**Shadow of a Starless Night**

“One cartridge per person,” said Lieutenant Rutledge, pressing a round into one of the Frenchman’s hands. With his stern attitude and head for numbers, he had stepped easily into his role as quartermaster of the makeshift platoon.

When the two platoons had met, they had already been effectively decimated at a battle that had taken place a few miles up the Nile River, and only the cooler heads of Lieutenant Rutledge and Captain Touchard kept what remained of the two groups from destroying one another. Napoleon’s armies, it was said, were already moving on to Syria, and two wandering groups of deserters had more chance to survive together than they did shooting at one another.

*Such a testament to the age of reason, it is,* thought Dylan Lalande, *that men settle dispute with argument and not with guns.* Still, that the English Lieutenant only trusted any man with a single cartridge at time was more than the English tendency towards frugality, Dylan knew.

Dylan, as a *Médecin Major*, elected not to carry any weapons at all. He hadn’t taken the Hippocratic Oath upon his graduation in 1797 lightly, and even his otherwise-absolute commitment to Republican ideals could not sway him from that. He might desert the army, abandon his countrymen, and play doctor to a group of likely-soon-to-be-graverobbers. But first, do no harm.

When he’d first graduated from the University of Paris, he’d never thought that the illness he’d treat most was heatstroke. He’d ridden high off the spoils of the Revolution; a pure embodiment of the age. A young man from the city, with no title or wealth to call his own, made into a physician by sheer force of talent. Something like that never could’ve happened under the *Ancien Regime*. And when Napoleon had been crowned Emperor, to protect the rights promised to all peoples and that reactionary forces sought to destroy, Dylan was only too happy to add his voice to the many. He signed onto the army as a surgeon as soon as he was able.

Now, pressing wet towels to foreheads in the Sudanese desert, he wondered if he should’ve showed his support for the revolution from a practice in Paris instead. He hadn’t originally intended to desert with the rest of his platoon, but the thought of going back to the main force, having to suffer artillery barrages as he tried to tend to men with pus-filled bullet wounds and limbs blown apart by artillery fire, filled him with more dread than any hangman’s noose.

His reverie was blessedly interrupted by the sound of hoofprints on sand as a camel appeared over a nearby dune. Dylan quickly looked away, focusing on his patient, and not on the beautiful woman who brought the camel around. Perhaps it was that she was the only woman he’d seen in months, but Dylan couldn’t help but blush whenever Fariza was nearby. She was beautiful, and in his loneliest moments, he thought about slowly caressing her soft, round face, or slowly removing her headscarf as he pressed his lips to her. Adolescent fantasies, nothing more. But he would convert for her, if she asked him to marry her.

Fariza, for her part, paid no mind to the medical tent and let her camel saunter slowly over to Cpt. Touchard. They exchanged a few words, too low for anyone else to hear, before the captain’s eyes went wide. Dylan already knew what it meant.

She’d found it.

The group had originally stumbled upon the Berber woman as she collected water on the banks of the Nile. Apparently belonging to no band or village, the Lieutenant had hired her because he believed they needed a guide through the Sudanese desert. Rutledge, Dylan had heard, had his misgivings about deserting the British Army. Dylan hardly knew the specifics of why the English company had deserted, but he figured it was similar to why his own company had done so. Being routed, decimated, and traumatized after suffering hours of rifle-and-cannon-fire tended to leave one with a negative impression of ‘*Dulce et decorum est, pro patria mori’*. And while it was clear that Lieutenant Rutledge had his misgivings about abandoning his country for the life of a brigand in Africa, he’d still made the choice in the end.

Captain Touchard, on the other hand, seemed all too eager to be ought from under the thumb of *L’Empereur*. Touchard struck Dylan as a bit of a reactionary. He was an older man, to be sure, and he had served in the military since before the Fifth of May but had never quite risen beyond the lowest rungs of commissioned officers. He was, Dylan surmised, not quite important enough for the revolutionary government to purge even during the days of the Committee of Public Safety. Given that Touchard seemed more like an opportunist than an overly ambitious soldier, Dylan figured that the captain had *other* motives for wanting the Berber woman to guide the group.

Egypt, apparently, was laden with treasures hidden beneath its sands. The French incursions into Egypt had brought to light incredible wealth, both material and otherwise, in the tombs and monuments of the ancient world. In the chaos of the war, the Ottoman governor of the province could hardly guard every ancient building, least of all the ones he didn’t know about.

Fariza had made a few noises about a tomb she’d seen, far to the south, on the border of Ottoman and Funj territory, and the captain’s interest had grown immensely. Indeed, the whole make-shift contingent had practically started sprinting south when rumors had spread through the camp. It wasn’t even certain that the place existed, but people had already told stories of an immense, but cursed treasure, or the remnants of great and forgotten city. Dylan had held his tongue, but had never believed they would find anything. Even if they did, there was no promise that anything would be buried in such a tomb, besides a few dead bodies.

It was times like these that Dylan appreciated his ability to keep his mouth shut, despite the strength and vigor of his opinions. Having to eat crow in front of the group of both French-and-Englishmen would’ve been a blow to his ego far too large to bare.

Dylan tried to put the thought out of his mind, but even still, with no injuries to tend to or ailments to cure, he found himself packing away his tinctures and tools in anticipation of the groups leaving.

Sure enough, by the time he had finished, Captain Touchard sounded the meeting bell, and the group of 40 stood at attention in respective their national styles. Even their rapid descent into petty banditry could not sway these men from the strictures of military life. Dylan leaned against the post of his tent, listening with rapt attention as the captain explained. Rutledge, as a proper Englishman, spoke French fluently, while Touchard, as a proper Frenchman, didn’t speak a word of English, and so it fell to the Lieutenant to translate for half the group.

“About 4 miles that way,” Touchard said, pointing off into the dunes “Is the structure Fariza mentioned. There are no towns closer than Jebel Bakar, so there should be nobody around for miles, but I want all of you to stay alert just in case. There may be nothing in those ruins,” he said, before a grin crossed his face, “or there may be treasure beyond our wildest dreams. We won’t know until we get there, so let’s get there before nightfall. Pack your things and we’ll go.” Dylan noted that Touchard’s manner of speaking had eased up a bit now that he was no longer a real Captain. He’d been infamously strict to the men when they’d first landed in Egypt, but giving up on his old life had seemingly softened him up.

Dylan, already packed and ready to go, threw his kit-bag on the sand and watched the sun begin to set.

The full moon illuminated the little chunks of the ‘ruins’ that stuck out of the ground. While Dylan was hardly a geologist or natural historian, he’d seen the Pyramids at Cairo earlier in the month, and if they were anything to go by, the Pyramids here must’ve been *extraordinarily* old, based on how deep they would’ve been buried in the sand. A couple of stone bricks jutted out of the ground, unclear if they were pillars to something that had fallen, or the tip of a structure that was deep underneath. They formed a pair of parallel lines in the sand, leading to the only structure that had apparently weathered the effects of time and climate. A pyramid, not as large as the ones at Giza, but still easily 20 meters high, sat at the end of the apparent courtyard, a short staircase leading up to the top, where the entrance was blocked by a large, circular stone.

Rutledge, taking his shawl from his head, addressed the group, and Dylan quickly found himself translating for the Lieutenant. “All right, let’s set up camp for now,” he said, and pointed at three of the men closest too him. “Head up there and see if you can’t move that rock,” he said, “The rest of us will join you when you’re done.”

Dylan set his kit out, and quickly threw his tent up. A part of him was shivering with anticipation at the prospect of treasure hunting in darkest Africa, like in the books popular in the coffee shops of Paris. He placed his pack on the ground in the tent, not bothering to unpack his tinctures or bandages, and ran up the steps to join the rest of the group.

The stone wheel blocking the entrance slowly began to roll with the help of a few extra hands as the rest of the group started to arrive. The doorway was surprisingly wide, enough to fit five men easily, and 6 men shoulder-to-shoulder. Musty air came up from the depths of the Pyramid, and Dylan turned away to cough into his shoulder at the smell. The doorway led downwards, into a hallway that was dark as pitch, and the bottom of it wasn’t obvious, and Dylan’s hands shook with excitement and trepidation at the prospect of going into the depths.

“*Touchard,*” said Rutledge, suddenly. The captain turned away from the passageway and back at the Lieutenant, his eyes at bid wide.

“Yes?” He asked, confused. Dylan turned to see Rutledge staring, not down the hallway, but rather, up at a point above the doorway. Faintly, a few inscriptions were written above the doorway in several scripts, each growing fainter as it ascended. The top, and faintest, script was a series of ideograms. Dylan could just make out what looked like a bird, a few squiggly lines, and a hand, but the symbols had no meaning to him.

The symbols below, however, were in Ancient Greek. As the only one in the group to have received a truly classical education, Dylan could already feel the eyes on him as he scanned the letters. It hadn’t been his strongest subject during his studies, but the text was thankfully not too difficult.

“Passing traveler,” he began, trying to translate on the fly. “Please you allow- Please allow my son to rest here without disturbance.” A short script, but what interested him was the series of letters that followed. “Grgk?” He said, trying to pronounce the odd series of letters. “Gryk? Yryk? I think that’s the name of the person who wrote it, but it’s missing vowels.” He shrugged. “Could by anything from 'Gargok’ to ‘Yorayuko’”.

The third and final script above the doorway, while clearly readable, was completely foreign to Dylan. It seemed like Latin script, but not quite. One symbol looked like the Latin Q, while another looked like the Greek letter for Theta. “I can’t read the other two scripts,” he said to the group. “I think the top is Coptic, or perhaps Hebrew. The language of the people who built these pyramids.” It was a guess, but he figured a safe one. “The bottom, I’m afraid I don’t know.”

“It’s Amazigh.”

Fariza’s voice rang out from the back of the group as she pushed her way forward to the front. She seemed almost annoyed at the men looking at the foreign script. “It says the same thing.”

“It must be a tomb then,” concluded Touchard, and seemed quite proud for having come to this conclusion. “I suspect we’ll find quite a few grave goods within. I’ve heard that the old Kings of Egypt were buried with their riches.” The glimmer of greed in the Captain’s eyes was unmistakable, but Dylan couldn’t help himself as he felt the same avaricious feelings pass through him.

"We’ll take it five men at a time. The lieutenant and I will lead, and Doctor LaLande should stay in the back,” said Touchard, giving Dylan a quick glance. “We’ll take a quick look tonight, and a more thorough search of the place tomorrow. God willing, we’ll all be rich by tomorrow.”

Dylan, figuring that this was more an attempt to build group cohesion than it was a professional expedition, rolled his eyes a bit. Perhaps Touchard just wanted to make sure nobody filched any treasure without sharing it.

A few verbal commands, and the group assembled into eight rows of five. Dylan felt his heart begin to sink as he pulled up the rear, sinking lower and lower into his stomach with each successive step into the darkness below. A mix of fear for the unknown, an adventurous energy, and a desire for the riches held within all mixed together, melted into a crucible for his emotions that sifted out the impurities, leaving only a feeling with no name.

And, in his rapturous attention to the path ahead, his eyes affixed firmly to his captain’s torchlight, he failed to notice Fariza’s lack of presence, or hear the rolling stone door close behind him.

After a surprisingly long time, the torches at the head of the column brightened a much larger room. Several meters long in every direction, the room was lined with painted sandstone, and compared to the barren walls of the descending hallways, were painted with strange scenes. The same, ideographic script Dylan had seen outside was drawn all over the room, but the writing was interspersed with odd images that were difficult to parse. People, facing either left or right, performed tasks that Dylan could only guess at. One group looked as if they were plowing a field, while another looked as if he were sitting at a desk. These drawings of people intermingled with other, stranger images. People, but with animal-like heads, were interspersed throughout the reliefs. They possessed a strange prominence among the images; sometimes, they were physically larger than the others, or more finely detailed. And one, nearly in the center of the room, opposite the entrance, was the largest and most finely-detailed of all. It depicted a man, not unlike any of the other images, save for the grey, wolf-like head that decorated the top. It sat in front of a large, stone box lay, propped up against the wall in front of it. The wolf-man in the relief towered over a veritable army of men, who all bowed in some act of submission or servitude, and the creature what looked, to Dylan, like a Cat-‘o-Nine-Tails in one hand, and a crook in the other. It was a bizarre sight, and for the first time since his youth, he felt a sense of wonder pass over him, and a sense of guilt, as if he were desecrating something sacred and beautiful.

Before he could express his regret and hesitation, though, the rest of the group had already grown restless at the apparent lack of anything of value in the room. With no other exits, and only a few pillars to support the room, the area was bare, save for the single, large stone box opposite the entrance. The coffin, Dylan presumed.

Clearly not wanting to lose the group’s morale, Captain Touchard and Lieutenant Rutledge took one brief glance at one another, nodded, and gestured for the men to pry the box’s lid open. Two men grabbed onto either side of the lid and, with a great heave, pulled the lid down, exposing the sarcophagus’s interior.

In an instant, the room was filled with a bright and blinding light, as if filled with the radiance of the sun itself. Dylan shouted in pain and covered his eyes, tumbling to the ground as he curled inward. Eventually, the pain and searing subsided, and when he finally had the strength to stand back up, he blinked, his eyes re-adjusting to the room now that it was dim once more.

After a few more seconds, his vision, while still tinged with a greenish overglow, started to return, and he placed his arm on one of the nearby soldiers to steady himself. He noted, somewhere in the back of his conscious mind, that the man didn’t flinch or sway under the new weight. He was rigidly still, like a statue. And as Dylan’s vision finally evened out, he saw a chilling sight.

The entire room of 40 men, all of them tough-and-able soldiers, stood frozen in time. The room’s velocity had been derived into a single point, and now approached the limit of the next second in the future; only able to reach towards it, and never to meet it. Images of the Gorgon, the creature of ancient myth that turned men to stone, flashed through his mind for a second. Before a more awesome and terrifying sight reached his eyes.

Something like a man, but not quite, inspected the reeling form of Lieutenant Rutledge like a taxonomist inspecting his latest piece. His dark human fingers forced their way into the Lieutenant’s mouth, moving away the lips and cheek, so that the creature’s canine eyes could inspect his teeth. In a moment, Dylan realized what (or rather, who) he was looking at. The wolf-headed man on the bas-relief. Such a thing seemed impossible, of course. The head, he supposed, could be explained by a complicated mask. But it was unimaginable that anything could survive in a tomb for so long.

Dylan’s knees started to give out, and he felt his feet slip on the stone floor. He managed to right himself on the soldier’s shoulder before he truly fell, but the sound of his misstep alerted the thing inspecting the Lieutenant. It’s beady eyes were filled with an immense, and intimidating, intelligence, staring into Dylan’s own face with an authoritative and knowing look. Dylan, his heart beating faster and his mind racing with incoherent thoughts as he tried to piece together this odd new reality, said the only thing that came to mind.

“Who are you?”

The creature’s lips turned upward in either a smile or a snarl. He nodded his head in a thin bow. The words “I am Wepwawet” echoed in Dylan’s mind. While the creature’s grey-muzzled lips moved, and Dylan had clearly heard… *something,* he understood that the creature wasn’t speaking French, or English, or even Greek. It was something else entirely, a primordial language that spoke directly to Dylan’s soul. His mind alighted on passages from the bible about speaking in tongues and wondered if he was blessed or cursed to experience it himself.

The creature, Wepwawet, continued. “I am the God of War.” His voice, mystical though it was, had an adolescent eagerness to it. Even as it sounded friendly, it seemed less jovial, more playful. It reminded Dylan of himself only a few years ago, before having been carted away to distant Egypt to see men die.

Dylan took another look around, becoming more confident as he slowly began to realize the creature was in his own age cohort. He didn’t seem malicious, so much as curious. “What happened to them?” he asked, gesturing to the group of 40 men now frozen in time.

Wepwawet shrugged. “I told them to halt their advance.” He said it with such a natural inflection that Dylan couldn’t help but swallow. Despite being a proud son of the Age of Reason, he was, at heart, still a boy from a simple family. Fairy-stories had been a childhood joy, but never more than that. Now, experiencing thinking back on them in this new, strange context, they seemed like they might be more real than reality was. He made a mental note not to eat anything.

“Who are you, though?” The wolf-man asked, his head tilting in wonder. “You look like the other soldiers, yet I have no power over you. Are you a spy? Or are you a commander of great renown?”

Dylan’s mind raced a mile a minute. Whether this thing was a creature out of myth or not, if it could freeze 40 men in time, Dylan figured it was best not to get on its bad side. If it believed itself to be War God, like Mars, then it was best to play along. And what would a War God respect more than a modern-day Caesar? Certainly not a company doctor.

“I am the latter,” Dylan said, his voice evening out as he tried to inflect an air of competence. “I am General LaLande, of the French Army. I am the commander of this joint group of troops, sent to civilize the Sudanese interior.” He puffed out his chest and stopped using the frozen soldier to steady himself. He wasn’t a natural liar, but he knew one rule above all; say as little as possible.

Wepwawet tilted his head as he examined Dylan. “You seem awfully young. But then, I suppose, so was Alexander. But you must forgive me if I doubt you.” He put a hand under his chin as his beady eyes squinted. “Thankfully, this can be settled quite easily. I assume you know the rules of-” the last word came out as multiple words at once. ‘Chaturanga’, ‘Senterej, and ‘Xiangqi’ bounced around until it finally landed on ‘chess’, and Dylan nodded.

“Good. Would you indulge me, then?” He tone was so genial and sincere that it momentarily put Dylan off guard. “A game, to prove your strategic acumen.”

Realizing the gauntlet that had been thrown, Dylan nodded. A military genius, he was not. But he’s spent many of his days at university playing chess at the local coffee shops. A game of chess, he had at least a fighting chance. “Happily. But I’m afraid I don’t see a board or pieces nearby.”

Wepwawet dismissed that thought with a wave of his hand. Originally believing this to be a simple gesture, Dylan nearly lost his footing again as the walls of the room melted away, and the dark corners instead became bright and open sky. Dylan was quite sure that it was still night outside; they hadn’t been in the tomb that long. And yet, as the room disappeared, he found himself standing in a vast desert, dunes stretching out in all directions and yellow sands rolling like ocean waves into eternity.

With each new strangeness, Dylan wondered if he was somehow dreaming. He tried to remember if he’d drunk any absinthe or some other hallucinogen, but the physicality of the space he was in, and his sheer lucidness, made such a hypothesis unlikely. In front of him, standing on a flat patch of sand, were 40 men, arranged in four rows of 10, with half the men separated from one another and pointed towards the other half. The half closest to Dylan, dressed in their Republican blues, stood at a parade rest, and Dylan quickly realized that Captain Touchard was standing in the king’s square.

On the opposite side, the English contingent of the deserter platoon faced towards Dylan. They were unflappable and unmoving, as they had been before, but now arranged neatly like chess pieces. Dylan swallowed.

Before he could truly gather his thoughts, the sand dune that sat behind the life-sized chessboard exploded to live, shattering apart as the massive creature within came to life. Dylan suppressed the urge to scream, but covered his head and eyes from the massive rain of sand that fell. When he was sure that the danger had passed, he gave a tentative look up, and saw the imposing figure of Wepwawet. Now, however, rather than being a few inches shorter than Dylan, he was massive. He laid across the desert, lounging on them like a dilletante on a sofa, and he still managed to loom over the board. Dylan’s thoughts about the creature, how he’d called himself a ‘war god’ suddenly came back to him, and he began to consider for the first time that this may not be mere illusion or fairy-tale magic. They’d stumbled upon something *old* and *powerful*. And now his survival, and the survival of the entire group, was now dependent on him winning a chess match. Against what might well be the actual God of War.

He swallowed stood back up to his confident stance. He refused to let the unreality of his situation break through. This was all some bizarre dream that he’d wake up from in a few hours. It wasn’t true, but it was easier to stomach than the reality in front of him.

“Heads or tails?” Wepwawet asked. His voice, while it still had it’s youthful tinge, was louder now. More bass-like and resonant, and Dylan could feel the pit of his stomach vibrate as the massive creature spoke.

Dylan steadied himself internally and answered. “Heads.” The wolf-creature removed a stone disk, easily the size of a small boulder, from its tunic, and flipped it. It landed in the sand with a earth-shaking *THUD*, and then the beast smirked.

“Tails.”

Without waiting for a response, Wepwawet pointed a finger at his king’s pawn, and made a forward gesture. With a professional flourish, the man, who Dylan recognized as a Jack Barley, moved two spaces forwards onto the board. Dylan strained to see the movement from behind his lines, peering between the two rows of men to try and get a better vantage point.

Seeing the young man’s frustration, Wepwawet made another gesture with his hand, and a wooden platform spontaneously rose from the ground, pushing away the sands and giving Dylan a better vantage point from which to see the board. Surprised at the sudden movement, Dylan latched onto the now-existing handrails in front of him and leaned over, looking down from a few feet above to make his first move.

His confidence inexplicably growing as his intentional self-delusion grew, Dylan looked up at the massive creature and smiled. “And yet, I feel as though you still have the better vantage point,” he said. If he couldn’t win by checkmate, he might at least try and gain the creature’s favor. Anything to increase his own chances of survival. “King’s pawn ahead two,” Dylan said, in the most authoritative voice he could manage. The ‘pawn’ at that space was a young Guillame de Calais, of Calais. His family hadn’t had last names until Napoleon’s census had come to collect it. He was Dylan’s age, but otherwise quite different. He marched forward two spaces until he stood in front of the opposing pawn.

Wepwawet pointed to the kingside cavalryman, a James Hughes, whom Dylan had never met. His horse spurred forward suddenly and moved until he was diagonally behind Jack Barley. Dylan was a little surprised. He had expected a King’s Gambit of some kind, and he wasn’t familiar with this opening, but he supposed he shouldn’t have been surprised. Dylan ordered his Queen’s pawn to move ahead one. “Do you play chess often?” Dylan asked, knowing full well how absurd the question was given the circumstances, but figuring it was best to keep all avenues open.

“Not really. Not since I was placed down there,” he said. He scowled a bit, but not at Dylan. More at the circumstance of the thing. Clearly a touchy subject. “It’s quite lonely, and I only get visitors every few decades or so.” There was no particular inflection on ‘visitor’ save the very slight sense of boredom in his voice. Another point of his finger, and his queen’s pawn moved forward two spaces.

Dylan held his breath. The first capture of the game, and he wasn’t sure what would happen. The rules of chess required it, but Dylan had no idea what to expect from a game played with living people. Still, figuring it was best to play as normally as possible, he ordered his bishop (another infantryman that Dylan barely knew) to move four spaces, placing it directly next to Wepwawet’s horse. “It seems awfully dull,” Dylan said.

“It is,” said Wepwawet, agreeing enthusiastically. “I’m stuck in this basement for another thousand years. I’m going to go stir-crazy by the end of it.” Dylan noted that he sounded more like a petulant child complaining about his punishment than a great and powerful God of old. And yet, he still loomed over the board like a Titan, and commanded the whole unit with a flick of his wrist. And with another such flick, he commanded his queen’s pawn to take Dylan’s pawn.

Dylan held his breath as the piece marched forwards, and felt the pit of his stomach sink again when he saw Wepwawet’s massive fingers wrap around the poor boy’s body. He finally exhaled, quietly, when he saw the wolf simply place the frozen young man in the sand, and leaving him be, otherwise.

“But you’re not in the tomb now, are you?” Said Dylan, ordering his bishop to take Wepwawet’s knight. “So surely you’re free to leave as you like?”

“Ah,” said Wepwawet, almost condescendingly. “Not so, I’m afraid. By the will of my father, I’m to remain here until I have served my time as penance for my crimes.” He said this off-handedly, but Dylan shuddered at the thought of something powerful enough to contain something like the great creature in front of him (or what ‘crimes’ such a creatures was capable). He waved his hand and took Dylan’s bishop with his queen (a man simply known as ‘Corporal Taylor’, who was Rutledge’s second-in-command). “I can control the space within the tomb, of course. But it’s quite dull without people. Every few decades or so, someone will stumble in and provide a bit of fun for some time, but in the meantime, it’s quite boring.”

Figuring it was best not to ask questions he didn’t want to know the answer to, Dylan changed tack. “Do you always play chess with these visitors of yours?” Dylan asked as he commanded pawn-to-take-pawn. Wepwawet’s massive fingers once again wrapped around the piece, but he placed it gently on the platform, next to Dylan, though he remained at attention and unmoving.

“Not typically,” his opponent said as he moved his kingside bishop ahead three spaces. It was an odd move, to Dylan, but not an unreasonable one. “I don’t usually get so many visitors at once. Usually it’s only one, and we’ll play something like Senet, if they’re not a soldier.”

“And if they are?” Dylan asked, tentatively. He ordered his kingside knight in front of the bishop’s pawn, which evoked a confused reaction from Wepwawet, but no comment. Dylan wondered if he’d managed to blunder somehow, but if he had, it wasn’t yet obvious.

“Well, in that case it depends,” said Wepwawet. “If have power over them, then I can usually get a bit more creative. Especially if there’s a lot of them. Like now!” He said, smirking down at the board. “Normally I’d have to play with a wooden board and pieces, but this is much more fun, don’t you agree?” He moved his queen four spaces to the right.

Dylan tried to remain diplomatic. “Chess is chess,” he said. “Wooden pieces or whole armies, what matters is the game.” Not a real expression of any internal belief, but enough, he hoped, to keep him from committing one way or the other. Realizing that he’d have to muster to protect his back-row pieces, Dylan ordered his own queen (an Alfred St. Clair of Paris) to move in front of the king to protect the pawn.

Ignoring Dylan, Wepwawet continued. “Problem is, though, that most people aren’t very good. Unlike you, General LaLande,” he said, a complementary tone in his voice as his knight moved to the right of the queen. Dylan felt a beam of pride shoot through him. God of War or not, having his chess skills validated by the supernatural was surprisingly pleasant.

Almost off-handedly, Dylan moved his pawn at C7 forward a space. “Well, thank you,” he said, not sure how to properly take such praise. “That I’ve managed to remain even in material with the God of War is perhaps one of my highest achievements.” *Flattery, get me somewhere*, he prayed silently.

“For now, at least,” said Wepwawet, before moving his queenside bishop to attack Dylan’s horse. Realizing that he’d blundered his knight a few turns ago, Dylan looked around for his next avenue of attack. Realizing that he might be able to pull away Wepwawet’s pieces, he moved the pawn B7 ahead two, pressing down on his bishop.

“Are you sure you want to do that?” Asked Wepwawet, his voice almost teasing. Dylan tried not to pay attention, almost certain that this was a ploy to get him to make another mistake. Before he could respond, though, he felt his ribs being pressed inwards as his body was compressed by massive weight on either side. It wasn’t painful, yet, but it was certainly uncomfortable and two massive mounds of flesh pressed against him, holding him like a toy as he was lifted into the air. “You said you didn’t have a good vantage point, is it better now?” Dylan looked down at the board below, squirming and trying to get comfortable while also nearly panicking at the long, deep drop below onto the sand.

“I’m fine!” Dylan said, nearly panicking. Even he was surprised at his own composure at this point. “Please put me back down so we can continue?” He said, almost pleading.

Wepwawet, smirk plastered across his face, brought Dylan close to his face. “Killjoy,” he said, but placed Dylan back on the platform, and with a single gesture, commanded his knight to take the pawn Dylan had just moved.

Absolutely confounded by this move, Dylan had to wait for a moment before taking the blindingly obvious move; he moved his other pawn forwards, and took the knight. It was such a simple and obvious mistake the Dylan was absolutely convinced that he’d somehow blundered again, But no amount of looking at the board told him what it was. He was now up in material, having taken both knights, even if he was about to lose his other bishop.

Not wanting to lose the conversation, Dylan groped around for other topics of discussion, not wanting to let the awkward moment from before ruin the mood, least it hurt his later chances for escape. “So…” he began. “Why’re you so big?” It was a stupid question, but it was all that came to mind for Dylan. It was a hard thing to miss.

Wepwawet took his pawn with his bishop and smiled again. “Because I want to be, check.” Likely, literally, true, Dylan figured. Whatever this being was, it was clearly quite powerful.

Dylan commanded his B8 knight to D7, blocking the bishop’s movement. “Of course,” he said, playing into the idea that it was somehow ‘natural’. “But you were around my size before. Why change that?”

Wepwawet castled queenside, attacking Dylan’s knight. “Because. It’s important to show you mortals just where you stand in the hierarchy of reality.” It was said with such a blunt, matter-of-fact tone, but also a muzzle-wide smirk, that Dylan wasn’t quite able to tell if it was a joke or not.

Ordering his castle to move behind his knight, Dylan felt his voice go a bit hoarse. “Right,” he said, before clearing his throat and trying again. “Right. I suppose it’s hard to argue with that.” It was times like these that he *really* appreciated his ability to keep his mouth shut.

Moving his castle all the way across the board, Wepwawet took Dylan’s knight. “Don’t get me wrong, you have your uses, of course,” he said, not unkindly. “But it’s important that the natural order of things is made obvious, isn’t it? So that you don’t get any silly ideas about your place in the universe. That just leads to tragedy.”

Dylan swallowed again. He couldn’t stomach to agree with something like that, even as a purely utilitarian belief. But he didn’t need to say anything, anyways. Just play the game. He ordered his castle to take his opponent’s castle. Wepwawet responded by moving his surviving castle next to his king, threatening to do the whole dance over again. Not taking the bait this time, Dylan moved his queen one space ahead, protecting his castle and his knight from a more advantageous position.

“Of course, we might still do away with you in the end. There’s little us Gods can’t that you can, and when I was first imprisoned here, mortals were considered more of a nuisance than an asset. Always getting everywhere, hard to dislodge. I wouldn’t plan much for the distant future, is all I’m saying.” He took Dylan’s castle with his bishop.

Dylan’s unflappable persona slipped for just a second, and he broke character just the tiniest bit, letting an enraged look cross his face for just the briefest second, unable to contain his anger as he practically screamed at his knight to take the bishop.

Wepwawet shifted his weight for the first time in the entire match. He sat up, crossing his legs as he sat in front of the board, and moved his queen to the back line. “Checkmate.”

Dylan blinked. He could, of course, take the queen with his horse. In fact, it as all he could do. But then he could just move his castle to the end of the row, and that was it. He mentally kicked himself for not moving his queen instead, but it was too late now. The game was over.

“You’re too easily riled up, you know,” said the wolf-god, less antagonistic now. “You try not to show it, but it affects your thoughts all the same. You’re not bad at all, normally. Clearly a superior tactical mind. Not that you could hope to defeat the God of War, of course.”

Dylan started to calm down, realizing that he’d gotten upset for nothing, and that Wepwawet had been playing with his emotions. Not that it really provided much comfort, knowing that he’d never escape after having lost the wager.

Wepwawet scooped up the group of men in his hand easily, like a child gathering his toys to put away. A gesture with his hands, and the group vanished into smoke, no trace of them left behind at all. “Your men are free to leave, of course. I have no intention of babysitting 40 people, even if they are all soldiers.”

Dylan’s eyes went wide with amazement. “But-” he started, and shook his head. “I thought you made a deal, where we could only leave if I won.”

“Did I?” Asked the wolf, laying on the sand and basking in the light. “I believe I merely asked you to indulge me. I said nothing about any such bet.”

“So-” Dylan started, not sure if it was even appropriate to ask. “Am I free to leave?”

“You?” Asked Wepwawet, his beady eyes falling on Dylan with an almost amused look deep within them, as if the answer was obvious. “Of course not. I was going to let you go originally, but, well. You just such a stunning conversationalist that I have no choice but to keep you for company. I’m sure you understand.”

With that final blow, Dylan fell to the sand, lying flat on the ground in sheer dejection. It was times like these, that he really wished knew *when* to keep his mouth shut.