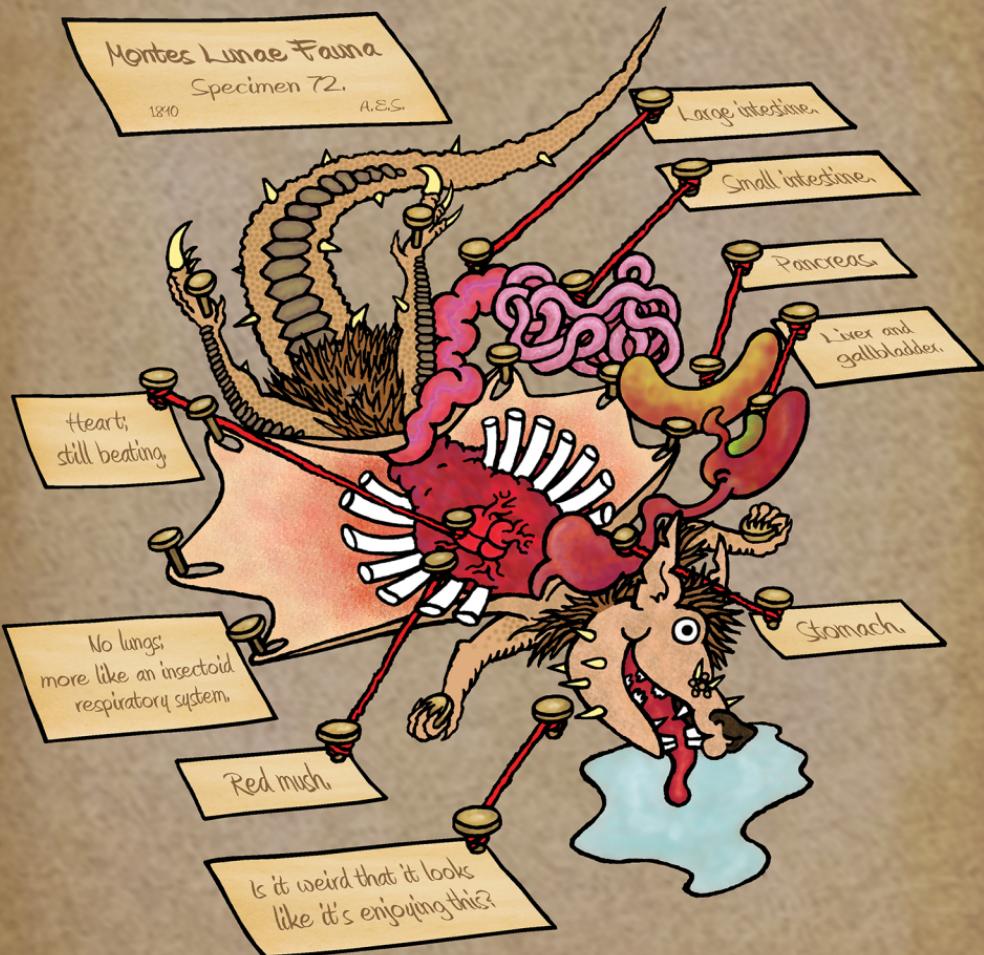


Shanks Family Legacy



L. R. G. Carter

WHAT URBI DID NEXT

L. R. G. Carter

Author's Note

Years after visiting the Isles of Shayde, Armitage was challenged by his rival Ravelin to a race around the world.

This race just so happened to take him to Egypt, where he just so happened to be reunited with Urbi.

Which is quite a coincidence, all things considered.

Naturally, Armitage asked Urbi what she had been up to since they parted ways.

This is the story she told him.

What Urbi Did Next

It was in the summer of my ninth year that the northern mists rolled up the Nile. Elsewhere the air was dry and clear, but over the river there slithered a veil which cut the country in two. I sat on my father's shoulders to see over the Memphis crowds, watching boats as they disappeared beneath that gluttonous shroud. The haze surged through the city, against opposing winds, and not one sound was heard of the wreckage wrought within.

At dusk, Aswan reported that Elephantine was lost. There was footage of shadows swarming the isle, moving in ways that darkness should not. One tourist managed to film the opening of doors between worlds, then paid the ultimate price for streaming their intrusion. Their assailants spurred croaking steeds forward into the rift, crushing the fallen phone, terminating the broadcast.

What happened next is still unclear. Investigators later scoured the island but found little to answer their myriad questions. The prevailing theory suggests our attackers accessed extra-dimensional folds in space-time, followed ancient mythologies to locate the gods of the Nile, then offered to break the river's chains in return for a flood to cripple Egypt. However, much of this is mere conjecture. All we can say for certain is that Aswan's dams were soon destroyed, releasing volumes of water that defied both maths and nature.

Black ships rode the deluge to conquer our black land, dispensing with magic mists to reveal themselves at last. In ages past the ocean had thrown them at our shores, to be driven by

our people back beyond the waves. Yet now those defenders' names were dust among the desert sand; now the Sea Peoples returned to claim this country as their prize.

Distant coastal cities escaped the river's wrath, but by dawn foreign forces marched through their streets. While those inland were untouched by these immediate upheavals, there was nothing they could do to resist the changing order. Our family joined refugees fleeing east to the Sinai Peninsula. My father had been held in high regard before the fall, so now many looked to him to help us through those troubled times. Between the Red Sea's fingers we hid and built Hotepia, while we watched the rest of Egypt begin a twisted transformation.

As I grew older I came to believe the Sea Peoples had forgotten us. Hotepia was just one community among many, in an area neglected even before the invasion. Now I know that throughout those years they were setting their subtle schemes. They promised my uncle our city in return for his betrayal, and together they conspired against all we had achieved.

Then Henry Shanks arrived. Hotepia collapsed in chaos shortly after. Uncle Anum killed my father, but the Sea Peoples were in no rush to support his coup. As the city burnt around us, he somehow came to the conclusion that *I* was his key to power.

Once again I had lost my home, so I set out with Henry to find another. We were harried by Anum on a weekly basis, always with some new plan involving his latest piece of stolen treasure. It was those relics that bested me in the end. His genie trapped me in a cage of ice, and I was dragged from the Isles of Shayde atop his magic carpet. I immediately attempted to smash my prison, but slipped too soon from consciousness in a state of frozen shock.

*

I awoke in the ruins of Hotepia's Capitol. Moonlight streamed through the shattered ceiling, highlighting rubble and enriching shadows. Anum stood in a carefully chosen dramatic spotlight, posing with the remains of the Cabinet's fancy table. I tried to rise but lacked the strength, dead limbs locking me in the puddle of my melted cell.

"Urbi, my dear, relax," said Anum. "You are not fit for fighting yet. Besides, this is a time for celebration, not violence. By the evening, you and I shall be wed, and the family of Hotepia will rule this land once more. We shall do such wonderful things together! Well, *I* at least will enjoy them ..."

At that he laughed, though as I had broken his face mere hours before this caused him nothing but pain.

"Had I known you were still alive, Anum, I would have seen your hand in those misty isles from the start. I thought you died when we fought those hopping zombies in Taiwan. How did you survive being eaten by that undead Chinese dragon?"

I listened as he explained, and to this day I do not know whether to be impressed or disgusted.

"You should be grateful at least for my recent interference," he continued. "I feel things were not going well for you."

"Yeah, you can say that again," said a voice resembling an infinite number of monkeys playing with an infinite number of megaphones. I turned to find Anum's genie refuelling the flying carpet. "I mean, I'm an unnatural force of primordial power, and even I was disturbed by what we saw. Still, it all ended well I suppose, what with us escaping to this desert. Now we must be thousands of miles from the nearest hideous fish monster."

At that moment, a squad of Sea Peoples burst through the

doors, riding into the room on the backs of hideous fish monsters.

“I really should have seen that coming,” said the genie. “If I had legs, I’d kick myself.”

The beasts surrounded us, their riders laden with weapons and their mouths overflowing with teeth. Though my body was recovering, there was little I could do against such numbers.

“Anum Hotep, so nice of you to finally return. We were beginning to think you had forgotten us.” This came from a man indistinguishable from the others, yet unquestionably in command.

“No, no!” Anum protested. “Not at all, Lord Axilliax, I remember our deal quite clearly. As promised, my brother is deposed and dead, so now I may rule what little is left of Hotepia. In your name, of course—”

“There is more of Hotepia left than you think,” said Lord Axilliax. “We lost many lives when the Capitol fell, but after that the land was ours. Your people serve us well and any opposition feeds our steeds. So tell me, Anum, why should I keep you alive? I can see no further use for you, while this genie provides endless possibilities.”

Axilliax turned from my quivering uncle, his gaze bearing down on the azure cloud.

“But-but-but,” the genie stuttered, “the people of Hotepia know Anum is royalty, and as such recognise his right to rule. They will fight you Sea Peoples forever, but cannot stand in the way of their one true king.”

“Royalty? *King?*” Axilliax, his guards, and the amphibious steeds all began to laugh. “Hotepia was a semi-direct democracy! Anum couldn’t even win a seat on their People’s Council! Still, I understand your confusion. After all, I personally led the

campaign to poison Hotepia's global perception. I just didn't expect the locals to believe my propaganda. Now, genies are not known for acting in their master's best interests. What value could you possibly see in Anum that would lead you to defend him?"

"Well, you know how it is. If anything happened to him, I don't know who I'd end up with next. The *magic ring that I am bound to* could end up anywhere. Anyone could pick up that *magic ring* and command my powers. That's the *magic ring* on his *right hand*, third finger from the left ..."

I slipped a sword from the belt of an unwary guard. A swift slice through Anum's wrist sent his severed hand soaring, and I snatched it from the air as I sprung towards the carpet. The Sea Peoples charged, trampling Anum beneath toadish mounts, cutting short his screams. Searching for safety, I crashed the carpet through the nearest window, then soared south across the sea leaving Hotepia far behind. The air turned blue and ripe around me, and I knew I had the genie on my side. Cries of pursuing ravens caused me some concern, but the spirit reassured me they were under their control.

These birds fed me well when we reached the Red Sea Hills, and we rested round a fire as I pondered what to do.

"So ..." I said, struggling to find something to talk about with someone I had for years considered my enemy. "Now I have your ring, you must do anything I ask of you, am I right?"

"Yes indeed," said the genie. "Well, no, actually; that was sort of a lie."

I sighed. "So already the tricks and deceit begin."

"Not at all, I just need to lay down a few ground rules. I will do almost anything you ask of me, but there are five things that I simply can *not*. I cannot kill people, nor can I bring them back from the dead. I cannot make people fall in love. I cannot carry

you through time, nor can I move you instantaneously through space. Do not ask such things of me and I shall grant you your every desire.”

I scrutinised the genie over the flames. Despite their primordial face of smoke and ash, they were as readable as any human I had ever met.

“You’re lying,” I said.

The genie’s eyes shrank back as they met my own.

“Yes. You’re right. In theory I *can* do all of those things, but I don’t *want* to. *You* don’t want me to either, trust me on this. I dragged Anum through some spatial shortcuts to escape a little pickle on the Isles of Shayde. Did I say a little pickle? I meant *big goblin-shaped trouble*. Yet even though it was for his own good, he’s not going to thank me for helping him.”

“He seemed healthy enough back there,” I said.

“Yeah, that’s because he hasn’t tried to sleep yet ...”

Everything about the genie’s shifting form suggested they really wanted to talk about something different, so I tried to put my new friend at ease.

“How about this; if you will treat me fairly, without misinterpretation or selective understanding, then with my final wish I shall release you from your prison and you shall never need to see this ring again.”

The genie started panicking and waving their tentacles in the air. “But ... that ring is my home ... all my stuff is in that ring—”

“Okay, my mistake,” I said, attempting to make my voice and gestures as reassuring as possible. “I had always assumed that Anum, I don’t know, had you trapped in there?”

“What? No!” said the genie. “I have the whole ‘phenomenal cosmic power’ thing. If I wanted to, I could have simply boiled his blood and peeled off all his skin. But where would that have

got me? Living in a ring on a skinless finger in a pool of cooling blood, that's where! Sure, his wishes were awful, *he* was awful, but what's a genie to do if they're not granting somebody's wishes?"

"Ah, so you weren't trapped in your ring," I said. "You were trapped in your relationship."

"Wow, yeah, that's real deep coming from someone who's spent the past five years on the run with a pirate. Tell me more about how to make the best life-choices."

"No, you don't get to do that," I said, my hands forming fists to stop my teeth from clenching. "I spent those years not knowing where I was going, but that is not because I was lost. I leapt into the unknown entirely of my own volition. If it looked like I was 'on the run', then that is only because *you* kept chasing me."

The genie opened their mouth in preparation for a devastating retort, then realised they didn't have anything and their mouth had been open for an uncomfortably long time.

"Wow," they said at last. "I am such a garbage person."

"No, you just need to get away from people who only seek to use you. We're both stuck in the middle of nowhere with no idea what to do next. If you will help me find my way, I'll do my best to help you find yours. If you think your power is sending me the way of Anum, then you may take your ring and leave."

"Can't say pharaoh than that," said the genie with a smile.

"Must you make such terrible jokes?" I asked, "It hardly seems appropriate in our current circumstances."

"Can't change who I am. Besides, you worry too much. So you've lost your family, your home, and your entire way of life. These things happen. At least now there is nothing holding you back and things can only get better. I mean, I fail to see how they could possibly get worse—"

The genie was interrupted by a dozen ragged soldiers erupting from the sands. Firelight glimmered against gunmetal, bringing a swift end to all thoughts of escape.

“You know what?” said the genie, “I just shouldn’t talk. You would think I might have learnt that at some point through the millennia, but I guess you can’t teach an old djinn new tricks.”

Throughout this rambling monologue our assailants barked their orders. Defiance was not an option before their twitching guns. One stepped forward to take the ring and ordered the genie back into their gem. Others seized my sword and snatched the carpet out of reach. Then they dived back into the dirt, dragging me down with them.

Hidden tunnels led us deep beneath the hills, to a warren filled with people sunk in squalor and despair. Strangers huddled close together in cold narrow chambers, and what little light there was revealed starvation and disease.

My captors threw me into a corner, taking up positions to block my escape. A terse order sent one of the soldiers hurrying away. It was not long before I heard them return, briefing someone else on the current situation.

“... seen flying through the sky from the northern lookout. We found her with the Recondite Ruby of Ra and a magic carpet. She doesn’t look like Anum, but we put that down to genie magic.”

“Possibly, though I was always told such sorcery quickly fades away. Demon, I command you, come forward with the truth; are these old tales accurate?”

“What, are you kidding?” said the genie, as a shining shape snaked out of the shadows. “You could be dead in the ground for decades and your face would still be mine ... er ... I mean, that’s what I could do if you kept my ring. Without it, the disguise

would hold for five minutes tops, no more, she definitely isn't Anum Hotep, no *sir*."

My companion's untimely pride went unnoticed, for at that moment the genie's glow allowed everyone their first good look at each other.

"Urbi!" the new arrival gasped, before pulling back in uncertain caution.

"Rashad!" I replied, recognising an old friend who had served on my father's personal staff. We had been close enough in that previous life that I could now blurt cryptic words to confirm my identity. It may seem unsatisfying that I do not repeat what I said, but those matters are still his alone to reveal.

Rashad needed only a moment to process my words before running to embrace me. Together we were able to persuade the others that I was who I claimed. Or rather, Rashad took full responsibility for my actions, and the others trusted him enough to leave me in his care. Either way, the soldiers nodded and shrugged and released me from my corner.

"Sorry about all that," said Rashad, handing me back my possessions. "Everyone here is somewhat on edge basically all the time."

"No surprise there," said the genie, as I returned their ring to my finger. "What with everything now being *terrible*?"

"I mean, things weren't great before," said Rashad, his voice laden with accusation.

"Still, we've obviously missed a lot," I cut in, hoping to keep the peace. "Please, I must know what has happened in my absence."

"Right, yes, of course," said Rashad. "Well, er, as the invaders took Hotepia, many found refuge in the subterranean tunnels that wind their way around the inside of the world. We assumed

the Sea Peoples were unaware of these caves, but within a week they sent their monsters hunting through the Below. This did little to endear us to those already inhabiting this hollow land, and violent struggles raged beneath all of Egypt.

“We eventually carved ourselves a place in these mountains where we would be left undisturbed, and the Sea Peoples lost enough of their creatures that they stopped sending them into the depths. Since then we have been muddling through with what those on the surface laughably call a resistance. Come this way, I will show you around our secret refuge.”

The genie and I followed as Rashad went scurrying through the darkness, throwing gestures at various holes in the rock.

“There is one of the bedrooms. Blind Mesi made those beds, she’s our only carpenter, takes half a day to make each one. She made all the tables in these kitchens as well, and all the watch towers up above ground. She even made the toilets, which wasn’t easy given our limited resources. Took her ages to figure out the flush, before that we just—”

“So, Rashad,” I said, trying to steer his rambling towards more pertinent matters. “How do we feed all these people, here beneath the mountains?”

“Ah, that is something we are less proud of,” he admitted, nodding towards a cage full of chittering monkeys. “Our ancestors used such animals to pick figs from the trees. We have trained these ones to provide a more diverse diet.”

As Rashad spoke a monkey ran between us carrying a squealing pig above its head.

“It pains me to steal from our own farmers, but the sentence for collaboration means we will not ask for aid. We have tried taking supplies from the Sea Peoples, but you can guess our success from this tattered armour and these antique weapons.

Still, we keep ourselves busy; I have been developing an innovative alternative to cavalry, and we even found some of the creatures your father claimed to have encountered on his underground adventures.”

We arrived in a cavern that someone had seen fit to fill with a farm. I watched a group of monkeys cramming chickens into a hen house. Another stumbled past struggling under a goat. People scurried between the animals, trying to impose order upon the sea of chaos. Rashad wove through the crowd, heading for a camel with too many humps.

“A humphrey?” I cheered. “They *do* exist! I always thought dad was joking!”

“This is Hasina,” said Rashad, introducing the soldier unpacking the animal’s saddlebag. “She worked with the Hotepian cartographers when they tried to map these tunnels, so she’s been able to find us all sorts of unusual things.”

“We currently only have enough humphreys for a small battalion,” said Hasina. “But give me a year or so and we’ll have enough for ten thousand troops to charge side by side into victory and beyond!”

“Hasina has won the Optimistic Rebel of the Year Award three times in a row,” said Rashad, pointing at a collection of carved wooden cups on an unexpected shelf.

“I’ve just been out gathering troop movements for the war room,” said Hasina. “Have you shown them the war room?”

“So far I’ve shown them the living quarters and the toilets.”

“Well, that’s useful too. Blind Mesi did a really good job on those toilets. We’re all more optimistic now that we don’t have to—”

“The war room?” the genie and I asked together.

“The war room!” cried Hasina, dragging me into a long, low

grotto. I found myself stooping over a wide table, studying a map of Egypt adorned with wooden models. The genie floated around a lamp hanging from the ceiling, casting a blue glow across the diorama.

“These are the last known positions of all the forces in the country,” said Hasina, shuffling soldiers from one toy town to another.

“Wow, these are really good,” said the genie. “You can see all the details on their faces and everything.”

“Their centre of power is here, in the Fortress of Denial,” Hasina continued, prodding something on the river that was more castle than boat. “It sails across Egypt carrying sufficient firepower to lay waste to the whole floodplain.”

“Not that the guns are really needed,” said Rashad. “Merely mentioning the creatures crawling in its hull is enough to quell any insurgency.”

“And what are those?” I asked, pointing at the heap of ships sat smothering the mouth of the Nile.

“The Delta Fleet,” said Rashad. “The Sea Peoples have been amassing that stockpile since they first took Egypt. Everything from Cairo to the coast has been converted into a single, all consuming shipyard. Whole cities, miles of farmland, all transformed to churn out the one thing you would think the Sea Peoples have enough of already.”

“The Nile is already theirs,” said Hasina. “So we suspect there is more afoot than consolidation of control. It wouldn’t surprise me if they had set their eyes on total Mediterranean conquest.”

“So,” I summarised, “our enemy is firmly entrenched in at least two positions, from which they hold dominion over all of Egypt. At present, we have insufficient numbers to meet them in anything resembling a pitched battle, yet any delay on our part

puts other countries at risk. Tell me then, what options do we have?"

"I could bring the Great Sphinx to life," said the genie, slithering across the map to study the ships.

"No, I've seen that happen before," I said. "Those things are hard to control and even harder to replace."

We furrowed our brows in quiet contemplation, but our thoughts were soon disturbed by gunfire and explosions.

"What are you doing?" cried Rashad, as the genie smashed the boats together with inhumanly realistic sound effects. "It took Blind Mesi hours to carve all those!"

"Now there's an idea," I pondered, watching the genie at play. "Does anyone here know their way around the inside of that fortress?"

"Oh yes," said Rashad. "We hold our book club there the first Thursday of every month."

"Sarcasm aside," said Hasina, "there is one person who might be able to help." She picked up a wooden figure and threw it over to me.

"Is this Omari?" I asked, studying the model. "Blind Mesi is *really* good!"

"Hotepia's beloved Minister of the Interior," said Rashad, completely failing to put sarcasm aside. "When the Sea Peoples took over, he happily sold himself out to become their Chief of Police."

"I suspect you're looking for information with which to implement some unbelievably inventive plan," said Hasina. "And I'm pretty optimistic that we'll be able to force it out of *him*."

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The next morning found Omari and his officers hassling an

old woman in a secluded village. They seemed to be enjoying goading her into making age old excuses.

“We cannot pay your protection money,” she pleaded. “Everything set aside for you was stolen by pig-picking monkeys!”

“A likely story!” scoffed Omari.

“I’m glad you think so.”

“I don’t! Seize her!”

The accompanying police officers cracked their knuckles and extended their batons. Omari chuckled as they chased the woman down the street and into a distant house. He only began to realise that something was amiss when nearby children started laughing and calling him names.

Omari gave a loud sigh, then followed them all into the building. He had just enough time to recognise the dead men on the floor before a thick, scarred arm slammed him into the nearest wall. His eyes flashed around, resting first on Rashad, whose arm had done the slamming, then on Hasina, who was peeling off her amazingly realistic old woman mask, and finally on myself as I offered him our terms.

“Here’s what’s going to happen,” I said. “You’re going to help us defeat the Sea Peoples. Otherwise, we will kill you.”

“And what if I refuse?” Omari sneered.

“Er, I just said we would kill you …”

“Oh yes, so you did, my apologies. You cut ahead of me there. Let’s see, what’s next? Oh yes …” Omari tried to fall to his knees, but found himself still pinned to the wall. Instead, he wailed at the top of his voice, “Nooooo! Anything but the cold embrace of death! My heart is heavy with sin, and I can never remember the names of all the gods! Spare me, and I shall live forever in your service!”

“Goodness!” said Rashad, “That is exactly what you said to the Sea Peoples when they first arrived in Hotepia. You really do have all this scripted don’t you?”

Omari tried to nod, but Rashad’s arm was unrelenting. “In the Jackal Cubs,” he said, “our motto is to always be prepared.”

“So, are you willing to help us?” I asked.

Omari’s eyes moved as he replied, as though he was reading his words from an unseen book. “I will take great pride in acting in the best interests of my country. Please explain what you require me to do.”

“We are going to steal the Fortress of Denial,” I said. “And you are going to show us how.”

*

Arms were twisted and plots were hatched. Omari begrudgingly answered our questions. Rashad finalised his innovative alternative to cavalry. Hasina warmed us up with an aerobics session set to some particularly inspiring music. Come nightfall, we were ready to turn our plan into action.

I set out on the carpet with Omari at my side. The genie conjured clouds to conceal our flight, and we positioned ourselves unseen above the Fortress of Denial. I heard Hasina below, shouting something about riding the humphries over their enemies’ vanquished pride. Gunshots rang through the air. The assault had begun.

“I need to see if the Sea Peoples are taking the bait,” I said to the genie.

“Sure thing,” they replied, turning into a gaseous recreation of the fortress throne room. I watched as a blue and foggy Axilliax was approached by a cringing servant.

“My Lord,” said the messenger. “The peasants are revolting.”

Lord Axilliax looked like he was about to say something, but then frowned and shook his head.

“No no no, far too easy. Set me up for some more sophisticated humour.”

“Er, my Lord,” said the servant. “Urbi Hotep has rallied the insurgents of the east and is launching an attack. Your desire to capture her alive for propaganda purposes dictates that we cannot open fire, and many who would normally be defending this fortress are instead combing the country, searching for the very army that currently attacks us. Should Urbi’s subversives gain entry to this ship, they may well set in motion some unbelievably inventive plan that may oust us from our position of power!”

“That isn’t funny at all,” said Axilliax.

“I’m glad you are taking this seriously, my Lord. What are your orders?”

“We shall easily see off this rebellion. Release the *Annileators*, then bring me my sword.”

“Hasina has them completely distracted,” I said, as Axilliax left the room. “Carpet, drop.”

The genie gagged Omari’s scream as we plummeted through the night. As we fell, I saw hulking reptilian beasts crawl out of the river and lumber into the fray. Then we hit the highest deck, a platform from which the Sea Peoples cast their eyes over all of Egypt.

“Genie, roll up the carpet and put it somewhere safe. You take Omari down to the engine room and make sure he follows the plan. If he doesn’t, you have my fullest permission to make his life as miserable as possible.”

We slipped through an armoured hatch and went our separate ways. I unfolded a map drawn by Omari, following a shaky line down through the decks. The deeper I descended, the more

everything around me seemed to warp and rust. A dull red glow lit barnacle-encrusted corridors, yet the light seemed to ooze from no visible source. Convenient coral outcrops hid me from frantic Sea Peoples as they ran to answer urgent alarms. The hull, bulkheads, every available surface, all pulsed with a rhythm that matched no machine built by human hand.

The route on the map ended at the word ‘CONTROL’. This marked a room almost completely filled with computers and screens and, most importantly, the ship’s wheel. I had of course come armed, so the man at the helm was easily overcome. Stepping over the body, I took a moment to take in everything I was seeing.

The flickering screens relayed pictures from all over Egypt. Many watched emptied streets as patrols enforced the curfew. Others peered into people’s homes or monitored night shift work stations. Some of the images seemed to come from inside the fortress itself. I saw fish-things swimming in tanks of brine, water boiling around their fingers as they moulded metal into twisted shapes. One screen showed them building bulbous, golden cannons, while another revealed a worrying stockpile of weapons already completed.

A view of the battle outside caught my eye; Hasina slicing a scimitar straight through the neck of an assailing beast. I looked down at the controls and continued with my part of the plan. Although the mechanisms were almost entirely alien, I had spent the past several years with a sly and slippery pirate. There was not one ship in the world that I could not handle, and the Fortress of Denial was no exception. I set the ship on a northern course, before jamming anything resembling an accelerator and smashing everything that looked like a brake.

“Urbi Hotep,” called a familiar voice. “We meet again.”

I turned to find Lord Axilliax framed in the doorway.

"No doubt you think I intend to offer some way of ending this peacefully," he said. "Perhaps by joining forces or—"

"Actually," I interrupted, "I was thinking I'm going to kill you."

"Ah," grinned Axilliax. "Well in that respect we think alike."

He lunged with his sword as I raised my own in defence. The parry knocked his weapon aside and I let the tip of my blade bounce back across his forehead. The resulting blood spilled into his eyes. He clawed at his face with one hand, while thrashing his sword around with the other. I decided not to risk striking a blow through such erratic steel, instead slipping out of the control room to lure him away from my work. The cries that pursued me through the ship proved the predictability of his rage.

"Do your rebels truly believe they can beat us?" Axilliax screamed after me. "I know how few of you there are! Yet every day I watch more of our creatures hatch! Every day I listen to the growing guttural croaks! Today we have enough fish to overrun all of Africa. Soon their numbers will swell to smother the entire world!"

This was not an unfamiliar speech, for I had met many such megalomaniacs in my travels. I found my way back to the upper deck and ran to the side of the ship. The Nile hurtled by with increasing speed, the battle on its banks left long behind.

I glanced back to see Axilliax charging towards me. A whistle pierced the winds. I leaped over the bulwark, out into the night.

Axilliax arrived at my previous position in time to see me land on the flying carpet. He shook his fists and roared rude words, then noticed the land speeding rapidly by. A frantic dash to the bow of the boat let him see the Delta Fleet rush into view. He tried to give warning of the oncoming disaster by shouting and

jumping and waving his arms above his head.

The Sea Peoples along the docks did not seem to grasp his meaning. Some of them even began to wave back.

The fortress collided with the shipyard. Jetties and piers shattered. Cranes and scaffolding crumpled into a twisted iron web. Vessels began to capsize before folding instead into a crushed metal mess. The expanding wall of destruction swallowed workshops and warehouses. A cascade of explosions began rolling out beyond the immediate carnage. Sea Peoples stumbled aimlessly amid the destruction, for without anyone to fight there was little they could do.

“Looks like you rigged the engine without any problems,” I congratulated the genie and Omari. In the distance, heaped debris finally brought the fortress to a grinding halt.

“Well, quite,” said Omari in a sulk. “There we go; lots of burning and death. Can we go home now?”

I gave him a withering look then leapt into the fray.

“Over there!” came a shout as I landed on one of my foes and availed myself of an extra weapon. Sea Peoples closed in, swords drawn and stun batons sparking. Then they faltered as a hoard of hungry, hungry hippos erupted from the waters behind me.

Rashad lacked Hasina’s fondness for dramatic battle cries, so even without his scuba mask he would have led the charge in silence. The Sea Peoples, however, made plenty of noise as they were crushed beneath the feet of his innovative alternative to cavalry. I followed him into battle, cutting down the enemy as their fleet sank beneath them.

*

Of course, nothing lasts forever. When the Sea Peoples finally began to regroup, we fell back content with the ruin wrought.

The hippopotamus riders sank beneath the waves and I signalled for my companions to carry me from the chaos.

“Well that showed them,” said the genie as I climbed back onto the carpet. “Now *they’re* the ones in *De Nile*.”

“I do wish you would stop making such terrible puns,” I winced.

“Wow, I’m impressed. You’re the first person who has ever wished for that! Is the offer still open for me to take my ring and leave?”

I laughed. I finally felt I was home again after too many years away. I had come back healthier, stronger, ready for the work ahead. The Sea Peoples had suffered their first defeat; one so spectacular that they could not hope to hide it from the Egyptian people. The morning news would see hope rekindled, a chance for freedom and a better future.

Still, it would take more than one victory to win this war. So we returned to our hidden refuge and prepared ourselves for the fight ahead.

Urbi will return in:

Urbi Hotep and the Mountains of the Moon