

MICHAEL NORTROP

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For Ronald Martin Solan Artist, soldier, Porter Street irregular

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Hungry Ghosts

His name was Abdel. Once, he had been Mr. Shahin, the boss of ten men. But like so many in Cairo, he had fallen on hard times. Now, he was a proud man in a cheap suit — a good man in bad company. Desperation had brought him here, but he was worried.

“What’s this job you have for me?” he said, trying hard to hold his voice steady.

The towering man next to him answered with the same three words as last time: “You will see.”

Abdel glanced over at him. Was this man truly the leader of The Order, the criminal cult that had haunted Egypt for thousands of years? He certainly looked the part, tall and strong and wearing a suit more expensive than Abdel’s car. Under his arm was a large, elegant leather bag.

“Nothing illegal,” Abdel added. “You promised me . . .”

“Of course not,” said the man, a hint of amusement slipping into his flat, cold voice. “As I said, you are here to help.”

Abdel nodded, forcing himself to think of the food he would buy his family, maybe even long-overdue birthday

gifts for his children. Still, he wondered what sort of help he could offer in a drafty warehouse on the edge of the city.

Their footsteps echoed in the massive space as they approached a heavy steel door. “Here we are,” said the cult leader.

Abdel eyed the thick bar holding the door closed as the man slipped the bag from under his arm and began unzipping it. “You will excuse my new appearance,” he said, removing a heavy golden mask and letting the bag fall to the floor. “But as you know, we are a very old organization, and we have certain . . . traditions.”

Abdel had hoped those “traditions” were rumors or exaggerations, but now he knew better. He gaped at the mask. It was an Egyptian vulture made of finely wrought gold, showing every fold and pockmark of the vulture’s skin. The beak was forged of sharp iron. The leader slipped it on carefully, and his words echoed out from underneath: “Open the door!”

Abdel suddenly understood that he had made a deal with the devil. He knew that he should refuse, that he should *run*. And yet the powerful voice thundered in his head, robbed him of his will. With fear-widened eyes, he watched his own hand pull the handle of the bar up and back. The door began to rattle against its hinges, and fresh voices reached his ears. A chorus of sinister whispers buzzed around him, and his warm skin went cold.

The bar slid aside with a loud *thunk*.

Suddenly, the door opened inward, releasing a rush of

stinking air and a swarm of dark whispers so strong that Abdel could feel them, like snake tongues on his skin. And for a moment — one brief, horrible moment — he saw it.

An abomination.

“That . . . should not . . . be,” he managed.

Two powerful hands pushed him, strong palms slapping his back. “Ooof!” he gasped as he stumbled forward into the room. The door slammed shut behind him, and in the sudden darkness, he heard the bar slide shut.

Ten thousand whispers combined into one word — “Welcome” — before shattering back into pieces. Unleashed, the heavy whispers cut into him, no longer tongues but teeth! Each one grabbed a piece, tore it off, gobbled it down. It wasn’t his body they were devouring; it was his soul. The effect was the same. His pulse revved for a moment from fear and pain.

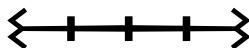
And then it thickened.

And slowed.

And, finally, it stopped.

What was left of his soul slipped free of his body and was torn to bits, devoured.

Abdel Shahin was a good man, and that was what they liked.



Elsewhere in the old warehouse, a second man emerged from the shadows. He had kept his distance during the feeding

and now cast a nervous look at the barred door. Little more than a ridiculous decoration, he knew. What was inside could not be contained. In a sense, it was already loose.

The man pried his eyes from the door. “We have received information from the source,” he said.

“Have the amulet keepers arrived?” said the leader, carefully placing the heavy mask back in its leather carrier.

“Yes,” said the man. “They are here.”

“And Peshwar awaits them?” said the leader.

The man hesitated. “Yes, but . . . are you sure this is the right way? If we give them more time, if we follow them . . . they could lead us to the Spells.”

“No,” said the leader flatly, “they have troubled us enough. We will cut them down. Leave the others in a ditch, but bring me the boy. Whatever he knows of his mother we will wring from him.”

The man nodded. Challenging the leader on anything was dangerous. Challenging him about the boy could be suicide. “I have told Peshwar this, but she has no mercy in her. I worry she will kill them all, and whatever they know will die with them.”

“Then tell her to think of it as playing with her prey,” said the leader, zipping up the bag. “Cats are good at that.”