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The Necropolis Guard

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Maya Abouelnasr

RHET 3160 (Fiction Writing)

Spring 2022

Process Memo

The original inspiration for the first draft of this story came from the Rare Books and Special Collections Digital Library's "Qurna Hillside Oral History Project," wherein residents who had been relocated shared information and memories about life in Qurna. The two oral histories I found to be especially informative in helping me craft this story were the interviews with [Gamil Gereis Boktor](#) and [Fatma Ahmed Taber](#), as both discussed a belief in the supernatural in some way through supposed encounters with spirits/ghosts or "goblins," as one of them refers to it. This stemmed from the notion that the land they lived on was possessed due to being the site of the burial of ancient nobles (as was the case in other locations, of course), as well as being a former battleground.

This information from the oral histories, combined with the fact that I was intrigued by the significant geographical location and unique operations of the place historically, made me want to write about it and imagine a relative of a former resident going there and becoming trapped in some kind of dream or being punished for disturbing the resting place of the mummies. That's where the first draft of the story ended. My original vision for where it would go next changed many times, going from putting Hassan in a maze that he had to successfully get out of while encountering spirits of various ancient nobles to another idea being making him travel back to the time of his mother's childhood and work to find a way back to the present while immersing himself in the village life. I then decided on the current idea. This involves him (alive but unconscious/in a kind of coma) going through the Duat (ancient Egyptian underworld)

and specifically “[The Regions of Night and Thick Darkness](#)” to make up for his ancestors’ mistreatment of the tombs of the nobles they lived on top of (changed some details geographically as to the tombs’ location to fit the narrative). I made some changes to the mythology as well such as making the three shrines in one of the kingdoms fall out of the lion’s mouth rather than being separate and having Tepu-yn interact with Hassan.

When I decided I wanted to revisit this story after getting positive feedback on it and having already conducted a lot of research for it, I first knew I had to conduct additional research on Qurna, its history, and the villages/communities that had been there pre-relocation. This is where the 2012 dissertation “[Villager Participation in the Relocation of El Gourna](#)” came in handy. Written by Paul Duggan, who holds a doctorate of planning, design, and the built environment from Clemson University, it not only discussed the relocation but, more importantly for my story, also discussed village life, including social patterns and interactions, leadership, their love for the outdoors, and much more.

I also felt I could perhaps develop Hassan more in giving him a kind of internal conflict wherein he’s searching for his identity and longing to connect to the area after his mother’s death. In doing so, the intention was that he would encounter some kind of obstacle or challenge that he needed to overcome. Whilst researching the first time around, I came across the [Qurna History Project](#), which has a ton of papers, photos, and articles on a variety of topics related to the people and place. On one particular page, titled “Qurnawi Family Heritage,” there’s a photograph of a woman named [Fendia](#) from around 1907, which I found very interesting. So, I made it so Hassan’s directly related to her through his mother and Fendia becomes his guide through this journey, inspired by Dante’s *Inferno* and specifically Virgil’s role as a guide to Dante.

I also found out that Fendia was the mother of two of the most famous tomb robbers ([Ahmed and Mohamed Abdul Rassul](#)), so I built a narrative around her having been on this journey before to make up for her sons' looting and consequent angering of the nobles' spirits. Additionally, after discovering the legend of the three brothers who were the first settlers of Qurna in Duggan's dissertation, with each having a najua/naj (or "Nag") named after them and Fendia having the title of the "Grandmother of Horubat," I made Fendia related to them as well. Her clothing in the story is both inspired by the description of what she's wearing in the photo and also a 1924 New York Times [article](#) on clothes found on a mummy discovered in Qurna. So, I created a whole family tree around this, with the only real people being Fendia and her three sons and the rest being made up entirely.

Furthermore, I also referred to Egyptologist and travel writer Garry J. Shaw's *Egyptian Mythology: A Traveller's Guide from Aswan to Alexandria* to learn more about Thebes West Bank mythology (the book is divided into different locations/places in ancient Egypt). Its explanations on the relationship between the dead and the living, ghost stories, and how to summon various beings such as a drowned person, a zombie, and a spirit (intended to be Fendia as a kind of guide) were all quite helpful. For the stones for the summoning bit, I referred to a [paper](#) on important gemstones in ancient Egypt, which was written by two associate professors and published in a journal linked with Alexandria University. I did this because the book only indicated what was believed to be needed to summon these various beings but didn't name the stones.

The biggest challenge I faced while writing this revised story was trying to make the family tree narrative work, as that was what I was building the story from. This was especially challenging when I was trying to figure out how to incorporate the journey through the Duat and

make it evident how this troubled Hassan's perceptions because of the need to make up for the unpunished "sins" of his grandparents whom he admired growing up and thought could do no wrong. Ultimately, I think it's become more of a story about trying to imagine what it would be like for someone to go through the Duat and get an inside look into how these nobles felt when their names were removed and they lost their identities. In any case, I hope I've managed to make this somewhat interesting. It's certainly been fun to research and come up with.

The Necropolis Guard

Nestled in the lower slopes of the hills behind the Theban Necropolis lay several abandoned villages, as the majority of their people had left after being forced to relocate. Mud brick houses with honeycomb-looking walls of caves in which thousands of residents once lived sit atop and next to tombs of nobles, including various New Kingdom pharaohs' most trusted and loyal viziers, treasurers, and keepers of vineyards. Separate houses with the same honeycomb walls and mud brick architecture can be found on the other side of the hill. It comes as no surprise then that this place — El Qurna, or to locals, El Gurna — was named after *El Qurn*, meaning “the peak,” as it overlooks a plethora of royal tombs, statues, and valleys that tell stories of a distant past.

It is the fall of 2021. A lone Necropolis guard, Hassan, decided to venture by foot one day to Qurna beyond the main attractions of the temples and tombs of the Pharaohs after hours, having had a great day speaking to all the excited visitors about a topic he loved: ancient Egyptian history. Checking the time on his watch, he noted that he could not stay and explore Qurna for long, as it was already 6:57 PM and he wanted to be home before 10 PM.

Once a mesmerizing sight with its many caves, earthen architecture, and mud brick houses, Qurna now resembled a war zone. Tents made of date palm tree trunks and branches now lay scattered and broken on the roof of each house. Shattered stelae, broken tomb entrances, and walls entirely defaced of the vibrant, sprawling artwork that served as a witness to over 200 years of life are the grim sight that he is met with. He headed for the Nag El Horubat area, his late mother Sanaa's birthplace, and decided to enter the cave on the far left on the lowest level after arriving.

He had never felt the desire to visit before, but since her death from brain cancer the previous year, he grew more and more curious, wanting to gain a better understanding of the place of origin of the only family he knew since his father had abandoned them shortly after he was born. His curiosity began when he was a child and only grew with every little detail that his mother shared when he asked. Hassan could tell it was a sensitive topic since his grandparents Seyadat and Mostafa shared even less and for that reason, he figured it was best not to ask too often. He assumed he could try and ask for more details when he was older, but never got around to doing so.

Hassan pushed down on the door handle and went to enter the cave, expecting to find nothing but a sandy, dusty ground with no evidence that anyone had ever lived there, as it had been at least twelve years since the final phase of the relocation. What he saw instead stumped him dead in his tracks.

A dust devil. In the shape of a human. Dancing. Unable to tear his eyes away, it is only when he heard what sounded like faint humming that came to his senses. He dropped his hand from the handle and rushed to hide behind the wall next to it, peeking around the corner a few seconds later to see if the dust devil was still there. He waited a moment more before plucking up the courage to go in and quickly entered the room, immediately feeling the tension leave his body when he saw that nothing was there. Walking around, he inspected every little nook and cranny, trying to reconcile his mother's few short stories about her time here as a young child with the dusty, abandoned space. He never truly understood why she and her family left in the late 1960s. After all, her family descended directly from the first settler of Nag El Horubat — Harb — and his two brothers, Rhaba (founder of Nag El Rhabat) and Attiya (founder of Nag El Attiyat), as well as the rest of their family. The three brothers were joined by sister and three

other brothers, their parents, paternal grandparents, and father's sister. Hassan's mother was the great granddaughter of their three brothers' sister Sawsan. The family had made the journey to Qurna from Qena in search of a better life, seemingly having hit the jackpot, they thought, with an entire cave complex filled with riches from tombs to sell to who they perceived then to simply be intrigued foreigners who kept visiting to excavate the area.

The only explanation Hassan was ever given by his mother for why she and his grandparents left was that they were driven out by "the possessed walls."

A breeze entered the cave and made him shiver, cursing himself for not wearing his heavy jacket that day. Exhaling deeply, he continued to walk around the empty room until he noticed a small drawing on the wall. Upon closer inspection, he found that it was a moving drawing of a dancing figure that strongly resembled the dust devil he had just seen... or maybe he had just imagined that... Suddenly, faint, barely visible words begin to appear above it, letter by letter.

I AM NOBLE, I AM A SPIRIT... – BOOK OF THE DEAD

The bewildered guard extended his hand to touch the small, entirely uppercase handwriting. With each passing letter and second, the words darkened from a very light pink to a dark red.

"This must be part of one of the spells... but which one?"

Hassan traced each letter with the tip of his index finger, noting how it felt as though tiny pins were pricking him as he did so. As soon as he removed his finger from the wall, loud thumping and cracking sounds filled the room from all sides, so much so that Hassan worried the walls were about to collapse. A swirling brownish fog descended out of nowhere and filled his view as he followed its path upward and turned to find yellow circles on what appeared to be the head of a gigantic version of the earlier human-looking dust devil. It was gazing at the wall when

its head quickly snapped to stare right at him as soon as it sensed his gaze. The yellow circles for eyes glowed and moved up and down his comparatively small form as if scanning him before turning red. Feeling faint, Hassan only registered the red light expanding further in all directions to fill the entire room before he fell unconscious.

Whoooooosh.. Whoooooosh. Whoooooosh.

The first thing Hassan heard when he regained consciousness was what sounded like heavy wind. Meanwhile, particles of a grainy nature — likely sand — pelted his face.

Still laying down on the ground, he blinked once, trying to focus his vision. Still seeing a blur of color, he blinked again until he finally had his full vision back, but all he saw was white. Confused, he blinked once more and rubbed his eyes for good measure, but still, he saw nothing but white all around him. Hassan slowly got up and looked around. In the distance to his right, he saw what looked like a brown dot and decided to walk in that direction. He soon realized that the brown dot was a door.

Hassan approached the door and grasped the handle, pushing down on it ever so slowly and opening the door at an even slower rate. Once the door was open, he found himself back at the cave that he had just been in... only now the words from before were dripping down the wall as if freshly painted. The already narrow corridor in the back leading to what he presumes must have been bedrooms became even more narrow and the ground turned into water.

THUD!

Hassan turned just in time to see the door he had just entered through shut. He swallowed and faced the dripping wall again. A long red arrow formed beneath the dripping letters and traveled down the wall and across the floor, ending where the ground met the mysterious body of

water. Still rooted to his spot, all he could do was follow the movement of the arrow and then stare at it. The arrow glowed and flashed rapidly, with water from the river shooting in all directions like a waterfall and an enormous fire quickly appearing in the arrow's place before disappearing as if threatening him. But still, Hassan was unable to get his legs to move. The ground began to ripple under his feet, suddenly becoming a water slide and forcefully moving him towards the river before turning into solid ground again.

WELCOME, HASSAN EL SHARKASSY. WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOU.

Hassan gasped and went to step back, only to fall on his back, having slipped on a puddle of water.

“W-Who are you?! H-How do you know my name?”

Hassan barely recognized the sound of his own voice as it took on a hysterical tone and scrambled off the ground.

WE ARE THE SPIRITS OF THE NOBLES REKHMIRE, SENNEFER, AND MENNA. WE HAVE BEEN WAITING FOR YOUR CRIMINAL GRANDPARENTS TO RETURN... BUT YOU'LL DO.

“Rekh- isn't that... governor of Thebes... and Sennefer... mayor of Thebes and overseer of... and Menna... the scribe and overseer of the fields of Amun... No, but it can't be...” Hassan whispered to himself before remembering the second part of the spirits' reply.

“‘Criminal grandparents’? Surely, you can’t mean *my* grandparents. They... They donated money to the poor, they gave blood at blood banks, they fed all their street’s doormen, they... no, they’re not criminals.”

HEH, YOU’LL SEE IN TIME THEN. BUT THE POINT IS: YOU MUST PAY FOR THEIR SINS. THEY RAN AS SOON AS THEY SAW OUR WARNING... TOO FAST FOR US TO TRAP THEM. YOU, HASSAN EL SHARKASSY, MUST MAKE UP FOR THE SINS OF MOSTAFA AMIN AND SEYADAT SHAKER BY GOING THROUGH THE TWELVE KINGDOMS OF NIGHT AND DARKNESS AND BY GIVING OFFERINGS EQUAL TO WHAT WE HAVE LOST – OUR NAMES AND IDENTITIES. YOU MAY BEGIN. YOU HAVE UNTIL DAWN.

The words vanished and in its wake was a cloud of thick dark grey smoke that left Hassan no choice but to enter the river to escape and save his lungs. As soon as both feet were in the river, he found himself sitting in a gold and green barque, similar in appearance to the ones he had seen on temple walls. As he traveled down the dark river, his mind wandered.

“What could Nana and Grandpa have done to cause this...”

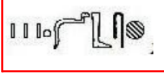
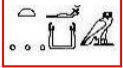
He racked his brain for any kind of possible wrongdoing that he had witnessed, but could not think of a single thing. Five minutes later, he came to what looked like a dead end in the form of three walls that blocked the entire path. Hassan moved to the front of the barque and realized each wall had words on them, following which a brazier appeared in front of each one, a flame already going and ready for something to be cooked. A small table with a bowl on it also appeared next to each brazier, with each bowl containing various items.

Wall 1: To summon a zombie, place the following ingredients on the brazier:

- *Donkey’s dung*

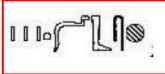


- Amulet of the goddess Nephthys

Wall 2: To summon a spirit -

- Place two stones — lapis lazuli “hsbd”  and turquoise “mekkhat”  — on the brazier

- Useful for protection, healing eye injuries and serpent bites, enhanced vision, and better communication
- When the spirit emerges, burn the heart of a hyena or hare on the brazier

Wall 3: To summon a drowned person

- Place three stones — lapis lazuli “hsbd”  , turquoise “mekkhat”  , and carnelian “hrst”  — on the brazier

- Also useful for protection, enhanced vision, increased courage and luck, and increased eloquence

Hassan considered his options. He felt summoning a zombie could not do him much good. As for summoning a drowned person, he wondered if that person could do the swimming if the barque broke and carry him all the way to the end, as they presumably would not need to come up for air. But what he believed he truly needed was a guide and companion, which a spirit could very well be.

Deciding to summon a spirit, he followed the instructions on the second wall and waited for the spirit to appear while preparing to burn the hare’s heart on the brazier to ensure that it worked. Seeing a figure begin to take form, he quickly placed the heart on the brazier and

watched it burn. It is then that he readied himself to meet and become acquainted with the spirit that he had summoned, only to find that he recognized the person.



(Source: qurna.org; originally from
The Light of Egypt by Robert de Rustafjaell, 1909)

Dressed in a long burgundy robe, piped with grey and with a v-shaped opening in the front, a light shawl on her wavy silver hair, and palm tree sandals stood one of his oldest Qurna ancestors who certainly was not translucent as he would have thought a spirit or ghost would be.

“F-Fendia?”

“Hello, Hassan. It’s good to meet you. Welcome to the first kingdom of night, the Watercourse of Ra. I understand you are my great-great-great-great grandson, correct?”

The elderly woman smiled as she stepped onto the barque, followed by twelve other women who each bowed their heads in greeting and sat on the edge of the barque.

“Th-That’s right. You’re the spirit who’s going to help me? And who are these other women?”

“Yes. I’ve been chosen to do so, as I had to make this very same journey myself to seek forgiveness from the nobles for the sins of my sons Ahmed and Mohamed Abdul Rassul. Otherwise, the spirits never would have left the cave.” She laughed lightly and shook her head. “As for who these women are, they are the twelve goddesses of night.”

Blink.

“I can see you’re in shock. I was as well some 140 years ago. I can laugh about it now that it's been so long since it happened, but it certainly was not a pleasant experience. Anyway, we better get moving. We’ve still got a bit to reach the gate of the second kingdom, Ouranos.”

Without saying another word, Fendia grabbed an oar and began paddling, leading Hassan to do the same. A few minutes later, just before the riverbend, an orange-red light traveled down the river in their direction and illuminated the previously pitch black space. Turning the corner, Hassan nearly dropped his oar and only just managed to save himself from falling out of the barque as a result of the involuntary jump at the sight that greeted him.

Fire-breathing serpents loomed over both sides of the river, turning it into a lake of fire while hissing, baring their enormous fangs, and shooting fire in all directions. Hassan narrowly ducked out of the way of a fireball, deciding to keep his head down as they approached the first gate. It was then that the wolf-headed god Upuaut emerged and guided the boat the rest of the way to the gate of the second kingdom. Meanwhile, the first night goddess Saa rose from the edge and walked to the back of the barque to guard it from enemies, three of which soon made their presence known in the form of three more serpents, all of which were far bigger than any of the others.

“They’re poison-breathing serpents. You’re the only mortal here, Hassan, so best keep your nose blocked and mouth shut while we pass through the gate. Wouldn’t want you dying early,” Fendia advised. “Try to calm down while you’re at it as well. Think of it this way, those who pass here are usually dead and don’t get to see a thing. You’re probably the only living person who will ever get to see this.”

Hassan nodded and watched as Saa slowly vanished as the second night goddess moved closer to where he was at the front. She opened the gates and called out the names of the three snakes, effectively calming them and getting them to stop releasing their poisonous breath while the barque passed through. The river widened and Fendia and Hassan found that there was no need for their labor in this kingdom as the current carried them along. Hassan put his oar down next to him and only then noticed four shallops on all sides of the barque with figures resembling men but again in the form of dust devils aboard.

The protector god of pregnant women and children Bes, the god of grain Nepra, and the elder god Tepu-yn — all of whom are also the cheerful spirits of the corn — welcomed a few moments later, offering them bags of wheat and barley before they accompanied them to the entrance of the third kingdom. Tepu-yn tapped Hassan gently on the back before the third goddess of night opened the gate and held out a deep blue amulet with tinges of purple to him.

“Lapis lazuli. To offer the spirits of the nobles. I probably shouldn’t be helping so early on, but it’s not fair that you get punished for actions that preceded your birth. It should have ended with your grandparents’ deaths.”

“How do you-”

“We find out all the details about every visitor to the Duat before they enter. Good luck, son.”

Hassan took the amulet from the elderly god and ran his fingers over it, flipping it over for further inspection before placing it around his neck. The second goddess of night vanished and the third goddess took over, announcing the third kingdom's guardian's name as they entered and the river narrowed once again.

“Is that normal? Nothing really happened in that one? The first one had fire-breathing serpents for days and ended with poison-breathing serpents, but this was just three gods greeting us and one gave me a gift. I thought all of the kingdoms were meant to be terrifying.”

“Terrifying to those who are truly ill-intentioned and cruel at heart. You are protected by us and your goodness, but you must still unfortunately pay the price on behalf of cowardly relatives who escaped instead of facing up to their crimes.”

Fendia shakes her head and seems to be deep in thought for a moment.

“It's unfair, no doubt, but oh well. It won't be pleasant on the whole, so don't get your hopes up. Just know you won't get hurt... not too seriously anyway. You'll be as right as rain in the end, you'll see.”

Fendia paid no attention to how Hassan's slightly calmer expression quickly morphed into a shocked one as she focused on the journey ahead.

“Okay then... speaking of which, when do I find out what my grandparents did? What am I being punished for exactly? What, did they steal some of the jewels or something? Everyone living in Qurna did that at some point, according to my mom. Big deal. Not like they belong to anyone anymore.”

Fendia simply tsked and shook her head.

“You shall see before between the eight and ninth kingdoms. Now, onto the next two kingdoms. This third one is the Watercourse of the only God and the fourth is the Living One of Forms. You could take a nap, if that might help ease your nerves at all. They’re largely uneventful... but after that, you must stay awake and alert. Your biggest challenge will be coming then. Might do you good to recharge.”

“I don’t think I could stop thinking long enough to nap. I’ll just try to calm down a bit and quietly watch.”

“Suit yourself.”

Still, Hassan was unable to think of what his kind-hearted, charitable grandparents could have done. Besides his mother, he was closest to them. They spoiled him and his cousins rotten with trips to different cities every summer and winter, having been afforded the luxury to do so following the major breakthrough for the family’s restaurant business in the 1980s, which was still going strong and being run by his mother’s cousins’ kids. Whenever he was upset or had fought with his mother, he would run to his grandmother to vent and get her to defend him. Whenever he wanted to play soccer, all he had to do was call his grandfather and they would play until late, much to his mother’s dismay on school nights.

Moving further into the third kingdom, the scenes began to look like something out of one of the funerary texts. As they traveled further, Hassan realized with a start that sat upon a golden throne to his left, with the White Crown of the South and the Red Crown of the North, was none other than Osiris himself, accompanied by four of Horus’ sons... the same four sons whose heads are on the canopic jars where the organs were stored for preservation in the afterlife.

“This must be the Hall of Truth where the judgment occurs then...”

Hassan marveled at the sight of an event he had only ever read about in Egyptian mythology books. Sure enough, he spotted the 42 judges and was even able to see the scale where a heart was being observed by Anubis as it was being weighed to determine whether it was lighter than the Feather of Maat, with the monster Ammit on hand and ready to consume the heart if it was found to be heavier. If only he had his phone with him, he thought, but quickly realized it likely would not work and he still could not exactly figure out whether this was a dream or not.

They passed through with little else to note about the kingdom and soon entered the fourth kingdom. The fourth kingdom, Living One of Forms, was also rife with serpents, much like all of the other kingdoms, but this kingdom was by far one of the dreariest. Devoid of grass or any kind of nature, all that lived and breathed there were the serpents, of which some slithered on the ground and some had legs. The river had been swallowed up and disappeared, turning into a ravine that Fendia informed him was known as the “Mouth of the Tomb.” From there, the barque descended into the fifth kingdom. The fourth night goddess turned the barque into a giant serpent, which carried them by slithering the rest of the way to the fifth kingdom.

Ruled by the mummified falcon god of the dead Sokar, “Hidden” is the name of the fifth kingdom and is what most associate the underworld to look like. Dark, gloomy, and swelteringly hot. Barely a minute after entering, Hassan heard Fendia mutter a “sorry” as the barque suddenly tipped over and dumped him into the boiling lake.

Choked sounds left Hassan’s mouth as he struggled to breathe. His whole being had been set on fire as he pushed himself to move through the hellish lake to catch up with the departing

barque. Unable to muster any more strength to propel himself, he gave up, only just acknowledging the feeling of something or someone pulling him upwards.

Fendia and the remaining seven night goddesses watched the lifeless body of Hassan on the bottom of the barque as they approached the Abyss of Waters, the sixth kingdom. They hoped that being back in Osiris' domain and this time as his role as the god of resurrection and fertility could help bring Hassan back to life. Fendia noticed a green object land and crawl on Hassan's face. Crouching down to get a better look, she recognized it to be the scarab-faced god of creation and the renewal of life Khepra in his beetle form. Khepra began the process of reawakening Hassan as the journey continued. The river gradually returned and the serpent was turned back into the barque, making its way through the sixth kingdom, which was rife with gods along the banks of the river and an enormous lion above them watching the entire scene unfold. The lion roared and from its mouth three shrines fell onto the barque. Each shrine contained an offering for the spirits of the nobles. The first contained a human's head, the second a bird's wing, and the third contained the hind part of a lion.

“Perhaps he feels for Hassan? Certainly didn't bother giving me offerings as grand as these when I went through the journey,” Fendia noted.

The group then entered the seventh kingdom, the Secret Cavern, where the chaos serpent Apophis, or Apep, resided and sought to eat all visitors, with the goal of ending the world. The goddess Isis appeared on the barque and summoned the equally huge protective serpent Mehen to battle Apophis and prevent him from getting near Hassan. Horus and the goddess of the dead Selket then appeared and fought alongside Mehen not only in an attempt to defeat the monstrous reptile but also to distract it as the barque continued its journey through the seventh kingdom. By

the end of the journey, Apophis was drained and surrendered to the fact that he was no match against Isis' magic, admitting defeat with a final puff and returning to his home.

It is then that Khepra completed the resurrection process and Hassan sprang up as if a bucket of cold water had just been thrown over him.

“What happened?”

“The fifth kingdom's boiling lake and Sokar happened. He has no mercy. Innocent or guilty, he doesn't care. If you visit his domain, you get dumped into the lake. We're immortal and mere guides, so it doesn't affect us, but unfortunately, that made you his victim. We're approaching the eighth kingdom, the Sarcophagus of the Gods.”

“I was out for that long?”

“Mhm... You'll soon find out the reason why you've had to go through this. You now have four offerings. The lion from the sixth kingdom added three. Declaring your relatives wronged the spirits of the nobles after discovering what they've done and sincerely apologizing on their behalf is what's left. That will absolve you of these inherited sins. Until then, you are the carrier.”

The eighth kingdom is akin to a parade, Hassan noted, as several dead gods call out from the river banks to him and the rest of his group as they smoothly sail through the kingdom. The barque was guided by four rams, collectively known as the genderless primordial earth god Tatenen. Some were calls of elations, some of mourning... animals, gods, all together making a ruckus that normally would have annoyed Hassan, who greatly valued peace and quiet. Instead, Hassan simply listened and found comfort in the knowledge that there were just four kingdoms left.

As they departed the eight kingdom and headed for the ninth, Hassan braced himself.

“Moment of truth. What are the sins my grandparents committed? The spirits of the nobles said they lost their names. What does that mean?”

“Better I show you than tell you.”

Fendia pointed to the sky. Hassan followed the direction that her finger was pointing at and saw a bright white dot in the dark sky that glowed brighter and brighter until it became a projection screen and expanded to a size that could rival the world’s largest TV.

A video began to play. Hassan immediately recognized younger versions of his grandparents, with their looks staying largely the same in their old age. They are seen playing with a little girl, whom he identified as his mother, in a space that looked similar to the one he went to several hours earlier. The scene shifted to his grandfather going down under the ground to where the tombs were. Close ups of three hieroglyphs on three of the walls appear next, with the translated names next to them being immediately recognizable.



Rekhmire



Menna



Sennefer

The scene shifted to his grandmother entering with two buckets, handing one to his grandfather. They both proceeded to dip brushes into the buckets and painted over all the reliefs

and hieroglyphs on the wall with little care for the preservation of history. The next scene showed his grandfather drilling a hole into their floor and turning that into a toilet... Hassan realized this meant their waste went down to the place where the tombs were.

Click.

The screen went black and disappeared as Fendia broke the silence.

“To us humans living now, this may seem very insignificant. You especially have so much more now that can record and document your existence for generations to come. But to these spirits of the nobles from that time, the destruction of their life’s work of displaying their deeds and maintaining their resting places for their well-being in the afterlife is quite literally the end of the world.”

Hassan found himself far more moved by this than he thought he would be.

If the spirits had never brought him here and he had heard of what his grandparents had done, he might have seen nothing wrong with it, but now that he had met these spirits, he was not sure how to feel. Surely, his grandparents must have known something if they were scared enough to flee rather than stay and carry on with a belief that spirits and ghosts are nonsense as most people likely would.

“The removal of their names leaves them to be unidentifiable, lost spirits in death. That is the removal of the memory and existence of them in a place that was their home long before our family settled there. You can relate on some level, I think. We all strive to be remembered after we die, don’t we?”

Hassan stayed quiet for a few moments before replying.

“I’ve never thought of it that way before... I really am sorry they lost their names. That must be a horrible existence... or lack thereof. I hope the offerings will make them feel a bit better.”

The journey to the ninth kingdom, the Procession of Images, continued. Once there, Hassan noticed that objects were falling from the sky to the gods on the riverbanks. Confused, he turned to face Fendia.

“Offerings from the living to the dead,” Fendia informed him.

As soon as she said this, Rekhmire, Sennefer, and Menna appeared before him, saying “hello” at the same time. Realizing the reason they are here after Fendia’s explanation, Hassan replied with a “hello” of his own and turned to collect the four offerings to present to them.

“I genuinely am very sorry for what my grandparents did to you. I’ll admit I likely never would have seen anything wrong with it until today, but I see now how awful that is. I hope these in some way make up for it.”

“Thank you, Hassan. That’s all we were after,” Menna told Hassan.

“Some understanding and an apology. Simple as that,” Sennefer continued.

“We’ve lived so long without our identities, but to have someone from the living see our side of the story can now bring us some comfort. It really does mean a lot.

You’ve proven yourself to have a pure heart,” Rekhmire concluded.

“We’ll make it so you can exit the journey after leaving this kingdom. No need to go to the Mouth of the Cavern and endure the pits of fire there. Thank you again,” Menna said.

The barque, with a mind of its own, began to move before Hassan could reply. He waved to the three nobles and settled back down with Fendia and the four night goddess aboard.

“Feels good, doesn’t it? That’s how I felt after I finished the journey back in the 1880s. But lucky you, you were forgiven in the ninth kingdom. I had to finish all twelve and had no guide or spirit with me to keep me company. I foolishly ignored the three walls. To this day, I still don’t understand how a zombie could help, but that’s why I’m not in charge then.”

“It does... and I got to meet you. Through this, I got to learn about seeing the other side of how we treat our monuments and the places in which we occupy... even if most people will still regard this whole journey and these spirits as never having existed.”

A comfortable silence filled the air during the remainder of their journey through the ninth kingdom. When they approached the new side exit, Fendia notified him that only he could go through it. Thanking her again for joining him and reiterating the pleasure of having met her, he stepped off of the barque and walked towards the door, which opened on its own and behind which was only a bright white light.

A thought came to him and he quickly turned and yelled to her, “Fendia! What sins did your sons commit? I never found out.”

Fendia simply smiled and replied, “You can look it up on Google. Shouldn’t be hard to find. Goodbye, Hassan.”

Before he could yell back another goodbye, Hassan felt himself being dragged to the door by an invisible force and was then sucked into a kind of vortex before he lost his vision.

Caw. Caw. Caw. Chirp. Chirp.

Opening his eyes, Hassan squinted and rubbed at them to wipe away the blurriness. Blinking rapidly, his vision finally focused and he saw that he was back at the cave. Hassan sat up and stretched. He then took a quick look around and could not see any red words or dust devils anywhere. Checking the time on his watch, he was surprised to see that it was 7:07 PM.

“Only ten minutes have passed? Was it just a dream... no, but it couldn’t have been. That felt too real...”

Hassan again looked around before he figured it was best to not dwell on it too much and spare himself the headache. Getting up and dusting himself off, he prepared to exit the cave when a shining red object in the corner of the room caught his attention. Shaking his head, he decided that he’d had enough excitement for one day or rather, for ten minutes and with that, he chose to turn and leave the cave.