind her, curious to see what she would find. Among the scattered sand and footprints was a leather strap. Samira reached for it, pulling up what looked to be an old, brown satchel. She beamed, handing the torch to Laura before slinging the bag over her shoulder. She slumped beneath its weight.

Samira took a moment to glance between her friends, who looked just as curious as she was. Laura pointed the torch into the bag while Samira used her thumbs to pry it open. The trio peered into its

exposed innards. Nestled in the leather suede was a flask, a notebook, and a few Egyptian pounds.

Carlton's shoulders hunched at the discovery, "Why do you two get all the cool things?"

"Well, you also got a hat." Laura offered, motioning the beam towards Carlton's landing spot. Surely enough, a safari hat lay discarded among shards of brittle pottery. He gave her a 'that's not the same' look before fetching the hat anyway. He slipped it onto his head, deciding that he would at least evade sunstroke.

"Okay, so we got everything." He said, tipping his new hat upward to better see his friends, "Now we need to find a way out of here." He expectantly turned to Samira.

"What?"

"You're the smart one." Carlton shrugged.

"I don't know anything about tombs, though."

Laura manoeuvred the light around the tomb, noticing that it had grown dimmer. She rattled it from side to side, disturbing the inner compartment, "Tombs like these usually have a corridor or something."

The rattling managed to interrupt Carlton and Samira's bickering. Laura looked between them before continuing, "We just need to find it."

Her friends nodded. She took it as a signal to start. They followed a pace behind her while she used the dimming light to navigate around the small chamber. She tried to walk in a straight line, hoping to come across a guiding wall.

Walking in single file, they took slow, steady steps. After several paces, a doorway appeared. It swallowed up all the light, leaving behind a dark chasm in a hieroglyphed wall. Laura stared in awe. She had seen hieroglyphs in her grandmother's photo albums but never expected them to be so large and ornate. Nearly untouched by time, the intricate imagery depicted rows and rows of rigid animal-headed deities and their servants. They looked different from the ones at the

museum – these were humble carvings, separated by bands of yellow and red. They were all stacked atop one another, depicting what looked to be the passage of a boat and its passengers through various floors.

“Is that the way out?” a voice rang out behind her. It was Samira.

Laura wouldn’t look away from the mural. Instead, she shrugged, “I’m not sure.”

“Okay, so let’s find out!” Carlton chirped, walking up beside Laura. “Maybe we can figure out whose tomb this is.” he reasoned. He took a step forward, and then another until he stood right at the light’s edge. He leaned forward, squinting into the doorway.

“Does it matter?” Samira stepped up beside Laura.

“Uh, yeah?” Carlton’s voice vibrated into the hollow darkness, “there’s a reason why we’re here.”

Laura nodded, thinking over the suggestion. If they were really trapped in a movie – or some alternate universe like one – then their location would be important in some way. They planned to escape the tomb, but they hadn’t thought much farther than that.

“He’s right. We should take a closer look before leaving,” Laura nudged Samira’s shoulder, “in case there are any clues.” She stepped forward, waiting for Samira to follow.

The trio lined up at the edge of the doorway, turning their heads to follow Laura’s torch. The beam had grown considerably duller but still managed to illuminate the chamber ahead of them. Laura bit the inside of her cheek, withholding an excited squeal. They stood at the threshold of a much smaller chamber – stuffed to the brim with treasure. An annex!

“Looks like there aren’t any booby traps.” Carlton held onto the door frame while he stuck his head into the little room.

“Booby traps aren’t real.” Samira’s voice echoed after his, though she also leaned into the room.

Feeling reassured by her friends, Laura took the first step inside. Statues, pottery, furniture and gold all glowed beneath the dimming

light. Laura found herself twisting and turning around the stacks of stuff, careful not to bump into anything valuable. She realized that the arrangement was haphazard, as though everything was packed in a hurry.

At the back of the room was a large statue, carved from a single piece of stone. It was of a person, sitting rigidly against the stone slab. Samira was already standing beside it by the time that Laura made her way there.

“Who do you think it is?” Samira asked, leaning in to get a closer look at the dusty stone.

“I’m not sure.” Laura flashed the torch over the statue’s face. It looked similar to all the other Egyptian sculptures she had seen before, “I don’t think they were very good at copying faces.”

Samira sighed, leaning back onto her heels, “Well, I think she was a pharaoh.”

“She?” Laura furrowed her brow. The statue had a delicate figure, with a slim waist and a pretty face. Laura supposed that it did look quite feminine – its shoulders weren’t as those of the other statues she had seen in school. She reached towards its stone-carved headdress. It looked to be a cloth, fanning out into pointed wings on either side of the head before falling into flaps over the shoulders. An upright snake stuck out the front, framing the forehead with the rest of the garment. It was a crown, she knew – one worn by ancient pharaohs. She churned her thoughts for its name.

“You’re right, she’s wearing a Nemes,” Laura confirmed, “and a kilt. Only pharaohs wore those.”

Samira nodded, feeling chuffed by her discovery. “Also, these down here are yellow.” She picked up a much smaller sculpture, this time painted in a combination of green, brown, and gold. Much like its larger counterpart, it was rigid and symmetrical. It also wore the Nemes, along with a severe expression. There was no smile on this one, only a pair of staring eyes, outlined with thick eyeliner. Its skin was painted

“Mr Moodley said they’d paint the men brown and the women

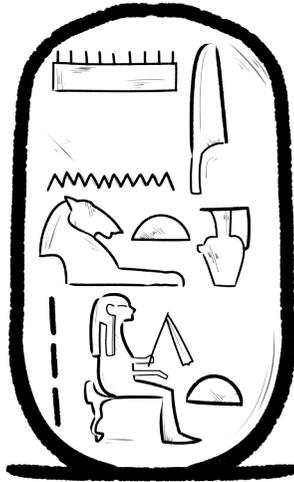
yellow, remember?” Samira smiled at her friend, recalling their recent history lessons. Laura nodded with a smile. A warm feeling spread through her chest – the thrill of discovery. She wondered whether her grandmother experienced the same sensation in her youth.

“Guys!” Carlton’s voice was extra loud in their small quarters, “Look!” he clambered towards them, holding his findings in each hand. Thrusting them towards his friends, he presented his own discovery. They were beetles, also carved from stone. These were green in colour and polished to a delicate shine.

“Scarabs!” Laura noted, taking her offering. It was small enough to sit in the palm of her hand.

“Yeah! Like the one from the museum.” Carlton stood akimbo, puffing out his chest in satisfaction.

“They have something written on the bottom.” Samira noted, holding hers closer to the torchlight.



“What does it say?” Carlton leaned towards the carved stone.

“I can’t read hieroglyphs.” Samira gave him an irritated glare.

“Oh, right.” Carlton pushed his glasses up his nose, feeling a little flustered.

“It’s a cartouche,” Laura added, “like a name tag.” She ran a dusty finger around the inscription. “See this circle around the

hieroglyphs? That means it's the name of something." Laura grinned, feeling chuffed at her discovery.

"Can you read it?" Samira asked.

"No," Laura responded, a bit sheepish, "Though it might be someone's name." She shrugged. If she had all her stuff buried with her, she'd have her name written on it, too.

"It's a clue! We should take it with." Carlton smiled, plucking it from Samira's palm. He slipped it into a pocket on his cargo shorts. His friends stared at him for a moment.

"But isn't that stealing?" Laura suddenly felt nervous. What if they got caught with it somehow? Would someone call the police? What if someone realized it was missing?

"Not if it's for a cause!" Carlton replied, "Remember this is like a movie, and we're saving the day. That means we're the heroes." He added with a grin.

"How do you know that?" Samira folded her arms, still sceptical about the whole situation they were in.

"Because," Carlton sighed emphatically, "Mrs Vera was kidnapped by some dude called The Director – who's obviously the head of some evil corporation. We were sent here to rescue her, obviously." He rolled his eyes.

"How do you know it's a guy?" Samira challenged.

"What?" Carlton spat, "Because it's always a guy in these movies! And there's always a damsel in distress, and there's always a group of heroes who save her – that's us!"

"But how do you know that? We could just be their captives."

"Because the bad guys literally left a note for us? And a trail to follow? Come on, Samira!"

"You're jumping to conclusions."

"You're just jealous that I know what's going on and you don't."

"No, I'm not!"

"Yeah, you are!"

“Guys!” Laura’s voice bounced off the walls, “Stop it. We’re running out of time.” She shook the dimming torch for emphasis. “We still need to get out of here.”



## Chapter 7

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They walked in silence. Laura led them back through the burial chamber to another doorway. They stopped there, using her now very dim torch to survey the room. It appeared to be a much smaller version of the burial chamber – an empty space decorated with hieroglyphic murals.

Their new boots stomped into the chamber, filling the air with a crunch against the sandy floor. Carlton huffed and puffed with every step, barely able to contain his irritation. Samira, on the other hand, internalized her anger, and acted as though nothing had happened. Still, Laura could feel the tension in the air. Though she'd usually be the one to resolve their differences, she kept her thoughts to herself. She was also annoyed – at them, at their situation, and at her crummy flashlight.

She mulled over the film they had watched in History that day. *Harrison Jones and the Golden Chalice*, led by a hero of the same name. Her mind itched with the thought that she was thrust into his role. In the film, Agent A was the villain. He kidnapped Sara, Jones' fiancé, and held her for ransom. He left a Jones with a CD of instructions to get her back: Jones had to obtain a chalice from an Egyptian pyramid and break into a museum to hand it over to Agent

A. Only then would Sara be safe. Laura shuddered.

In this world, her grandmother was Sara, and she was Jones.

Buried in her thoughts, Laura forgot about the best part of the film: the booby traps.

Exiting the antechamber, the trio happened upon yet another dark corridor. This one fed into a corner, followed by a sharp right turn. By then, the torch could only illuminate about a meter ahead of them. Laura turned her body, ready to walk around the corner. She took a step, expecting to hear another crunch against the sandy floor.

None came.

Instead, her right foot extended into emptiness. With a yelp, she fell forward. Her hand remained stiffly clasped around the torch, whose dim shine revealed nothing but darkness. Recognizing the danger, her body stiffened to brace itself for the fall. She heard the sand scatter behind her. Her friends were scrambling in the dark.

Suddenly, she stopped falling.

Samira had caught her by the belt. Laura held her breath. She shone the torch over her shoulder, revealing her friends on the ledge behind her. A moment passed where they only stared at each other, stiff with the sudden shock. Then, as though pulled from a trance, Carlton tugged at Samira's waist. Together, they pulled Laura back onto the ledge. She landed on her bum, dropping the torch with a rattling thud.

"Are you okay?" Laura heard two voices at once.

"Thank you." Was all she could manage after catching her breath. Samira pulled her into a hug.

"Looks like a booby trap." Carlton picked up the torch. He stepped around Laura to shine the light into the pit ahead of them. It looked endless.

"Booby traps aren't real, though." Laura's voice trembled, "The Egyptians never actually used them." She spoke over Samira's shoulder. She shuddered, trying to swallow away the fear in her throat.

“Well,” Carlton turned to her, “movies aren’t real, either.” He offered her a smile, though his eyes also sparkled with a teary film. He extended his hand, helping them up.

“Can I see that?” Samira said. She pointed to the torch, silently asking for her turn with it. Carlton stared at her, confused by the sudden request. “I think it’s rechargeable.” She explained, noticing her friend’s expression in the dim light. Still confused, Carlton passed her the torch, causing the dull beam to dance around from one hand to the next.

Samira stepped back into the corridor, clearing some space around her, and gripped the shaft with both hands. She tightened her hold, making sure not to accidentally drop the torch while she vigorously shook it up and down. The torch rattled along with her movement, accompanied by a new, winding sound. Laura watched on, her eyes widening in realization. Instead of a battery, the torch was loaded with a magnet inside a metal coil. With each shake, the magnet passed through the coil and generated an electrical current. After a few moments of shaking, the torch returned to its original brightness.

Samira aimed the torch ahead, satisfied that they could now get a better view of the pit.

“How did you know it could do that?” Carlton spoke. He was squinting in the brighter light.

“It’s a shaker torch – we use them at home during the load shedding.” She shrugged.

“Can I see?” Laura reached out her hand. She took a turn to shake it properly. The torch looked old, like the kind you’d see in Harrison Jones, but it was all for show. It was just a prop. She shook her head in surprise, “If there’s booby traps, you’d think they’d at least keep everything authentic.”

“I guess it counts in a movie.” Samira shrugged, “Everything’s fake in those.”

“Yeah, except for this.” Carlton was still looking into the pit. He waved his friends over, urging Laura to shine the torch into it.

It was deep. Laura swallowed hard. Her body was still trembling from her almost fall. Seeing the skeletons at the bottom of the pit didn't help. She panned the torch upwards, revealing a series of scratch marks on the opposite wall. An unsettling silence filled the air.

"There has to be a way to cross it." Carlton muttered.

"There is," Laura said, shifting the light to right. The circular beam fell upon the inscribed wall, revealing a narrow ledge jutting out from just beneath the pit's edge.

Samira scoffed, "You're joking, right? That ledge is tiny!"

"Do you see another way across?" Laura flashed an irritated glare at her friend. She had enough of their bickering; and their pessimism, too. They were sucked into a movie, trapped in a tomb, and faced with a booby trap. They had a role to play, and this was part of it.

Samira quietened, noticing Laura's irritation. Even Carlton had nothing more to say – he only stepped forward. "We should tie ourselves together." He gestured toward the rope strapped to Laura's hip, "In case one of us falls."

Laura glanced into the deep pit. She suppressed a shudder and gave Carlton a silent nod. Together, they unfastened the rope from her hip and snaked it around their waists, forming a harness that linked them together. This way, if one of them fell off the ledge, the other would be able to hoist them back up.

Once he was finished, Carlton passed the loose ends to Samira. She hesitated for a moment, squeezing the scratchy rope in her hands. Impatient, Carlton took it back and wound it around her himself. He slipped it through her belt loops and secured it into a tight double knot.

At the front of the line, Laura took the first step towards the edge of the pit. The rope shuddered around her hips, causing her to jolt backwards and then forwards with her friends' motion. One by one, the trio climbed down onto the ledge, forming a three-person train on the narrow path. It was only wide enough to fit one boot at a time, lengthways.

Laura swallowed her heart back down into her chest. She dug her fingers into the wall beside her, burrowing the digits into the stone carvings. They stung with effort as she braced herself against the wall, trembling while she placed one foot in front of the other – mirroring the hieroglyphs around her. She shone her torch toward her feet, illuminating as much of the ledge as possible. Her hips shifted with the movement of her friends, who adopted the same position as she had, and threatened to topple her over into the darkness below. She felt a pressure build-up behind her, urging her to step forward and make space for each new link.

She ground her teeth with each step and tried to ignore the skeletons below. The torch just barely illuminated their presence – a pile of ivory nestled in the dark. The bones were contorted into tortured shapes, their arms and legs forced into uncomfortable twists while their jaws hung open in silent screams. Despite the tomb’s cool air, Laura felt herself start to sweat while she and her friends slowly made their way across the abyss.

They moved in silent concentration, punctuated only by their puffing breaths and heavy boots. Laura’s eyes hung wide open, straining on the narrow beam that illuminated the ledge ahead. After what felt like an age of careful movement, there were only a few steps left. Her tongue scooped up the sweat on her lip while she quickened her pace. There was a loud crackle behind her – the sound of boots dragging on the ledge.

“We’re almost there.” She huffed, looking over her shoulder to her friends. Two pairs of wide eyes stared back at her, the whites glowing against the dark surrounding.

Making it to the other side of the pit was only half the challenge. Once they reached the end of the ledge, the trio would have to hoist themselves up onto the other side of the corridor – which began as a steep staircase. Handing the torch to Carlton, Laura braced her sweaty palms onto the first step and pushed upwards. Carlton’s legs shuddered as he was pulled forward, followed by a less coordinated Samira. She yelped with the sudden tug, pulling both Laura and Carlton backwards. They stiffened, clenching their bodies to keep

their balance on the narrow foothold.

“Sorry.” Her voice echoed towards their turned heads. She swung her right foot in front of her, regaining the balance that she had momentarily lost, “I’m okay.”

Slowly exhaling, Laura regained her composure and hoisted herself upwards again. This time, her friends expected the sudden movement and stepped forward while she climbed upward. Then, it was Carlton’s turn. Laura took the torch while he helped himself up, digging his feet into the stone in front of him. Once on solid ground, he was pushed forward by Samira, who made quick work of climbing out the pit.

“Well, that wasn’t so bad.” Carlton’s mouth felt stale from being so quiet for so long. He looked between his staring friends, “It could have been worse.”

“We could have died.” Samira muttered while she untied the rope around her waist. She flung it towards him.

“But we didn’t – because heroes don’t.” Carlton mused with a smug smile. He followed Laura, who had started up the staircase.

“I’m pretty sure we could still die, though.” Samira caught up beside him, stomping on the narrow steps.

“Those skeletons looked pretty real.” Laura shrugged.

“Ugh,” Carlton rolled his eyes, “we just had a hectic bonding experience and you’re still trying to prove me wrong?”



## Chapter 8

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Laura imagined that she was seeing heaven for the first time. The rest of the tomb was fairly straightforward. Buried deep underground, the tomb was accessed by steep corridors and staircases that opened into the bright, desert surface. All they had to do was walk straight up the stairs until the tomb's opening came into view. It started as a tiny slit of light – a burst of yellow against the cold dark that surrounded them.

“Is that it?” Carlton's voice was hopeful.

“I think so.” Laura panted excitedly. Her thighs burned as she broke into a jog up the corridor's steep incline. She flicked the switch on her torch, finally turning it off as she approached the tomb's opening – a little doorway carved out of the surrounding stone. She climbed up its narrow steps, cheering while she finally stepped out into the sunlight.

She held up her arms in triumph, tightly shutting her eyes that burned beneath the sudden brightness. Her friends followed, offering similar gestures as they too stepped out of the cool dark and into the sweltering air.

Together, they stood in the Egyptian desert.

Once their jeering had subsided, and the heat started to settle into their skin, the trio took a moment to survey their surroundings. They stood among a series of sandstone cliffs, which formed a striking landscape against the still, blue sky above. Carlton adjusted his hat, and looked towards the tomb from which they emerged. Its doorway was neatly nestled into a mound of sand and rock, punctuated by a stone-carved entrance that fed into the darkness below.

“Where’s the pyramid?” he mused, scratching his chin.

Laura blinked, freeing herself from their hypnotizing surroundings. She turned on her heel to follow Carlton’s voice, and also faced the buried doorway. “Not all tombs are in pyramids,” she explained, taking the chance to step around the mound from which they had emerged. She reached out to touch the sandy surface. It burned her fingers. She quickly withdrew, shocked not only by the heat, but by the thrill that ran through her spine – confirmation that it was real.

“Some were buried in the desert, far from the bigger villages and cities.” Samira continued, “So that grave robbers couldn’t get to them as easily.” She grinned, recalling the information that she had memorized. She suddenly felt very grateful for her after school tutor.

“I see,” Carlton readjusted his hat, “so, what does that mean for us?”

“It means that we’re in the Valley of the Kings!” Laura slid her torch into its holster, feeling giddy at the discovery, “Or, at least I think so.” She recalled the familiar surroundings from one of her grandmother’s old photos. The grainy image hung in the museum’s entryway – right beside the stairs – and showed a much younger Marta proudly standing in front of a similar-looking mound. Below it was a hand-written label,

*Valley of the Kings, circa 1975.*

“That means we were in a pharaoh’s tomb!” She added, grinning at her friends – who were far less enthusiastic than she was.

“Okay.” Samira huffed, tugging at her cotton shirt. She shook the collar, airing her already sweaty skin, “We need to get out of here –

it's boiling!"

"Right." Laura nodded, noting her own dampness. She took cover in the tomb's doorway, "We also need to figure out whose tomb this is," she patted the stone wall, "so we can find gran."

"How do we do that?" Samira followed.

"Well," Carlton used his hat to fan himself, "usually the heroes have backup waiting for them."

"Backup?"

"Yeah, like someone waiting with a plane, or some camels. So that they can get a lift." He shrugged, nestling into the shade. The girls took a moment to think over his suggestion. They quietened to listen for any movement – perhaps the sound of a running engine or the pitter-patter of a donkey.

Silence.

Laura shifted, feeling unsettled by the dead air around them, "I don't think anyone's giving us a lift." She gave Carlton a sorry look.

He nodded, kicking the sand with the tip of his boot, "I guess we'll have to walk or—"

"Wait!" Samira hissed. She held her pointer finger to her mouth, signalling for quiet. Laura and Carlton froze at her command. The desert air fell quiet once again while the group strained their ears to listen. "Do you hear that?" Samira whispered.

Confused, Laura stepped out from the shady doorway. Holding her breath, she leaned forward into the sun. After a few seconds, she heard it – an awkward, dragging sound against the desert floor. She tucked her loosened hair behind her ears, trying to hear more clearly. The sound was slow – like that of a herd, lumbering across the desert sand.

"Samira's right," she turned to her friends, "there's something out there."

"We should find it." Carlton stepped forward, adjusting his hat beneath the beating sunlight. He walked ahead, away from the tomb and towards a flattened patch of ground – a dirt road.



## Chapter 9

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The African sun was relentless – this, Laura knew from her PE lessons. They always started with two laps around the rugby field, followed by a game of some kind. It was unbearable under the afternoon sun – especially during the summertime. Though, now Laura realized that not all African suns were created equally. A sunny afternoon in Johannesburg couldn't compare to the beating heat that sunk into her skin.

Crouched beside her friends, she patted the top of her head. It was hot to the touch. *Harrison Jones at least had a hat*, she thought to herself while reaching for Samira's flask. Shortly after leaving the tomb site, Samira fished it out of her bag to quench her building thirst. It was a nice size – holding about a litre of lukewarm water. Her friends stared at her while she drank, only just remembering that she had it in the first place. Of course, there was a brief squabble about sharing. Samira didn't want anyone's gob on her flask, while Carlton insisted that he would die without it.

After watching on for a few moments, Laura intervened. They decided to only take a drink when absolutely necessary, and only for three seconds at a time. Now, while the lukewarm water rivered down

her throat, Laura struggled to stop herself after her third second. Glancing at her friends, she took one last, secret, gulp while they were distracted.

“What are they doing?” She smacked her lips while screwing the flask shut.

“I think he’s letting them look around.” Carlton spoke from behind his binoculars.

“We should wait for them to get properly distracted before joining.” Samira said, cupping her hands around her eyes.

Crouching behind a discarded rock, the trio watched a tour group amble toward a nearby tomb. The tour guide spoke animatedly, reciting the same script he had countless times before. They were too far to hear it – only just catching a muffled voice evaporate into the air.

After following the lumbering sound they heard earlier, they happened upon the tour group. Without a map or any directions, joining a guided group would be their best option to get back to civilization – this was their ‘backup!’ Excited to escape the desert heat, they followed the group from a distance, waiting for the right moment to join in somehow.

“He’s leading them in!” Carlton hissed. His glasses clattered against the viewfinders, “We should go now.”

Lured forward by their smartphones and selfie sticks, the tourists slowly squeezed into the tomb behind their guide. Once the desert was silent again, Laura stood up. She gestured for her friends to do the same. Now that the coast was clear and the tour group was sufficiently distracted, they’d be able to sneak in and pretend they were there the whole time. Naturally, it was Carlton who took advantage of the situation and cooked up this master plan. He felt giddy, as though he were in a Bond film.

“Okay, let’s go.” He stepped out from behind the rock and waved for friends to follow. Together, they quickly weaved their way across the open desert to the tourist footpath. They stood at the entrance to the tomb and stared into the familiar stone doorway.

This tomb was in much better condition than the one they had come out of. A pair of stone walls framed the doorway, followed by a neat set of stairs that led into the ground. A security camera stared down at them, its eye flashing in red. Carlton waved at it, followed by Laura and then Samira.

“Do you think they see us?” he asked.

“Yes.” Laura replied.

“That’s what it’s there for.” Samira echoed.

It was screwed into a metal gate, which guarded the ancient entryway. Laura scratched her sunburnt scalp. The pyramid in Harrison Jones didn’t seem so secure. After a moment’s hesitation, she pattered down the steps into the tomb.

Tugging her messy hair into a fresh braid, she called out to her friends, “Come on guys, it won’t be so hot in here.”

And she was right. The air grew cooler with each downward step, providing sanctuary from the beating heat outside. After realizing this, Carlton and Samira quickly followed her – also adjusting their appearances. If they were to blend in, they couldn’t look like they had just trudged through the desert!

They reached the bottom of the stairs in a pile. Laura stopped their procession abruptly, staring out towards the well-lit corridor ahead. It looked to be refurbished – prepared for groups of visitors to explore the ruins of a once-great empire. Here, a wooden walkway muffled their footsteps while they made their way deeper underground. Unlike the previous tomb, this corridor sloped straight downwards, instead of winding around in corners. Also unlike the previous tomb, they could see everything around them.

The deeper they went, the brighter and more intricate the hieroglyphed walls became. Laura stared on, slowing down even more to appreciate the imagery around her. A series of floodlights gently illuminated their surroundings, propelling the trio into an ancient time capsule. Every surface was plastered with ancient carvings, punctuated by patches of red and gold. Even the ceiling was painted a rich shade of blue, and lined with rows of stars. Laura’s

chest filled with a strange sensation – she never imagined that it would all be so bright, look so alive. It was mystifying.

Carlton and Samira had to keep ushering her forward.

“Don’t get too distracted.” Samira muttered in her ear.

“We still have a mission to complete!” Carlton echoed in the other.

Laura nodded, tearing herself away from the magic around her. Her friends were right - they still had to rescue Marta and find their way home. Well, they still had to figure out how to do that.

Finally, they entered a crowded chamber. Like the corridor, it was also densely decorated – *but even better*. Here, the tour guide continued his speech, his heavily accented voice vibrating in their close quarters. The trio kept towards the back of the crowd, careful to not make their presence too obvious. Of course, wearing old-timey adventure gear wasn’t quite a disguise, especially when the rest of the group wore socks-and-sandals and denim shorts.

Conveniently, nobody noticed them. Once the guide finished his speech, the group trudged forward, further into the tomb. Carlton was the first to follow, and accidentally stepped on someone’s shoe – a pot-bellied man in a bright red shirt.

“Sorry, uncle.” He managed, reeling back into Laura and Samira’s chests. The man peered down at them through his thicket of eyebrows. Together, they peered up, wearing their sorriest expressions. Without a word, he turned and lumbered away towards his wife.

“That was weird.” Laura whispered, “Like he didn’t see us.”

“I think you mean he was *rude*.” Samira huffed.

The rest of the tour went in much the same way. One of them would bump into a group member, or sneeze, or speak too loudly, yet they still went unnoticed. Laura felt unnerved – it was like they weren’t even there.

Well, for the most part.

She kept her eyes fixed on the tour guide, pretending to listen

intently. He was the only one who noticed their disruptions, sparing them a glance through his grinning speech. Still, he didn't say anything. Instead, he was also pretending – as though he hadn't seen them, like the rest of the group.

“I think he noticed us.” Laura whispered.

“Who?” Carlton leaned in to hear her better.

“The guide.”

“How do you know?”

“He keeps looking at us.”

Carlton paused. He leaned over some more, seeking him out among the rows of heads. “I can't see him.” He used a finger to push up his glasses.

“I think he's looking at everyone,” Samira intervened, “like when we do speeches in class. Don't worry.” Samira squeezed Laura's shoulder.

Still, Laura wasn't so sure. She stepped forward, pushing through the oblivious crowd while Carlton and Samira hissed behind her – telling her to stop and turn around. She didn't. Instead, she pushed her way to the very front of the group. There, she stared straight up at the tour guide. Her gaze was fixed, glimmering with a silent question. She wanted to catch him out.

He ignored her (or did his best to) and went on about the tomb's architecture. By this time, Carlton and Samira were whispering their confusion while they also pushed their way to the front.

“What's she doing?” Carlton spoke through someone's backpack.

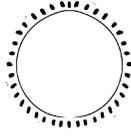
“Proving us wrong.” Samira said while shuffling past a couple. She'd been dealing with this behaviour since usery school. Holding a hand to her nose, she tried in vain to avoid the humid stench of bodies and sweat. Laura had always been the nervous type – she avoided any uncertainty. However, this went away when she *was* certain about something. Then, she always had to prove herself right - and this time was no exception.

Under Laura's careful gaze, the guide's words quickened into a

## *Uncanny Valley*

noisy slurry. His nerves were building. Still, he kept his eyes fixed on the crowd ahead, before finishing in a breath and turning on his heel.

“Finally, on to the rest of the tomb!” His voice rang out while he scampered through another doorway. As soon as he left, Laura felt some pressure build behind her. The tour group was moving again, ushering her forward with their every step. She started to walk, looking over her shoulder to see Carlton and Samira a couple of rows behind her. She smiled at them, keeping her spot at the front of the crowd before stepping through the stone doorway into a much larger room.



## Chapter 10

---

The tour guide stood rigidly in front of a stone sarcophagus – one that was very similar to what Laura and her friends had seen in the previous tomb. Like the rest of the tomb they were in, this sarcophagus had a grandiose display. It had its own floodlights, which illuminated a deep, stony scar that had chipped away from its hieroglyphed surface. Laura’s eyes widened in surprise – the sarcophagus was in much worse condition than the one she had seen before. Still, it was protected by a wooden bannister, which the tour guide tightly held on to.

His knuckles turned white.

He still pretended not to see her.

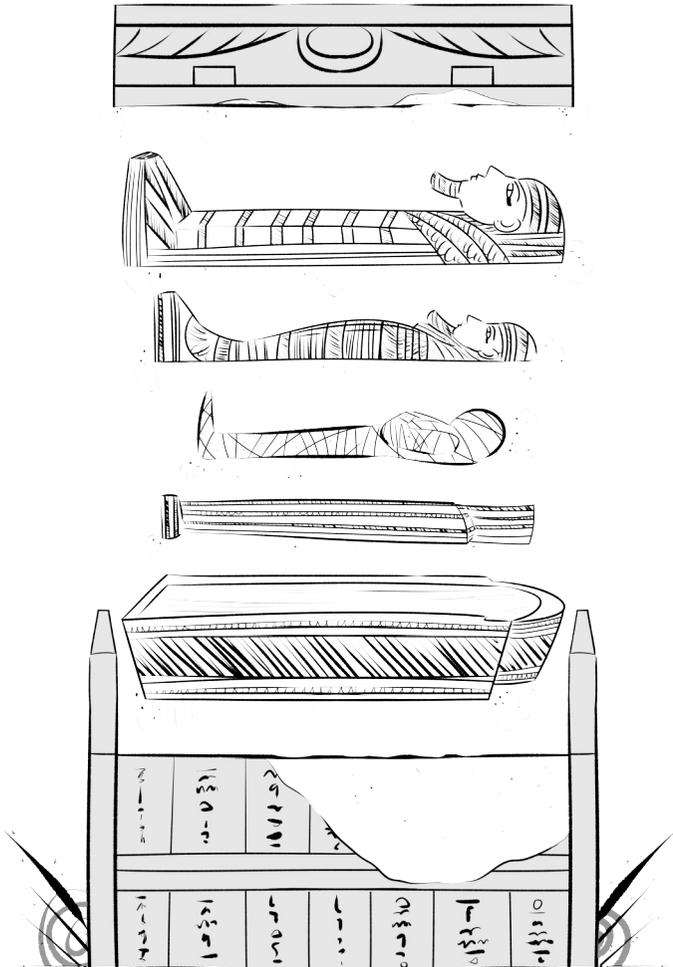
Laura felt the pressure build behind her once again, urging her to step closer towards him. She resumed her stare, taking the chance to absorb his features. Behind a strong brow and pointed nose was a pair of dark eyes. They looked worried. She shifted her gaze downward. He wore a black golf shirt with his name embroidered on the left breast: *Ahmed*.

Ahmed stood motionless, bearing a toothy grin toward his lumbering audience. Once the group stilled to a quiet mass, his pearly

teeth opened into another speech:

“Finally, we’ve reached the burial chamber!” he stretched out his arms, gesturing to the rest of the room. The tour group looked around, swivelling their heads from left to right. After a moment, he spoke again, this time winding around the sarcophagus to circle the room. Again, the group followed.

“Our journey into the underworld ends here, the room in which King Ramses IV was lain to rest. Like all the great pharaohs before him, he was mummified with amulets and jewels inside his linen wrappings, and then buried in coffins inside coffins to keep the body safe.”



He had his back turned to his audience while he spoke, saving himself from Laura's persistent gaze. Meanwhile, she spared a glance at the sarcophagus. It took up most of the space in the room, forcing the crowd to narrowly worm around it. Frustrated, she thought of a way to capture his attention again – to prove that he noticed her and then demand answers. She'd just have to ask the right questions first.

“Here, in the Valley of the Kings, the Ancient Egyptians believed he would have a safe passage to the underworld alongside his brothers, fathers, and sons.” Ahmed spoke gravely, looking up to the painted ceiling.

Finally, Laura saw an opportunity for her questioning to begin.

“Excuse me.” She rang out through his speech. His voice faltered momentarily before he continued as though he hadn't heard her.

“Excuse me!” She said after clearing her throat. Still, he ignored her.

Laura tightened her lips, taking a deep breath before speaking once again, “Excuse me, Ahmed!” She raised her voice, causing a piercing echo to ring through her ears. Although the rest of the tour group barely noticed, she heard her friends hiss at the sudden noise. This time, Ahmed paused, his back curling with a wince. He looked over his shoulder, glancing at the tour group before peering down at Laura. He looked irritated but quickly flashed her another smile. Like all the others, it was fake.

“I will take questions at the end-”

“What do you mean by brothers, fathers and sons?” Laura ignored him. She had finally caught him out and wasn't going to waste any more time with formalities. Ahmed stared at her, unblinking through his synthetic grin.

“This is the Valley of the Kings, only men were buried here. Pharaohs.” Ahmed's annoyance bled through his sickly-sweet tone.

“What about the women who were pharaohs?”

“There were none.”

“What about Cleopatra.”

Ahmed scoffed, “That was much later, these tombs were built earlier-”

“Well, we just came from a woman’s tomb.” Samira spoke from behind, shoving past a pair of tourists, “What about that?” she stood beside Laura. Though they stood a few rows behind Laura, Carlton and Samira had quickly realized Laura’s strategy. She was trying to fool him into directing them further, and they were going to assist her.

Ahmed blinked, shifting his glassy brown eyes from one girl to the next. He stood tall again, puffing out his stocky frame. “There is no such thing.” He said dismissively. His smile faded away, morphing into an indignant scowl. Laura set her jaw. Somehow, his demeanour still felt like a performance. Like he was acting.

Fortunately, two could play at that game.

The girls looked to each other, and then to Carlton – who had just managed his way through the crowd. He also stood beside them, puffing out his chest to mirror Ahmed’s pose. Together, they looked like a pair of duelling roosters.

“Well, what about this?” Carlton held up the scarab they had taken from the tomb, twisting his wrist for some added flair. The green stone glimmered beneath the floodlights, casting its reflection across Ahmed’s face.

Ahmed did well to hide his surprise, “That’s a scarab. Quite common among the Ancient Egyptians.”

“It has an inscription,” Carlton enjoyed the drama in his voice, “read it.”

“Excuse me?”

“You work here, right?” Carlton thrust the carved stone toward Ahmed’s face, “Read it.”

“Carlton, I don’t think that’s how it works-” Samira paused when Laura grabbed her wrist. Laura shook her head, silently telling her to stop. For once, Carlton knew what he was doing.

Ahmed stepped back, reeling away from the scarab – and the

group of friends. “Why should I?”

“Because you need to stay in character.” Laura finally spoke up, stepping up beside Carlton, “You have to.” She folded her arms. Ahmed stared down at her, aghast.

“You’re not supposed to do it this way.” He muttered, leaning in to speak to the trio. He stared at the tour group behind them before speaking, his voice barely a whisper: “He has eyes everywhere.”

“Who?” Carlton whispered, wide-eyed.

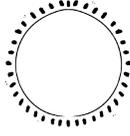
“The Director.” Ahmed hissed through his teeth.

“You work for him? Tell us where he is!” Laura demanded.

“Shhhhhht!” he shushed her, still staring at the tour group. They were still ignoring the commotion, it seemed. Feeling more relaxed, Ahmed leaned in and spoke to them at eye level, “You have to play along.”

“Or what?” Samira insisted.

Ahmed turned his head to her, furrowing his brow in bushy concern, “It all ends, and everything fades to black.”



## Chapter 11

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Laura struggled to breathe past the heaviness in her chest. After their confrontation in the burial chamber, Ahmed sent the trio to the back of the tour group where they could no longer interrupt him. He promised them a better explanation in return for good behaviour.

Now, our heroes followed the tourists back up the stairs of Ramses IV's tomb and out into the smouldering desert. Ahmed had regained his vigour, and emphatically directed the tour onward to their final destination: the visitor's centre. On her way out, Laura caught sight of the security camera's shadow. Its red eye winked against the sandy silhouette.

*"He has eyes everywhere."* Ahmed's voice echoed in her mind. Was the camera one of them? Had The Director been watching them the whole time? Her stomach dropped at the thought.

"Do you think there's more?" she thought out loud, pointing at the blocky shadow. Her friends shrugged – a silent response. They were battling the same thoughts. Laura furrowed her brow – resisting both the sun's brightness and her rising nerves. Ahmed's behaviour had certainly increased the weight on their shoulders. His anxiety, his dismissiveness, his strange threat – it was all difficult to decipher.

Though, among the confusion there was still one certainty: The

Director was dangerous, so much so that even the people living in this world knew it.

With this knowledge, Laura's burst of confidence waned back into uncertainty. Not only did they have to rescue Marta, but they also had to find The Director to do so. The booby trap they had encountered was enough proof of this world's dangers – meeting The Director could only be worse.



Intermission

“I must say, she’s just like you,” The Director said while stirring his tea, “misguided.”

He closed his eyes to take a sip of the dark brew, savouring its perfumed taste. It was Earl Grey – his favourite. Marta had a cup of the same, with two sugar cubes and a generous helping of milk – her favourite.

She didn’t touch it.

The tea was an extension of his cruelty – her hands were still tied behind the chair. She ignored both him and the tea, choosing to watch the screens in front of her instead. They were all TVs of different makes and sizes, some in colour and some not. Together, they were stacked up into an uneven wall of screens, depicting a variety of different scenes. Most were of the quiet desert, others were of hollow temples and tombs, and some were of urban settings – a tiny village, a busy road.

Marta kept her eyes fixed on one alone: a tiny black and white monitor on the top left. On it, she watched her granddaughter, Laura, and her friends walk out of a tomb behind what looked to be a tour group. They just barely disappeared from view before The Director spoke again.

“How long has it been since you’ve visited Luxor? Ten, twenty years?”

Marta didn’t respond.

“Oh, how rude of me. It’s ungentlemanly to point out a woman’s age.” The Director spat out the last word, as though a stray tea leaf bitterly clung to his tongue.

Still, Marta kept her lips tightly shut. Despite her rising anger, she knew better than to interrupt him during a monologue. He always spoke more to himself than to anyone else.

“As you know, I never left,” he continued, “I forgot to thank you for that.”

Marta tried not to roll her eyes. Though The Director was a poor linguist, sarcasm was his favourite language. He knew it irritated her.

“By the way, has the world changed much since I left?” He turned to face her. The TV screens were still running, splashing both their faces in blue and white. “Aside from your growing family?”

Marta bit the inside of her cheek. That was enough.

She turned her head, shifting her eyes to meet his. She was about to say something, to tell him off in the most colourful language she could use, but she didn't. She couldn't. What she saw was unsettling. His eyes were the same tiny blue dots they had always been. Though, despite their familiarity, he looked like a stranger.

The Director's eyes were dark. Fixed. Angry.

Much more than she was – much more than she had ever been. He bore the look of someone that was past shouting and cursing and punching his pillow. His anger had aged into calculated silence, boiling into something truly frightening: vengefulness.

Marta tried to be discreet about the lump in her throat. She knew that these feelings were directed at her.

At what she did to him.

“Your apartment looked the same as always. You never remodelled?” This time, The Director didn't wait for a response. Marta watched his moustache shift into a crooked smile, just barely exposing a chipped front tooth, “Too scared to let go of the past?”

Turning away, he stood and replaced his cup of tea with an old cane. Tightening his grip around the skull-shaped knob, he took a step towards the wall of screens, “You were always so sentimental.” He faced away from her.

“Collecting every measly thing that fancied your interest. Displaying it in your crummy museum, for everyone to see.” He slipped a hand into his pocket.

“Ah,” he muttered, “like this trinket.” From his pocket, The Director withdrew a carved stone, flecked in blue and gold. It was Marta's half scarab.

“I must admit. This one holds quite the memory.” He hummed, holding it up to the screens' light – away from Marta's view. “You

know, of the time you used it to trap me in this low budget cesspool?”

Marta winced. She remembered that day well.

---

It was 1975, and she had just turned thirty. To celebrate the occasion, she and Glen, her research partner, decided to visit Egypt – their favourite treasure trove. Together, they discovered an unmarked tomb during an expedition in the Valley of the Kings. With no permission to investigate further, they took a quick look around and salvaged the scarab from what grave robbers had left behind. Like always, they shared their discovery.

Later that day, they had a disagreement. This wasn't uncommon. A specialization in enchanted relics had a way of sparking obsession. In Marta, her obsession manifested in collecting things – hoarding every relic she found. In Glen, it manifested in power-hungry delusion. He wanted to rule the world – and wanted to use their relics to do so.

“Glen, we're archaeologists-”

“Tell that to the university.” Glen scoffed, his voice echoed out their hotel room's bathroom, “We're just grave robbers to them.”

“They won't think so when they read our research.” Marta tried to comfort him. It was true that none of their colleagues believed their theories. Enchantments are difficult to prove on paper, and even more difficult to execute with an audience. The study of magic is a science beyond anything a university could offer. It relies on two core principles:

1. Each enchantment is unique and requires a very specific set of conditions to work. These conditions can include specific locations, times, and temperatures – and often require a combination of all three.
2. Magic is shy. It must be patiently coaxed out with a practised and hopeful hand.

It's no wonder that Marta and Glen were the only enchanted archaeology specialists in the world.

"We should show them," Glen stepped out of the bathroom, "use these to their full potential." He held up the scarab, now clean and polished.

"You know we can't do that. We have a code." Marta explained while unpacking her suitcase.

"A code that we made up. Besides, imagine all the possibilities! We'd be rich, powerful, successful!" He threw himself onto the hotel's couch with an uncomfortable creak. He stared at Marta, eyes glimmering with ambition.

"We don't know how dangerous these things are." Marta spoke up only after a moment of thought. Though the idea of unlimited success was tantalizing, her academic integrity quickly shut it off, "The consequences could be astronomical!"

"We won't know that if we don't try!"

"We can't just try it if it puts the whole world at stake, Glen."

"It won't!"

"How do you know that?"

"Because I've tried it."

There was a long moment of silence. Marta stared at Glen, searching his features for the signs of a lie. The twitch of an eyebrow, a shift in his gaze, even his flaring nostrils. She found none. A weight settled on her tongue – her disbelief, too heavy to sound into the air.

"Nothing bad happened. It was a simple fortune spell on a medieval amulet. It only lasted for an hour." Glen spoke slowly, making sure he chose the right words, "I was waiting for the right moment to tell you."

Marta could only stare. That explained how he came up with the money to finance their trip. She shuddered – they were using dirty money. They were breaking their code of ethics – and she didn't even know it.

She didn't speak to him after that. They ate her birthday dinner in silence while she processed his betrayal. Glen's actions had put both himself and their research at risk. Everything they had spent the better part of a decade building together could have come crumbling down in a single moment of blind action – one which he kept from her. It wasn't so much that he cast the spell. She was elated that it worked. It was the fact that he snuck around to do it that hurt her the most.

What if he got his hands on something more powerful?

That evening, Marta made her decision. She'd cast her own incantation – the one carved under the scarab they had found together. It was a transportation spell – one that would bring the user out of one world and into another. They were quite common in Ancient Egypt, and Marta speculated they were used during one's passage into the afterlife. It certainly explained their complex burial rituals.

So, once she was sure that Glen had fallen asleep, she snuck herself and the scarab into the bathroom. A deep crack ran down its spine, causing it to split evenly in half under some pressure. Holding either half in each hand, she prepared to read the incantation.

A sudden burst of nausea stopped her.

She felt guilty – for betraying Glen in the same way he betrayed her. Though he could be dangerous, he was still one of her closest friends. She left a piece of the scarab on the bathtub. That way, he'd still be able to keep half of the discovery.

Then, she carefully read the tiny hieroglyphs. Not wanting to get caught, she kept her voice low while she read the words aloud.

After a sudden darkness and an awful case of pins and needles, Marta found herself in a very similar hotel bathroom. She tentatively stepped out into the bedroom, only to see that two single cots were now a double bed. The television was on, its black and white screen flashing a disconcerting image. It was Glen, peacefully asleep in their old hotel room.

The scarab was stuck between two worlds, and so were they.

“I tried to go back and get you.” Marta spoke for the first time since The Director had kidnapped her. He turned to her, his eyes a little too wide. Was he surprised to hear her speak? No. He was shocked by her audacity.

“Oh really? How kind of you!” The Director slapped his cane against the stone floor.

“I couldn’t have known that the artefacts had to be kept whole.”

“Well, now you do.” His voice quaked with emotion – anger, pain and betrayal all at once. He took a shaky breath before continuing, “I spent decades stuck in this movie. This place is a set, did you know that? It doesn’t even cover the whole of Egypt!” His voice echoed viciously, disturbing the dust from the small chamber’s walls, “It’s insufferable – seeing the same people, having the same conversations every day. It took me years to figure all this out!” He gestured to the wall of screens behind him.

“But when I did,” he took another deep breath, “I realized that I could turn all the cogs myself. It was only a matter of time before I’d be on your viewing schedule.” He slowly lifted his cane and placed the cranial knob beneath Marta’s chin.

“Glen-”

“Shh,” He silenced her, “I’m The Director, Marta. This is my film, and you’re my damsel in distress,” He looked over his shoulder to his screens, “and those kids are our heroes.”

“You don’t have to involve them.” Marta spat.

“Of course, I do.” He said with a wry smile, “Someone has to save you, that’s how it goes.”

“And then what? We have a happy ending?” Marta scowled.

“Hmm, I certainly will.” He hummed, “I hope you and the kids enjoy cinema as much as I do.”

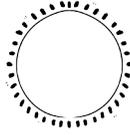


TAMARA

ACT III

A SPECIAL ON-SET SCREENING  
OF THE EXPLOSIVE CLIMAX

THE CONFRONTATION



## Chapter 12

---

The cafeteria food was a delight – even though it was a little stale and soggy. Laura munched through her club sandwich, relieved to finally fill her belly with something for the first time since her second break at school. She washed it down with a bottle of water – this time not counting the seconds of her drink. Though she still felt a little tense from her confrontation with Ahmed, the food and drink helped soothe her worries. Beside her were Carlton and Samira, also tearing through their food – so much so that the rickety table beneath them shuddered with every bite.

Once they had reached the visitor's centre, Ahmed released his tour group and ushered the trio into the cafeteria. He tucked them into a far corner where a small plastic table was awkwardly pushed up against the wall, insisting that this was the only spot in the whole cafeteria (and maybe even the whole visitor's centre) that was out of The Director's sight. While the overheated trio shuffled into their squeaky plastic seats, Ahmed hurriedly began his explanation. He didn't sit down, instead choosing to lean over the table with both hands spread across its surface. This way, he'd use his body to keep the trio out of sight. He kept his voice low, shifting his eyes around the room while he spoke, to make sure that no one noticed his

treason.

“The Director runs this place. He just showed up here one day, right here at the visitor’s centre, and started giving everyone orders. He told us he was sent from somewhere to manage the place. None of us knew what he was talking about, but he eventually got through to management and convinced them that he was the site director – whatever that means. He’s been living in the hotel across the river ever since-”

Ahmed looked at the trio in front of him. Their eyes were glazed over, staring past him into the rest of the cafeteria. Confused, he looked over his shoulder to see what they were staring at.

It was lunchtime.

Slumping his shoulders in realization, he turned back to the kids in front of him. They all stared up at him with wide, pleading eyes. He sighed – his younger brother always played the same trick.

“If I get you food, you must promise to help me.” He pointed a chubby finger at Laura’s face. Her fringe flew up and down with a nod.

Ahmed left in a hurry and came back with a bounty of food: three plastic-wrapped sandwiches, each paired with a bottle of water. He took a seat at the table while the trio unwrapped their sandwiches and dug in. Even Samira, who was usually a picky eater, took a bite of her sandwich before she even finished unwrapping it.

“So,” Carlton spoke through a mouthful, “you were saying?”

Ahmed blinked for a moment before continuing, “Ah, yes.” Again, he leaned on his hands across the table and spoke in the same hushed tone, “The Director’s forced us into an awful routine ever since. Every day, we must play the same roles and follow the same scripts without fail. Otherwise, he’ll make us disappear.”

Laura choked on her water, “Disappear?” she spoke through coughs.

“Yes,” Ahmed whispered.

The trio stopped their munching.

“We don’t know where he takes them, but The Director is quick to replace faulty actors.” Ahmed cast his eyes downwards. “We can’t take breaks or holidays. He says it’s because we can’t stop the show or else our scheduled programming will end.” Ahmed swallowed before continuing, “I haven’t seen my family since he came.”

Laura sat back in her chair, trying to process the sickness she felt. The food that had once soothed her nerves was now churning into anxious nausea. She felt bad for Ahmed, and everyone else living in this world. If his story was true, then it confirmed her suspicions about The Director – he was more dangerous than they had previously expected.

She recalled the trail of sticky notes that he had left for her.

“The Director brought us here. Why?”

Ahmed opened his mouth to speak, but nothing came. He didn’t quite know the answer to that question, “I don’t know that. We were only given orders to ignore you.”

“Why didn’t you?” Samira asked.

Ahmed shrugged, “I thought that if you came from the same place as him, then you could help us in some way.”

Silence washed over their little table. Laura shifted uncomfortably – the pressure only seemed to be mounting further. Her head was full of questions, though Ahmed didn’t seem to have any answers.

She excused herself to go to the bathroom.

*What would Harrison Jones do?* She felt silly for asking herself. Still, she thought back to the film she had seen earlier that day. Agent A had left Jones a clue – an ancient coaster that went along with the chalice he had to retrieve. Although she initially scoffed at the historical inaccuracy of the whole thing, she now realized that it held some merit.

Her boots squeaked against the bathroom tiles. It was mostly empty, save for a cleaner wiping the mirrors. She stood on her tiptoes to reach over the red-granite sinks. After a brief greeting, Laura took one of the empty stalls.

*We need to figure out where he is.* Jones used Agent A's trail of clues to not only retrieve the chalice but also find Agent A's secret lair to deliver the chalice. There, he fooled Agent A by replacing the real chalice with a fake. This foiled Agent A's evil plan for world domination and gave Jones just enough time to escape with Sara and the real chalice – which was then placed in the same museum that Agent A also used as his lair.

It was all very ridiculous and confusing.

Just like their own situation.

Laura sensed that The Director had a similar plan – maybe all movie supervillains were the same. If that was the case, then she and her friends would just have to figure out where his secret lair was. Then, they'd be able to rescue Marta and get home... somehow.

Laura rubbed her eyes. She hadn't quite figured out that part yet. Harrison Jones lived in a movie. He could just fly home in a helicopter – she and her friends were stuck in a movie they didn't belong in. The added pressure of freeing this world's people from The Director's control wasn't helping the situation, either. It was all so convoluted.

The bathroom was empty now. Stepping out of her stall, Laura pulled her hair into another fresh braid. She took long, concentrated steps towards the sink as she did so. Once she was close enough, and her braid was finished, she looked up to check herself in the mirror.

A chill ran down her spine.

Right in the middle of her reflection was another sticky note:

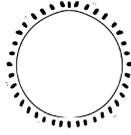
*Ahmed gave you quite the spoiler.*

*He's ruined the story!*

*Worry not, I've made the appropriate adjustments.*

*We just have to pick up the pace.*

*– The Director.*



## Chapter 13

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Laura had never washed her hands so quickly. She dried them on her pants while she rushed out of the bathroom, sticky note firmly lodged in between her lips. The rubber soles of her boots screeched against the shiny, tiled floor – all the way across the cafeteria.

She got lost at first – unable to spot her friends among the sea of cheap furniture and sunburnt tourists. She waded around the plastic arrangement, knocking over a couple of chairs until she reached their rest spot – the table that Ahmed had taken them to.

It was empty.

She looked around, making sure that this was the right table – that she wasn't on the wrong side of the room. A part of her hoped that the panic had overridden her sense of direction.

It hadn't.

The table – *their table* – was empty, its chairs violently scattered across the floor. Laura held her breath and leant over it to get a better look. It wasn't exactly empty. Among their rubbish was another clue.

Nestled between piles of crumbs and crumpled tissues was the scarab they had salvaged from the first tomb. It weighed down a

paper serviette, which was inscribed with what looked like The Director's handwriting.

The stone scarab felt cold in Laura's hands while she read the next instructions:

*No more cheating. No more distractions.  
From now on, you're on your own.  
In your hand, you hold a clue.  
The moon follows the sun, and so shall you.  
You have until moonlight to find my sanctuary,  
and your friends and family.  
See you soon,  
– The Director*

With a squeeze, the scarab's stone pincers dug into her skin. Her lips bent the sticky note into a downwards arc. Removing it from her mouth, the tacky edge now moist with spit, she held it beside the serviette. She wanted to make sure they were written by the same person. It was pointless, she knew. Even without comparing them, it was clear that the messages were all The Director's.

She just couldn't believe that a single person could be so cruel.

The lump in her throat had returned, bringing with it the same burning sensation that left her breathless. Again, she told herself to fight it away – just like she had throughout this whole journey.

She couldn't stop it. She gave up.

With a shaky breath, she allowed the lump to travel up towards her mouth, where it escaped as a throaty sob. Almost immediately, her vision blurred with a flood of tears. They spilt down her cheeks, leaving streaks on her dusty skin. She knew how this would go. Once she started, it was difficult to stop. She let herself sit on the ground, dribbling her frustration onto the floor as she went.

Like before, the people around her ignored her – or at least tried to. Some of the tourists and cafeteria staff shared awkward glances, while the others sent her brief, empathetic looks. This certainly

wasn't how she was supposed to act – she was supposed to take the challenge head-on and rescue her friends and family. That's what a hero's job was.

Laura only cried harder, wheezing with the embarrassment that buzzed in her ears. She was embarrassed by her frail nerves, her reckless emotions, and most of all – her role to play in all of this.

Without her friends to comfort her, it was easy to break down. Her worst fears had been confirmed: there was no way out of here, and even if there was, she wasn't smart enough or brave enough to figure it out. Samira and Carlton had been the brains behind this mission all along, and now they were gone. *Kidnapped!*

She wheezed.

And it was all her fault. Had she not insisted on following The Director's first message, they wouldn't have gotten sucked into this stupid movie in the first place. She should have been responsible and waited for her parents. She should have found a better way to save her grandmother. *Her grandmother!*

She wheezed again.

Marta was old and frail – and was probably terrified of the psycho that also kidnapped her. She needed a real hero to save her – someone like Harrison Jones.

Laura couldn't be him, no matter how much she pretended. She was embarrassed to even admit that to herself. She wasn't a real hero. She was just acting.

Laura's head throbbed with the effort of her sobs. It was an ugly sight – red and sticky and wet. Eventually, she had no tears left to cry. Closing her eyes, she inhaled an air-conditioned breath. Her body shuddered at the sensation, almost in protest of the cool intrusion. Quickly, she exhaled a shaky puff.

*That's enough*, she told herself, *people are watching*. She tried to exert some self-control. Still, her shoulders shook, and her breath hitched with a slurry of quiet sobs.

Still holding the scarab, she used her free hand to wipe her face.

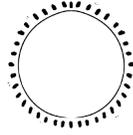
*Uncanny Valley*

Stray hairs clung to her cheeks while she settled down, trying her best to take deep breaths. She reached above her head, fumbling her hand over the table for a loose serviette. The first one she brought down was The Director's message. Still frustrated, she had half the mind to use it on her runny nose.

She read the inscription again.

"What a creep." Her voice was as stuffy as her nose. Begrudgingly, she stuffed The Director's serviette into her breast pocket and used another one to blow her nose.

Her grandmother was still missing, and now her friends were gone, too. Stuck in a movie world that wasn't hers, Laura had nothing better to do than to find them.



## Chapter 14

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Laura's eyes were tired. She closed them, briefly soothing her post-cry eye-itch, before reopening them to the map in front of her.

After her breakdown in the cafeteria, she managed to sneak out of the visitor's centre with some snacks and another bottle of water. Though she still felt sorry for herself, she felt worse for her friends and grandmother – who were still at The Director's mercy. She also wondered whether Ahmed was okay, especially after what he had told her. Her stomach's pit of guilt only deepened at the thought.

It was also her fault that he got caught helping them.

She wanted him to see his family again, just like she wanted to see her own. To do that, she'd have to defeat The Director and get back home somehow – before moonlight.

Laura mulled over these thoughts while she chewed on some peanuts and raisins. She stood in front of a large tourist map – the kind that had you'd find in a zoo or amusement park. It was of the Valley of the Kings – or at least that's what the heading said.

Without it, she wouldn't have guessed what she was looking at.

It didn't look like any of the other maps Laura had seen before. Right in the middle of an empty space was a bunch of roads that

stretched out in various directions. All but one of the roads ended abruptly. It also had lots of labels, most of which showed the location of tombs, and to whom they belonged. Some of these labels had a group of symbols beside them, which explained the tomb's condition.

Laura assumed that the empty space was the desert; and that the roads were the sandy walkways they had used to find Ahmed's tour. After a short walk with the tour group, they took a tram on a wider, tarred road down to the visitor's centre. This road was the widest one that ran across the map and off the page.

Laura poured the rest of her peanuts and raisins into her mouth. Her nostrils flared. This map wasn't much help. Scratching her head, she noticed that her scalp had grown hot again. Although it had started its afternoon descent, the sun was still bright enough to bake the landscape – and her poor scalp.

She turned back towards the visitor's centre – a little square building made up of sand-coloured bricks. Although she felt inclined to step back into its shade, she told herself to at least try to figure something out. If this map didn't work out, then she'd have to find another place to start.

She didn't have enough time for that.

Turning back to the map, she read over the labels one last time. The stale landscape made her uneasy. Her gut trembled. I shouldn't have eaten those peanuts and raisins so quick, she thought to herself. She was good at reading maps – or at least she thought so. Marta taught her how to read them – and she had lots of maps. Since she thought GPS was cheating, she'd ask Laura to use the city atlas and navigate during outings.

“Remember, there are only two rules to map reading!” Marta would say from behind the steering wheel of her old Land Cruiser, “Always point it North, and always read everything.” She'd wink at the last part.

Remembering this advice, Laura hardened her gaze on the stale map in front of her. This time, she took notice of everything she saw

– no matter how faded or insignificant it looked. A pair of unlabelled dotted lines trailed off the right-hand side of the page. Laura had ignored them previously, preferring to focus on the darker, clearly labelled roadways. She assumed that the dotted lines indicated something less important, like a hiking trail or something. Though, after taking a closer look, Laura noticed that those dotted lines were labelled – with tiny, faded writing that disappeared under the glare of the sun.

She cupped her hands around her eyes and leaned on her tiptoes to get a better look. The labels appeared towards the top of the map, right where the dotted lines streamed off the page. She read the lower one first:

*‘Path to Deir el-Medina & al-Gurn’*

Laura frowned. She wasn’t sure what any of that meant. Teetering on her toes, she shifted her gaze upwards to the second label.

*‘Path to Deir el-Bahari & Temple of Hatshepsut’*

At least she understood half of that one. The dotted lines were paths to temples – or at least one of them was. Laura dropped back onto her heels.

The map didn’t help as much as she had hoped – the one used in Harrison Jones led him exactly where he needed to go. This one only left Laura feeling more confused than before. Hands still cupped around her eyes, she looked to the sky. Though it was still bright blue, she could see that the sun had lowered considerably.

“You have until moonlight to find my sanctuary,” The Director’s message flashed in her mind.

*Sanctuary. What a weird word to use,* Laura thought to herself. Removing the serviette from her breast pocket, she read over The Director’s most recent message:

*No more cheating. No more distractions.  
From now on, you’re on your own.  
In your hand, you hold a clue.*

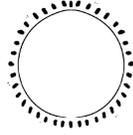
*The moon follows the sun, and so shall you.  
You have until moonlight to find my sanctuary,  
and your friends and family.  
See you soon,  
– The Director*

Laura's brow furrowed thoughtfully. Sanctuaries were sacred spaces – Marta had taught her this. They were in the museum, dusting an old Celtic amulet when Marta explained that she found it in an ancient pagan sanctuary – a place of worship where the divine was believed to be present.

*Temples are also places of worship*, Laura's eyes widened in realization. With grin, she turned back to the map. The dotted lines weren't only paths to temples – they were paths sanctuaries! According to his instructions, that's where The Director would be hidden.

Laura would just have to find the right temple before the moon was out.

Vibrating with excitement, she embraced the only good feeling she experienced during this whole ordeal: the thrill of discovery. Turning on her heels, Laura rushed back into the visitor's centre – in search of more clues for her mission, and more snacks for the stress of it all.



## Chapter 15

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Although the visitor's centre was small, it contained a wealth of knowledge – provided what you were looking for could fit into a pamphlet.

The visitor's centre had two entrances: one right at the front of the building, where the ticket counter and pamphlet racks were located; and another around the corner, which led to the cafeteria. As soon as she stepped through the front entrance, Laura grabbed as many pamphlets as she could carry, and found herself a spot to spread out on.

One of these must be useful, Laura reasoned. In his film, Harrison Jones used a library to learn more about the pyramids. Although all the information he learned was historically inaccurate nonsense, Laura tried the same strategy with her pamphlets.

Still riding off the adrenaline from her previous conclusion, she reclaimed her spot at the cafeteria – the one where her friends were kidnapped. Still covered in crumbs and rubbish, the scene was largely left untouched by the cafeteria staff. Laura wiped her arms over the table, pushing the debris to the ground before spreading her pamphlets out over the table.

Finally, she unfolded a miniature version of the map she

encountered outside - though the tiny labels were even harder to read on this one. Her pointer finger squeaked across the glossy surface while she traced along the dotted lines. They crossed over each other, forming an X shape across the right-hand side of the page. She wondered whether that meant there were interconnecting roads of some kind. She had to lean in close to read their labels again.

Again, she read the bottom one first:

*Path to Deir el-Medina & al-Gurn*

Quickly, Laura reached for her pamphlets. What she found was a thin brochure – just a double-sided page folded in thirds.

'Deir El-Medina is an Ancient Egyptian workmen's village, home to craftsmen who worked on the tombs in the Valley of the Kings-'

That wasn't quite what she was looking for. Unsatisfied, Laura flipped the page and skimmed over the other side.

'The highest point in the Theban hills, al-Gurn is a pyramid-shaped peak that Egyptologists believe is the reason that the valley was chosen to be the royal necropolis-

Laura frowned. This wasn't looking good so far. The first of her two leads led to an old village and a giant hill – dead ends. Feeling her adrenaline wane, she hoped that the other path led to somewhere more useful.

She checked the map again:

*Path to Deir el-Bahari & Temple of Hatshepsut*

After some searching, Laura found that both locations were detailed in the same brochure – a thicker booklet titled “Theban Temples”.

She read the first line of the first page:

“Deir el-Bahari is a complex of mortuary temples and tombs situated on the west bank of the River Nile, opposite the city of Luxor, Egypt.”

Feeling some renewed excitement, Laura flipped through the colourful pages. She noticed that there were three major temples

dedicated to three ancient pharaohs. Straining her eyes, she tried to read their names correctly: Mentuhotep II; Thutmose III, and Hatshepsut – whose name matched the label on the dotted path.

“Great!” she congratulated herself out loud. Her belly filled with satisfaction, and another round of peanuts and raisins. Was this how Harrison Jones felt? She wondered, her shoulders tickling with the same thrill she had experienced before, this isn’t so bad.

Though, she couldn’t lower her momentum. Like The Director had said, she needed to pick up the pace and find him. Now that she knew where to go, she’d have to figure out which temple is the right one.

Not wanting to waste time, she chose to figure that out on the tram to Deir el-Bahari.



## Chapter 16

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There were no trams into Deir el-Bahari. Well, none that would take Laura far enough. She'd be dropped off at the entrance to the mortuary complex, where she'd then need to walk the rest of the way towards each temple.

Unable to take all her pamphlets, she boarded the tram with only her booklet on Theban Temples and her map of the valley. She suspected it was enough to help guide her to the right temple... somehow. She'd just have to read more on the way there.

Though she felt good about her strategy so far, Laura couldn't quite stomach the motion sickness from reading on the tram, nor the amount of peanuts she had eaten. Feeling her eyes go squint on the shaky ride, she begrudgingly gave up on reading and focused on the landscape to soothe her headache.

Quiet and still, the surrounding desert was an emptiness that inspired both awe and dread. Laura wondered whether the desert in the real Luxor – the one in her world – was just as empty. Stuck on the shaky tram, she finally had a moment to properly absorb her surroundings. Without the rush of her friends and the constant threat of danger, she realized that this world felt hollow without all the action. Although there were various tourists and employees scattered

about, every place she had encountered felt sparse – even for a desert valley.

Even the tram was empty, carrying only Laura and the conductor.

Laura shifted in her seat. These thoughts made her uncomfortable. Taking a deep breath, she recounted her steps from the moment she arrived. It was the perfect story: a group of friends – heroes – find themselves in danger and must work together to traverse an unknown world, defeat the enemy, and save the day.

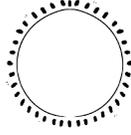
Though The Director oversaw it all, she didn't think defeat was part of his plan.

With a puff, Laura blew her fringe from her face. Everything felt so fabricated – so staged. Like her grandmother's museum, it was all so perfectly coordinated that it felt unreal. It was like she was stuck in a pretty dollhouse. Although it had all the trimmings, it was completely void of life.

Crawling beneath sandstone cliffs, the tram sunk into their shadows. Laura shuddered. The sun was setting faster now. Trapped in his uncanny valley, she'd soon have to face The Director.

Though she was doubtful, Laura hoped for a happy ending.

## Chapter 17



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The sky was halfway to sunset by the time that the tram reached Deir el-Bahari.

Laura's boots crunched onto the desert sand as she disembarked the tram. She turned to wave to the conductor, who surprisingly gave her a sorry nod before snaking around and heading back down into the valley. As she watched the tiny, yellow car shudder into the distance, she let herself be consumed by the desert's persistent silence.

Now, Laura was completely and utterly alone.

A gentle breeze swept the hair from her face while she turned to the path ahead. The tar and gravel road designated for visiting trams and cars ended abruptly in the middle of a flattened landscape. There was a small hut next to the road – what Laura presumed to be for security, like the ADT hut in Samira's neighbourhood.

Her gut twisted at the thought of her friends.

"Hello?" She called out, straining her ears to listen through the still air. There wasn't a sound – not even the rustle of clothes. Laura swallowed thickly. To her right was a dusty sign, close to the ground.

TICKETS

The words were inside an arrow, pointing farther right to a squat, yellow building. A curio centre, she thought. Turning towards it, she wondered whether she'd be able to find a sign of life there. Her body leant forward, eager to investigate.

She stopped herself mid-step.

What's the point in that? She shook her head. *No more distractions!* She echoed The Director's words in her mind. She had spent most of this mission getting distracted – by the treasures in the unmarked tomb, by the murals in the tomb of Ramses IV, by the food in the cafeteria, and now by the deserted curio centre.

She clenched her jaw.

She knew why she did this. Distractions were an easy tool to avoid challenges – and Laura preferred to ignore challenges when she could. She feared their uncertain results.

“No.” Laura told herself, pressing her foot back onto the sand. She couldn't ignore what was at stake any longer – not only for herself but for her friends and grandmother. She owed them a responsibility.

Decidedly, she looked towards the monuments ahead.

A short, stone wall separated the end of the tar road from the start of the monument path, which fed out into a sandy expanse towards the most captivating thing Laura had ever seen. Far into the horizon, carved into the side of a cliff, was an enormous temple. The rapidly setting sun cast a golden glow over the structure, submerging Laura in a feeling she couldn't quite describe.

It was a sensation that dwarfed all her other momentary thrills combined – though she couldn't tell if that was a good or bad thing. Constantly switching between excitement and dread was exhausting.

Quickly, she fumbled through her booklet, trying to find an image that matched what she saw. None of the pictures captured it perfectly – by a long shot, but one of them did match the building's shape and location. Square and solid against the foot of a cliff, the perfectly symmetrical structure bore a ramp that led up to its second floor,

before continuing into the third and final terrace. Above the image was the page heading:

‘The Mortuary Temple of Hatshepsut.’

“Awesome.” Laura spoke out loud. Looking up, she took a moment to get one last glimpse of the temple – to make sure that it was the right one. She had to hold a hand up to her face, blocking the glare of the sun that was setting right over the temple – almost as though it was sinking into the top.

It was regal – a desert oasis.

Turning back to her booklet, she started to read:

“...built during the reign of Pharaoh Hatshepsut, the temple is a masterpiece of ancient architecture. Its design was heavily influenced by the Temple of Mentuoteph II, built six hundred years earlier...”

Laura’s legs moved with a will of their own. Still reading, she walked, and then jogged, and then ran along the bricked path to the sandstone temple.

“...the temple has suffered over time. After her reign, Hatshepsut’s stepson and successor, Thutmose III, desecrated all references to her rule. This removed her from Ancient Egyptian memory, and almost erased her from history. The reasons for this destruction remain a mystery, but could be a result of Ancient Egyptian society’s preference for male pharaohs...”

Laura’s heart was in her throat, though this time it wasn’t because of a bad feeling. Instead, her chest could barely contain her excitement.

“...though still heavily disputed, Hatshepsut’s mummified body has yet to be discovered. Many Egyptologists suggest that Hatshepsut had modified the tomb of her father, Thutmose I, to include herself in the burial chamber...”

Through her panting breaths, Laura’s mouth broke into a cheesy grin. It was all starting to make sense now – the queen Pharaoh, the

unmarked tomb, Ahmed's denial. Hatshepsut was removed from her original tomb and re-interred elsewhere during her stepson's tirade. This meant that Ahmed wasn't keeping a secret from them – he genuinely didn't know what they were talking about when confronting him about their discovery.

There was no way he could know about a tomb and its mummy that had yet to be discovered – he was only a tour guide. His job was to relay the information on his carefully planned script, given to him by The Director.

Laura was close to reaching the temple entrance now. Though her legs were burning, she pushed herself the last few meters towards the first ramp ahead, before taking a break to catch her breath.

Though she managed to connect all the dots so far, her satisfaction started to wane. There was still a lot to do – she had to figure out where The Director was hiding. She was confident that Hatshepsut's temple was the right place, but still considered the possibility that she was wrong.

The temple in front of her was enormous – and suddenly much more intimidating than it looked on the horizon. Now that she was up close, she could see just how wide each terrace was – and how far she'd have to travel to explore each one.

“At least there aren't any stairs.” She reassured herself. She was right – each terrace was accessed by a series of ramps located right through the middle of the Temple. Though there weren't any stairs, it would still be a time-consuming climb.

Right at the back of her booklet was a map of the mortuary complex. Unfolding it, she realized that all three temples were located right next to each other. There, she could also see just how large each temple was – each with its variety of terraces, chapels, halls, and temples.

“It could be any one of these,” Laura had taken to speaking to herself – it's not like anyone could hear her anyway. She had to strain her eyes under the dimming sunlight. Laura looked up. The sun had almost completed its descent, now just peaking from behind the cliff

ahead. She wouldn't have enough time to look through each temple. She'd have to choose one now – and hope that it was the right place.

Under a sharp orange sky, Laura took a moment to reason with herself. She was close now – it wasn't time to be paralyzed by uncertainty.

With a deep breath, she closed her eyes and thought about her next steps. Just as Carlton had suggested, the first tomb they encountered had to have been important in some way. Otherwise, they could have started anywhere else – in the desert, the visitor's centre, or even another tomb. The Director deliberately put them there, just like he deliberately planned for almost everything else to happen.

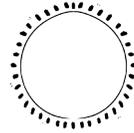
It was their first clue.

A queen pharaoh's tomb – unmarked and forgotten in the desert. That sounded a lot like what happened to Hatshepsut.

Laura opened her eyes. The temple's floodlights had turned on, illuminating its pillars columns in an other-worldly glow. As night crept closer, the still desert grew even quieter. It was almost as though it waited for a response – an audience for a great show.

Finally, Laura took a step forward and crossed the threshold into Hatshepsut's Temple.

## Chapter 18



Laura expected the temple to be big but was caught off guard by how enormous everything was. Now that it was dusk, the desert air cooled beneath the growing darkness. Laura rubbed the goosebumps on her arms as she walked across the temple's first terrace, and up the ramp to the second. Like before, the air was still and silent – so much so that it almost felt unnatural.

She shuddered at the eerie sensation. Although she was completely alone, she couldn't help but feel like she was being watched - a young antelope stalked by a hungry leopard.

Laura had to squint to read her map, the letters blurring in the blue-hour light. She had placed the director's serviette beside it, covering the other two temples in the complex. No distractions, she reminded herself, this one is the right one. Still, Laura battled the itchy doubt in her brain. Though she wasn't confident with her decision to search Hatshepsut's temple, she also knew that it was the only one that made the most sense.

She just hoped that she had correctly interpreted The Director's last message:

*No more cheating. No more distractions.  
From now on, you're on your own.  
In your hand, you hold a clue.  
The moon follows the sun, and so shall you.  
You have until moonlight to find my sanctuary,  
and your friends and family.  
See you soon,  
– The Director*

Laura had already guessed that The Director's sanctuary was inside a temple, which had to be Hatshepsut's since she and her friends had first appeared in a forgotten queen pharaoh's tomb. Still, this didn't quite give away his hidden location. She half-hoped that he was waiting for her on the second courtyard, illuminated by a great spotlight above.

A chill ran down her spine. What would she do once she finally found him? What would she say? How would she defend herself?

Laura felt Fear's cold hands wrapped around her neck. She didn't actually have a plan. They clogged her breath, sending a wave of chills down to her toes. She hadn't thought about actually confronting The Director – about the possibility of completing this whole journey, of deciphering The Director's clues, only to lose to him in the end.

*Harrison Jones always beats the bad guy*, Laura tried to comfort herself, *though he's also a black belt in Karate and Kung-Fu*. The peanuts in her gut trembled again.

She struggled to accept a lot of truths throughout this journey – most of which were her own shortcomings. Though, she now found herself struggling to come to terms with the most insidious truth of them all: The Director was playing a game, and she was his pawn.

*"It all ends, and everything fades to black."* Ahmed's voice rang in her head.

The Director wasn't the head of some evil corporation that oversaw the valley and its people. He was much more than the villain of this story. He was the director of the film she and her friends were

sucked into. He was the one who decided how her journey would start, and how it would end.

Hopelessness was a bitter taste.

Laura chided herself for being so foolish – so stupid. She followed his directions right into his trap, and hadn't even prepared a speech or anything! How embarrassing. She and her friends hadn't even taken a moment to think about how they'd save the day; or how they'd even get home. Instead, they followed the same steps that Harrison Jones would and expected the same results. It was the stupidest plan any of them could have come up with – and they all thought it was genius!

They did exactly what The Director wanted them to – and expected them to.

With these thoughts swimming in her head, Laura braced herself, now fully expecting to see him waiting for her – grinning maniacally and prepared to preach his evil monologue.

Holding a deep breath, she stepped onto the terrace.

Wide-eyed, she turned left, right, round, and round.

Then, she scurried across to the middle of the courtyard, her utility belt causing quite the ruckus in the quiet air.

There, she waited for him to appear – for the leopard to finally pounce on its prey, trembling and vulnerable out in the open.

She held herself stiff, arms clamped to her sides, and hands tightly wrapped around her souvenir booklet.

She waited.

She shut her eyes, trembling in the cold evening air.

And waited some more.

Nothing came.

He wasn't there.

Instead, she stood on another empty, sandstone terrace – this time decorated with some crumbling statues and ruins. Opening her eyes, she relaxed, and heavily exhaled the breath she held – feeling half-relieved and half-frustrated.

Why did he have to keep dragging this out?

It was twilight now – the moon would be out soon. Laura opened the booklet again, using The Director's serviette as a bookmark to hold her place. She could barely see any of the writing anymore. With a sigh, she made her way towards the second terrace's ramp, which would then lead up to the third and final terrace. Beside the ramp were two colonnades, each of which were illuminated by a set of floodlights.

Laura rubbed her eyes while she walked across the courtyard. The day's exhaustion started to settle in, weighing her down into an ambling pace. Her clanking utility belt didn't help much – carrying both the heavy prop torch and several meters of rope took its toll on her hips. Once she reached the colonnades, she chose the nearest side and sat down among the yellow lights.

She groaned when her bum plonked onto the floor, giving her tired legs some sweet respite. Seated behind a row of sandstone columns, she had a clear view of the temple's hieroglyphed walls. The pictures were enormous, and though they were cracked and faded, she could just make out the image of an army sailing across a fish-filled river. Here, she could at least read again – without having to hold a quickly-dimming torch.

Surprisingly, bracing herself for The Director's appearance had renewed her confidence. It was like finally seeing the monster in a scary movie – once you see it, it's not as scary anymore. Though she still felt worried about their imminent confrontation, at least she had some time to come up with a plan – one that would rival his.

She was close now. All she had to do was find his hiding place, of which there were many. The temple had four chapels, each dedicated to an Ancient Egyptian god or cult. There was also a tomb and a

smaller mortuary temple – each of which was located on opposite sides of the temple. Lastly, right at the top of the map, and labelled in extra-tiny writing was the sanctuary of Amun.

“There you are.” Laura spoke to herself, the corners of her lips barely twitching upwards. She didn’t know why she hadn’t noticed the sanctuary before – but didn’t bother to think about it either. She was tired and just wanted to go home. She had already braced herself to meet The Director and still carried those same feelings.

Amun-Ra was one of the Ancient Egyptian’s chief gods. He represented the sun, creation and fertility – among a bunch of other things that Laura had recently learned in history class. She suspected that Amun-Ra’s connection to the sun was part of The Director’s message.

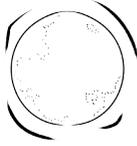
*...The moon follows the sun and so shall you.  
You have until moonlight to find my sanctuary,  
and your friends and family...*

She read again, rolling her eyes. Everything felt more theatrical the longer it went on. The sanctuary of Amun was certainly where The Director was hiding – or at least it was her best option.

She leaned forward, trying to peek up at the sky through the columns in front of her. Though it was darker, the moon didn’t look like it was out yet.

“Good.” Laura slapped her thighs. She still had time to find The Director and sort him out. She’d come up with a plan, or at least a cool catchphrase, on her way to the sanctuary. Standing up, she shut her booklet and made her way to the ramp on her right.

“I’ll get you!” She called out, her voice rippling through the still air.



## Chapter 19

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The Sanctuary of Amun was a small chamber on the farthest end of Hatshepsut's temple. Guarded by a tiny, stone-coloured gate, it didn't look as impressive as Laura had imagined. It was a quicker walk than she expected – the second terrace's ramp led directly into the small, heavily pillared courtyard where the sanctuary was located. Here, she concealed herself behind a particularly well-preserved pillar.

Like the previous terraces, the courtyard was empty. *He's inside*, she thought to herself while peering over the edge of the stone. Two burly men stood at the entrance. *Goons*, Laura rolled her eyes, how *cliché*.

Careful to keep out of sight, Laura peered up at the sky. The moon was out. It was a striking image – a pale, glowing disk floating amidst glittery stars. She had never seen such a large full moon, nor had she ever seen such a starry sky. She wondered whether this was also part of the world's theatrics, or whether her world's night sky could look the same. She hoped for the latter while she hid back behind the pillar.

I'm just in time, she thought while uncoiling the rope from her utility belt. Though she was crouching, she could already appreciate

the lighter sensation on her hips. She looked up at a nearby security camera. Despite the many other pillars in the courtyard, Laura specifically chose the one that had the best angle towards it. It was already pointing in her direction, its eye awake and flashing red.

The Director was watching her.

Brushing the loose hair from her face, Laura quietly turned her whole body towards the camera, smiled the cheesiest grin she could muster, and waved. As expected, there was no response – from the camera or through the sanctuary’s open doorway.

*Good.*

She knew what The Director was waiting for – for her to get past his goons and find him in that dark little sanctuary. That’s what Harrison Jones would do.

But she wasn’t Harrison Jones, and this wasn’t her movie.

The Director’s plan didn’t account for this. He expected her to follow the same pattern she had since the beginning: to play the role of a hero in a cheesy adventure film. She planned to do the exact opposite – to ruin his story and foil his plan in the best way she could think of.

She was going to break character.

Her wave to the camera was his first warning. Now was time for the second. Discarding her rope on the floor, Laura rose to her feet and stepped around the pillar. Her boots crackled against the stone floor with each careless step forward. Her shadow, dark and enormous behind the courtyard’s floodlights, dragged over the sandstone walls until it settled in a commanding stance.

Now standing in the middle of the courtyard, Laura challenged the goons to a staring contest. As expected, they pretended not to see her. Still, the microscopic shift of their eyes was enough of a response. They were unprepared for this – improv acting. Their job was to look scary, not be scary. She was supposed to sneak past them – crawl beneath the rope barriers in front of the courtyard’s sculptures and sneak into the sanctuary that way.

## *Uncanny Valley*

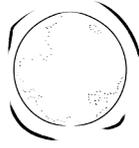
Laura braced herself. Now it was time for her climactic performance – the Oscar-winning scene. Screwing her face into an ugly wince, she clutched her stomach and doubled over. “Oh!” she cried, channelling Charlize Theron, “Oh my tummy!” she fell to her knees, “It hurts!”

The goons shared a look. Was she being serious? Should they help her?

“I need the bathroom!” she groaned, her voice cracking in phantom pain.

One of the goons stepped forward, to at least get a better look at her. What if she really was in pain? She was quite convincing. Looking back to his partner, he waved for him to come over and help.

Laura tried her best to mask a smile through her moaning and groaning. It’s an unspoken rule that all movie goons are terrible at their jobs – these included.



## Chapter 20

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Laura was making quite the scene. Inside the sanctuary, Marta's eyes were glued to the little black and white screen in front of her. Her granddaughter was barely in the shot, which was mostly cut off by a stone pillar.

The Director also watched on, his knuckles turning white around the skull-shaped knob of his cane. "What is she doing?" He hissed, turning to Carlton and Samira, who were tied up in a corner.

"Come again?" Carlton yelled over Laura's cries. Her echoes were an ear-beating sound in the tiny chamber. They could barely hear anything else.

"What is she doing!" The Director took a long step forward. He pressed his cane into Carlton's chest, forcing both him and Samira up against the wall behind them.

"She needs the bathroom, obviously." Samira spat over her friend's wails. She didn't appreciate being manhandled. Her patience was short, especially after being tied to Carlton for hours, "Are you as deaf as you are old?"

"Samira." Carlton warned. The Director was already an angry old man. He had crazy eyes – haunting, pale dots deep in his face. He was

insane, and Samira's attitude would only push him further. His panic flared – she never knew when to stop.

Carlton trembled in his restraints. The Director slowly turned his head to face Samira, who scowled up at him. Though she looked fearless, Carlton could feel her tight grip on his shirt.

She was terrified.

The Director's spindly figure bent at the waist, his head descending towards the pair of friends. With his head only centimetres away, Carlton pressed himself harder against the wall.

"What did you say?" The Director's breath smelled like tobacco.

Samira wrinkled her nose before responding, "I said she needs the toilet. She has a weak stomach." She held on even tighter to Carlton's shirt.

Laura was speaking in codes. The toilet routine was only used in express emergencies – like speaking to Ms. Coetzee. It was their secret way of asking for help. Laura was doing her part, now it was time for them to do theirs.

"It's true," Carlton stuttered, "she probably ate too many of those peanuts!" this was true – they all watched her stuff three bags of peanuts and raisins in her mouth. The Director was a certified creep. After he captured Carlton and Samira, he forced them all to watch Laura on his collection of CCTV screens. Now, those same, creepy, screens that illuminated the chamber offered a way out.

"We need to check on her." Samira insisted.

"No." The Director stood tall, "It's only a cramp." He turned on his heel and used his cane to walk back up to the wall of screens.

"Sorry?" Samira pulled on Carlton's shirt, trying to repress her panic, "You can't even see what's going on!"

"Glen." Marta finally spoke up. Her voice was stern, cold. Carlton and Samira stilled. Marta's face was hard, the pale glow from the screens sculpting a shadowy scowl. They had never seen her like this, let alone heard her speak like this, "You *will* let her go. Do you hear me?"

“Glen? His name is Glen?” Carlton gasped, “He doesn’t look like a Glen...”

“Carlton, focus.” Samira nudged him, “We need to get to her.”

“Right.”

Marta and Glen were facing each other now. Carlton and Samira watched on as the elderly pair stared at each other – the once simmering tension had now reached a rolling boil. Laura’s wails.

What did you say to me?” Glen’s voice trembled.

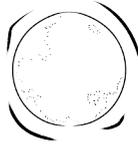
“I told you to let her go. Do you want her to have an accident right there? Is that part of your film too?”

“You don’t get to give me orders.” Glen’s fist was tightly clenched around his cane. Laura’s wails were unbearable now. They made already tiny chamber feel even more claustrophobic. “I’ll fetch her myself.” Taking a deep breath, he turned to walk out of the chamber, “The show *will* go on.”

Marta held her breath, listening hard for the beat of his cane. Once it sounded far enough, she mustered all the strength in her legs and leaned forward to stand up. With the chair still strapped to her back, her body hunched forward while she quickly shuffled towards Carlton and Samira. “Quickly,” she hissed, “use your teeth to untie me!” with an echoing thud, she sat back down in front of the pair. Facing away from them, she wiggled her wrists. They were tied together behind the chair.

“What? But-”

“Just help me do it, Carlton.” Leaning forward, Samira held onto the knot with her teeth. She twisted her head to pull it apart, “We need to help Laura.” Her voice was muffled around the rope.



## Chapter 21

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Laura didn't have much of a plan past this point. Still holding her stomach, she let out one final groan when The Director stepped out of the sanctuary. He stood in front of her now, looking down at her on the ground. She sat on her bum, matching his eyes with her own.

“Feeling better?” His voice wasn't as deep as she expected.

Laura kept quiet. Her act was over now, she got him where she wanted.

“You can leave.” He gestured to his goons. They gave her one last look, surprised by her sudden quiet, before heading out of the courtyard.

At last, it was just her and The Director. The inevitable confrontation.

Laura withheld a shiver. Her skin broke into goosebumps, but not only because of the evening air. The Director looked nothing like she had expected. A pair of thick eyebrows framed his skinny, wrinkled face, that then stretched down into a skinny, crooked body. He wore the same kind of adventure garb that she and her friends were dressed in, only his clothes hung on him like they were hollow.

He was just an old man.

An angry one, she could tell by the way his eyes burned into her. She stared on, challenging his fire with her own. She was angry too.

“That was a clever performance you made.” He spoke.

Laura bit her tongue.

“What’s the rest of your plan?” Leaning on his cane, he took a step towards her, “Now that you’ve got me out here.”

Still, he spoke alone.

“Aw, feeling shy? Here, I’ll go first.” He was only a step away now. Keeping her eyes on his, she tilted her head upwards. This left her neck exposed – a nice resting place for the tip of his cane. The bottom felt rough against her skin.

“My plan,” he continued, “is to make sure that you and granny are stuck here forever.” He gently pressed the cane into her throat, “Your friends are an unexpected bonus.”

“Where are they?” Laura tried to make herself sound tough – even though her adrenaline rush was subsiding. Her throat felt tight, and not only because of The Director’s cane – her nerves were returning.

“Shh,” he hushed her, “you had your chance to speak.” He pressed the cane harder into her throat. “You’re here because Marta stole something from me, and now I’m here to take it back.”

Laura withheld a cough; the cane was starting to hurt. Her hands clawed at the ground behind her. “You already have the scarab.” She managed.

The Director tilted his head. He almost looked sympathetic, “That’s not even the half of it.” He smiled at his own pun. Nudging the cane further, he forced Laura to lean back further. In doing so, he leaned forward.

*Come closer*, Laura let him speak. She briefly thought about snatching his cane away, but the idea seemed a little too dangerous – for her throat, at least. The sand gathering under her nails gave her another idea.

Meanwhile, Marta was hatching her plan. Once Carlton and Samira had released her wrists, she made quick work of untying the rest of their restraints. Now free, they could work together to escape.

“We need the scarab to get out of here.” She whispered while stretching out her back.

“The one he stole?” Samira whispered back.

“Yes,” she paused, “how did you know that?”

“We found the crime scene before we came here.” Carlton explained.

“And you didn’t call your parents?!” Marta tried not to raise her voice.

“We didn’t think anything bad would happen.” Carlton lied.

“Especially not this.” Samira nodded along.

Marta pulled them into a hug. She was upset that they unknowingly put themselves in danger (who disturbs a crime scene?), but even more grateful that they were there – without them, her fate would be sealed.

“You have all been very brave,” she reassured them, “but now you have to be twice as strong. The scarab has an incantation carved into its base. Glen intends to use it to get back to the real world and leave us stranded here.” Carlton and Samira stiffened in her embrace. She pulled away from them, her wide eyes meeting their own, “But it’s okay because we still have a chance to stop him. All you need to do is get one half of the scarab from him, and I can decipher the incantation from there. Then, we can leave, and he can stay here.”

“But what if he does this again? Can’t we just take him with us? Doesn’t he just want to leave?” Samira furrowed her brow.

“No. Glen is dangerous. He can’t by any means have access to our world or any of the other artefacts in the museum.”

Carlton and Samira stared at her, their heads spinning with this torrent of new information. The stakes only grew higher with every encounter. Not only did they have to save themselves, but also save

their world from a crazy old man with a magic scarab? It didn't make much sense, though none of what happened so far made sense anyway.

Sensing their confusion, Marta squeezed their shoulders and comforted them one more time, "I know this is all very confusing. I'll explain everything later – we just need to get home first."

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"Your grandmother stole my life away." The Director's voice grew venomous, "I had a bright future. A spectacular career ahead of me..." he went on.

From the corner of her eye, Laura saw her friends emerge from the Sanctuary. Her grandmother followed behind them, holding a finger to her lips. They were sweaty, dishevelled, and exhausted – but they were also in one piece. Relieved that her friends were okay, she focused on The Director.

*The moon's been up for ages now*, Laura kept her eyes on the unsuspecting Director. *Liar*. Like all cheap movie villains, he was still monologuing, going on about how awful his life had been for the last several decades. Squeezing her fingers tightly on the ground, she accumulated a good fistful of sand.

Her friends and Marta stood off to the side. They looked like they had a plan – at least she hoped so because hers was about to reach its end. Swallowing the lump in her throat, and gathering her last morsel of bravery, Laura used her free hand to grab the cane at her throat. Acting quickly, she pulled it hard, forcing The Director to fall forwards. Their eyes met briefly – his wide in surprise, and hers as hard as she could make them. She threw the gathered sand into his face.

With a yelp, he tumbled onto her.

In a heap on the floor, Laura thrashed beneath him. She didn't plan for *this* to happen. He smelled like tobacco and day-old sweat. She gagged while trying to push him away. Fortunately, her friends

were on him almost as soon as they hit the ground. Carlton and Samira pulled him away, pinning him to the floor while Marta dug into his pockets.

Laying on his stomach, he cursed loudly. He screwed his teary eyes shut while an ugly string of words spewed out his mouth. The flying insults were directed at everyone and everything. Carlton snorted and dug his knees into The Director's back. The old man was throwing a preschool tantrum.

"Shut up, Glen." Marta hissed at him. A string of her spit flew next to his face, "This is a family film."

Laura cringed. Was her grandmother using a pun? Right now? *How embarrassing.* Still on the ground, she reached for his cane, "What do we do now?" she said, chucking the rod to the other side of the courtyard. It landed with a whipping crack.

"We go home," Marta grinned. She fished the stolen scarab from his left pocket. A crusty piece of sellotape held it together. "Quickly, follow me."

Laura was surprised by her grandmother's nimbleness. She stood quickly and rushed away from The Director, who was still wriggling on the floor.

"Come on! We don't want to take him with us!"

Eager to leave, Carlton and Samira scrambled towards her. Laura struggled to keep the same pace. She shared their enthusiasm, but her exhaustion took hold. She was slow on her feet, giving The Director just enough time to grab her ankle and drag her back down to the floor.

Red and irritated, his pale eyes looked even creepier than before. "Got you." He grinned through his moustache. She tried to pull away, but his grip only tightened. Dragging her forward, he rose to his knees. "You haven't won yet-"

Laura kicked him before he could go on. Her free foot gave him a leathery mouthful before she finally scrambled to her feet and took a big, clear step away from him. "You're the worst!" she said to him

while he fell back onto the floor, concussed and bloody-nosed.

“Sorry,” Laura huffed when she made it to her friends, “we can go now.”

There was a quiet moment while Marta split the scarab back in half. Too tired and overwhelmed to sing praise, the trio shared a brief hug. She made sure to memorize the inscribed incantation before discarding half of it on the floor. “We only need the one side,” She explained, “now, hold hands. I’ve only ever done this once before.”

“Aw, what?” Carlton complained, “I don’t want to hold hands.”

“Don’t be immature,” Samira rolled her eyes, “I want to go home.”

“We didn’t have to hold hands before!”

“Just do it!” Laura and Samira spoke in unison. They grabbed Carlton’s hands before linking with Marta’s.

Once they were ready, Marta recited the incantation. The ancient words were difficult to pronounce – and Marta was out of practice. She had to stop and restart a couple of times before finally getting it right. Laura closed her eyes, welcoming the strange, staticky sensation that took her home.



# Epilogue

“How do our outfits change?”

“Magic.”

“How come so little time passed?”

“Time in movies passes much faster than time in the real world.”

“Where did all our gear go?”

“Glen took that from you when he tied you up, remember?”

“Oh.” Carlton was full of questions, many of which didn’t have the answers he was hoping for.

Alongside a plate of cheese toasties, the trio digested the day’s events. Laura had never felt so relieved to fall onto the grimy museum floor. The incantation worked almost immediately, transporting them back to their world – the real world – only an hour after they had first disappeared. Back in their uniforms, the only evidence of their adventure was a film of dust clinging to their skin.

They all looked forward to taking long, warm showers when they got home.

For now, they still had to wait another forty-five minutes for their parents to arrive. Marta took this time to explain as much as she could – about her and Glen; their research in archaeology; and their eventual falling out.

“So wait,” Laura said in between gulps of Oros, “what about the rest of the museum’s artefacts? Are those magic too?”

“You mean all of these?” Marta wagged her finger around the room. They were seated around the granite bench, right in the middle of the Cultural History exhibit.

Swallowing the last of her juice, Laura nodded.

“Pretty much.” Marta shrugged.

The trio stilled.

“All of them?” Samira asked again, wide-eyed. She’d be asking her science tutor about all of this.

Marta leaned forward, her breath heavy with coffee and biscuits.

“All of them. Both floors.” There was a strange twinkle in her eye.

“Woah! Do all of them do the same thing? Or different things? What does that one do?” He pointed to a corner full of displays.

“Hang on.” Laura held up a hand, quelling Carlton’s excitement, “How did you get so many of these? Do people even know about this.”

“Well,” Marta rubbed her neck, “People know, they just don’t believe my research. As for the artefacts... archaeology has always been a messy field. You could pick anything up and keep it if it’s not a protected site.” She shrugged.

“So, you stole them?” Samira’s eyes were even wider now.

“That depends on your definition of stealing. Technically, the British Museum is full of stolen artefacts.”

“Wait!” Carlton slapped both hands onto the table, “If these are all stolen and magic, then does that mean people are looking for them?”

Marta dipped a biscuit into her coffee. She didn’t quite know how to answer that question. Her career was always full of excitement, but it wasn’t always ethical.

“Gran,” Laura cut through her thoughts, “how many more people are after you? Us?”

Marta had a lot more explaining to do.



# Glossary

# A guide to historical lingo

**Adrenaline** (rush) – a feeling of great excitement caused by the release of the adrenaline hormones. This kind of feeling happens in response to a threat, like finding a spider in your shower.

**Amulet** – A small piece of jewellery believed to protect against danger, death, or disease.

**Amun** (Amun-Ra) – A supreme god of the Ancient Egyptians. He was believed to have created the universe and is also closely associated with the sun god Ra. He represents the sun, fertility, and creation.

**Annexe** – An extra part, or extension of a building, such as an extra room beside a pharaoh's burial chamber. These rooms can be used to store treasures or booby traps!

**Archaeology** – The study of human history and prehistory through the excavation and analysis of artefacts and other remains.

**Architecture** – The style in which a building is designed and built. This word can also refer to the practice of designing and constructing buildings.

**Artefacts** – A man-made object, usually of cultural or historical importance. In other words: Treasure!

**Atlas** – A book of maps or charts. Essential when exploring!

**Begrudge** – to give something reluctantly.

**Bias** – An unfair preference for something (a person, concept, or idea), usually because of someone's direct connection to that preference.

**Bond Films** – A movie series about a British spy named James Bond. These old spy movies are action-packed, glamorous adventures!

**Booby Trap** – A masked or hidden trap that causes harm when touched or disturbed. Usually, these can be bombs, but pits and giant boulders work too!

Fun fact: booby traps were never really used in Ancient Egyptian tombs; however, they were used throughout other parts of history such as the Vietnam War.

**Bounty** – Something occurring in generous amounts. This can be a great treasure that one finds or a sum of money paid after completing a task.

**Brochure** – A small book or magazine containing information and pictures about something. These are usually informative, like Laura's booklet on Theban Temples!

**Burial Chamber** – A room used as a grave to store a sarcophagus or coffin. Ancient Egyptians built these into their tombs underground.

**Celtic** – This word describes anything belonging to the Celts and their culture. The Celts were a group of people that lived in Europe and Asia in pre-Roman times (thousands of years ago!)

## *Uncanny Valley*

**Chalice** – A large cup or goblet, usually used to serve wine. Some are simple and made of wood, while others can be encrusted in gemstones!

**Chasm** – A deep opening in the ground.

**Claustrophobia** – A fear of confined spaces.

**Cliché** – A phrase, concept, or opinion that is overused and lacks originality. This adventure was full of cliches, such as booby traps and goons.

**Concussion** – Temporary unconsciousness, shock, or confusion resulting from a hard hit to the head.

**Connoisseur** – An expert judge in matters of taste.

**Convolutéd** – Something that is extremely complicated and difficult to follow.

**Cranial** – Relating to the skull, otherwise known as the cranium.

**Damsel in Distress** – A young and beautiful woman who must be rescued by one or more men. This is an overused storytelling device in movies like Harrison Jones – a cliché!

**Delusion** – A false belief about reality, even though it has been proven untrue. For example, the belief that the Earth is flat even though it has been proven to be round.

**Dusk** – The darkest stage of twilight, just before the sun has completely set and night comes entirely.

**Egyptian Pyramid** – Monumental structures built as royal tombs in Ancient Egypt. These structures must have a square base and triangular sides.

Fun fact: The Pyramids of Giza were built well before the Valley of the Kings was used as a tomb site. These pyramids were once coated in a layer of limestone, creating a beautiful and blinding sight in the desert!

**Egyptology** – The study of the language, history, and culture of ancient Egypt.

**Empire** – A large group of states or countries ruled over by a single monarch or sovereign ruler. In the case of Ancient Egypt, generations of Pharaohs ruled over the Egyptian empire for several centuries.

**Enchantment** – A type of magic used to cast a spell over something or someone.

**Ethics** – A moral compass that directs a person's thoughts and actions. Ethics determine whether something is right or wrong.

**Exhale** – To breathe out.

**Fabricate** – To construct something out of pre-prepared components. In language, a fabrication is another word for a lie.

**Flask** – A container for liquids, usually used to keep them at a specific temperature (hot or cold).

**Foothold** – A space where someone’s foot can be lodged to support them securely – especially while climbing.

**Footpath** – A path for people to walk along, especially where there are no clear roads – such as in the Luxor desert.

Fun fact: A man-made path created by continuous foot traffic is also called a desire path.

**Formalities** – Things that are done simply to comply with convention or tradition. Sometimes this takes place without question, an expectation.

**Gauge** – To measure, judge, or assess something, such as a situation or circumstance.

Goon – An intimidating person who is hired to scare or harm others. Usually, goons are associated with foolishness, which means they aren’t very good at their jobs (guarding).

**Grandiose** – Impressive and imposing in appearance and style. This usually indicates that something is very pretentious or ambitious.

**Granite** – A very hard kind of stone that is granular and crystalline. It comes in various colours, such as black, white, and red.

**Hatshepsut** – The fifth pharaoh of the Eighteenth Dynasty of Egypt. She is the second historically confirmed female pharaoh, whose reign was marked by prosperity and good trade.

Fun fact: To solidify her power and role as pharaoh, Hatshepsut had herself represented as male in sculptures and hieroglyphs.

**Hectic** – Full of intense or frantic activity. A common buzzword used among South Africans.

**Heresy** – An action or opinion that is the opposite of what is generally accepted.

**Hieroglyphs** – A writing system made of simplified drawings/carvings of objects that represent a word, letter, or syllable. Egyptian hieroglyphs make up a complicated writing system using images of animals and the environment around them.

Fun fact: Hieroglyphs can be written in any direction – it's up to the reader to figure out which way to read them.

**Humid** – When there is a large amount of water vapour in the air.

**Hypnosis** – The act of putting someone in a state of involuntary action or behaviour. Sometimes, deserts can have a hypnotizing effect due to their hot environments and vast landscapes.

**Improv** (acting) – Short for improvisation, this means to spontaneously create a performance without direction or preparation.

**Incantation** – A series of words said to cast a spell or charm. This can be a phrase, song, or poem.

**Inhale** – To breathe in.

**Inscription** – A message carved into a monument, or written into something like a book.

**Intricate** – To describe something as very complicated or detailed.

**Ire** – A feeling of anger or irritation.

**IV** (see also: Roman Numerals) – Roman numerals for the number 4. I represents 1, and V represents 5. Because the I comes before the V, we subtract 1 from 5 to make 4.

**Kilt** – A men's garment resembling a knee-length skirt. Ancient Egyptian men wore kilt-like garments called a shendyt. These cloth garments came above the knee.

**Lapis Lazuli** – A bright blue, precious stone used for decoration and jewellery; or crushed up to make a bright blue pigment of the same name. This pigment was widely used to colour hieroglyphs. Many ancient civilizations prized lapis lazuli for its appealing colour and religious symbolism.

**Linoleum** – A material made of canvas coated in a mixture of linseed oil and powdered rock. This is used especially as a tiled floor covering and was incredibly popular from the 1870s to the 1960s. This is the kind of flooring you'll see in older homes, buildings, and apartments, because it was cheap to produce and easy to install.

**Load Shedding** – Cutting the electricity to reduce a large load demand on the supplying plant. This often happens in countries with poor electrical infrastructure, or badly managed supply.

**Luxor** – An Egyptian city located on the east bank of the Nile River. Right across the river, on the west bank, is the Valley of the kings – only a short ferry ride away!

**Masterpiece** – A work of outstanding skill, mastery, or workmanship.

**Monarch** – A sovereign head of state, especially a king, queen or emperor.

**Monologue** – A long speech made by one actor in a film or play, or as part of a theatrical performance. Old movie villains are known to make drawn-out monologues about their evil plans!

**Mummification** – To preserve a body by embalming and wrapping it in linen cloth (in Egyptian terms). There are various ways in which bodies can be preserved. This definition is most relevant to the Ancient Egyptian method.

**Navigate** – To plan the direct course of a ship or vessel, especially by using maps and special instruments.

**Necropolis** – A large cemetery belonging to an ancient (dead) city. The Valley of the Kings is a necropolis – a city where male royalty was buried.

**Nemes** – A striped headcloth worn specifically by pharaohs in ancient Egypt. It covered the whole head and nape of the neck and had two large flaps that hung behind the ears and in front of the shoulders. It was typically worn along with the uraeus – an upright Egyptian cobra used as a symbol for royalty.

**Mosaic** – A picture or pattern made from arranging tiles, glass, or small pieces of stone.

**Oasis** – A pleasant or peaceful space in a difficult or harsh place like a desert. Usually, this is a place where food and water are found in an otherwise barren land. Paradise!

**Pagan** – A person holding religious beliefs associated with paganism and pagan spirituality. Paganism includes religious beliefs that incorporate practices outside of the world's main religions.

**Pamphlet** – A small booklet or leaflet that contains information about a particular subject.

**Papyrus** – An ancient form of paper prepared with water plants in Ancient Egypt. This was used for writing, painting, and weaving things like rope.

**Pharaoh** – An ancient Egyptian ruler, typically a man who takes the role of a king.

**Procession** – When several people or vehicles are moving in an orderly fashion, usually for important events such as weddings and funerals.

**Ramses IV** – The third pharaoh of the Twentieth Dynasty of Egypt.

**Refurbish** – To renovate or redecorate something to an altered or original state.

**Regal** – Resembling of, or fit for a monarch, especially in being magnificent or dignified.

**Relic** – An object surviving from an earlier time, especially one of historical importance.

**Robot** – The South African word for a traffic light.

**Roman Numerals** – Any of the letters representing numbers in the Roman number system. I = 1; V = 5; X = 10; L = 50; C = 100; D = 500; M = 1000.

**Sanctuary** – A holy place used for religious worship. Typically, sanctuaries are the inmost, holiest place of a temple or church. Sanctuaries can also be a place of refuge and safety.

**Sandstone** – A type of rock made of sand or quartz grains that are cemented together. It can be red, yellow, or brown in colour. Sandstone is also a soft, easy to carve type of rock – perfect for ancient civilizations who carve and build intricate structures, such as tombs and pyramids.

**Sarcasm** – A type of irony used to joke or mock. Sarcasm intends to cause harm or make someone uncomfortable.

**Sarcophagus** – A stone coffin, usually decorated with a sculpture or inscription. These are associated with ancient civilizations that had complicated burial practices.

**Scarab** – A ancient Egyptian symbol carved from stone into the shape of a beetle. Sometimes scarabs are depicted with their wings open and are engraved (inscribed) with hieroglyphs on the flat underside (bottom).

Fun fact: Ancient Egyptians revered scarabs for their rejuvenating properties; and their breeding cycle which represented the movement of the sun, and the cycle of life and death.

**Sedate** – To make someone sleep by administering a special formula or muscle pinch.

**Serviette** – A table napkin.

**Silhouette** – A dark shape or outline of something's shadow, usually visible against a bright background.

**Slurry** – A semi-liquid mixture made up of different components, which are usually gross and clumped together in water.

**Spoiler** (film) – To reveal an important event in a movie, book, or TV show that might ruin the story for those who haven't watched it yet.

**Symmetrical** – To be exactly the same on at least two sides (left and right, or top and bottom). For example, a square is symmetrical on all sides because all sides are the same length. A rectangle is only symmetrical on two sides.

**Synthetic** – Something that has been manufactured or constructed chemically. In language, this is another word for calling something insincere or not genuine.

**Temple** – A sacred building made for religious or spiritual worship.

**Terrace** – A levelled and paved area next to a building. You can also call this a patio or stoep.

**Thebes** – The Greek name for an ancient Egyptian city whose ruins are located on the River Nile. It was the capital of Egypt during the Eighteenth Dynasty and is the site for major tombs and temples. Today, Luxor makes up part of the ancient city.

**Tomb** – A large, underground vault used to bury the dead. Ancient Egyptians cut their tombs into the sandstone cliffs around the Valley of the Kings.

**Trinket** – A small ornament or piece of jewellery that is of little value.

**Uncanny** – Something that feels strange and mysterious in an uncomfortable or unsettling way.

**Uncanny Valley** – When something fake or constructed feels too real or genuine in some way. For example, visiting an amusement park that is modelled exactly like your hometown. You know it's fake and just an amusement park, but it feels so real that it's a bit creepy.

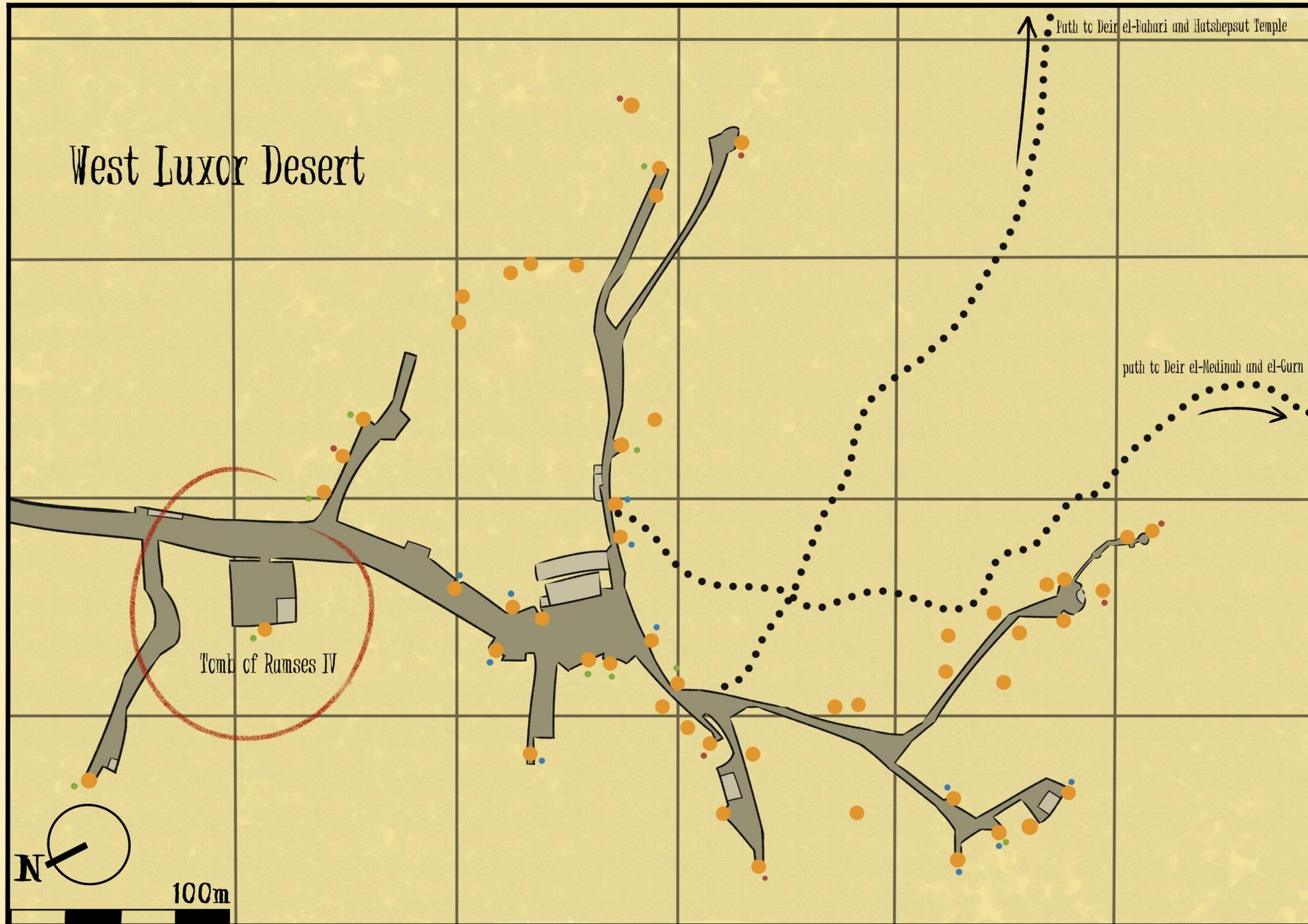
**Underworld** – The mythical land of the dead, usually imagined as being somewhere underground. Ancient Egyptians believed that people's bodies had to be mummified (preserved) so that they could still travel to the land of the dead and enjoy their afterlife.

**Unicorn Horn** – Also known as alicorn, various societies believed in fabled unicorn horns from as early as 400BC. They were revered for their magical properties, such as water purification and medicinal use. In reality, these were the horns of narwhals that were sold by merchants at a high price to royalty and nobility– or were they?

**Valley of the Kings** – A necropolis located in a valley in ancient Thebes, now Luxor. This area was used as a burial site for the pharaohs of Egypt's New Kingdom. Similarly, the Valley of the Queens is a nearby site used to bury Egyptian queens (wives of pharaohs) of the time.



# Valley of the Kings visitor's map



- Tombs
- Dynasty XVIII
- Dynasty XIX
- Dynasty XX

Please no flash photography  
inside the tombs.  
Please do not touch the walls.

# Deir el-Bahari

