

## Prologue

*Bastet* is a short story set in the Architects of the Veil universe.

It can be read independently, yet it resonates with events, themes, and consequences explored in greater depth in the novel Architects of the Veil — The Veil of Normality.

No prior knowledge is required to follow this story.

It exists as a window into a larger world — and like any window, it does not reveal everything.

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## BASTET — LUXOR, 2003

— Before the name, before the symbol.

Valley of the Kings. Ancient Thebes. Present-day Luxor.

The tomb appeared on no official map.

Lena went down first. The air below was old, dense, as though it had not been breathed since the world first learned how to pronounce names. By the beam of her flashlight, the chamber revealed itself intact — too intact for something that should have been plundered millennia ago.

A stone sarcophagus occupied the center, covered in hieroglyphs and images of protective gods. Anubis appeared repeatedly, vigilant, muzzle lifted, his gaze turned not toward the dead, but toward those who might dare disturb them.

Around it lay the silent inventory of a powerful man:

Scarab amulets, necklaces and bracelets of gold, lapis lazuli, and faience, all arranged with ritual care. Canopic jars guarded the organs of the deceased, each under the custody of a divinity. Weapons betrayed the occupant's status — daggers, curved-blade khopeshes, remnants of bows made of wood and bone. A general. Someone the pharaoh had trusted with victories and secrets.

There were offerings for the afterlife as well: miniature boats and chariots, mummified food, alabaster jars bearing traces of beer and bread. Ushabti figurines lined the walls, eternal servants meant to labor in the Duat in place of their lord.

But none of that held Lena's attention for long.

What made her smile — laugh, really, with the childlike joy of someone who had grown up dreaming of impossible adventures — was the chest.

She opened it.

The bottom was lined with gold bars. Raw, heavy gold, stacked without delicacy. Spoils of conquered wars. Payment in blood and strategy.

At the center, resting on an absurdly well-preserved red linen cloth, lay a pendant.

Bastet.

Though the name did not yet surface in her mind, Lena felt the gaze.

It did not come from the darkness.

It came from within.

An ancient warning — domestic and feral at once. Like the silence before a cat's leap.

The chamber did not react with sound or light. It reacted with restraint. Nothing there wanted to attack her. Nothing wanted to touch her. Everything waited.

The pendant rested in the chest as something that had never been lost.

This was not a discovery.

It was a return.

Lena lifted it with gloved hands, as one holds a treasure and, at the same time, something that does not entirely belong to them. There was no explosion, no overwhelming vision.

Only an unsettling certainty:

Some things do not choose the world.

They choose who will stand between the world and what tries to cross it.

The metal was neither cold nor warm.

It was attentive.

She felt its weight in her soul long before she felt it in her body — as if the object were measuring her breath, her fears, and something deeper still, for which she had never found a name.

Around her, the cats carved into the walls did not move.

But they changed.

Eyes that had once been mere symbols became functional. They were not watching Lena. They were watching what might try to reach her later.

She thought of Jorge.

The young soldier she had met at the local market, the Luxor Bazaar. Inconvenient. Persistent. Owner of an irritatingly effective sense of humor. With a foolish bet and a badly rehearsed line, he had managed to extract from her a promise of a date — and her phone number.

She did not desire him.

Yet, against her will, she felt divided.

Not by longing.

By anchoring.

She then thought of a child who did not yet exist.

And the pendant answered.

A brief pulse.

Like a distant purr.

At that instant, something on the other side of the Threshold tried to look back.

It did not cross.

It did not dare.

The presence was repelled with the naturalness of someone closing their front door upon hearing unfamiliar footsteps in the hallway.

Bastet did not hunt.

She did not judge.

She did not guide souls.

She guarded the interval.

The narrow space between premonition and event, between cradle and home.

Between sleep and waking.

Between life — and the moment something improper tries to pass through.

When Lena left the chamber, the desert seemed far too ordinary. The world went on unchanged. But now there was something that would not allow certain eyes to open near her.

And many years later, when hands would emerge from an impossible screen, it would not be faith alone that made them recoil first.

It would be territory.

At the end of the day, Lena tried to do what she always did. Catalogue.

Seated at the excavation's improvised table, she opened her field notebook, took a breath, and carefully wrote:

Item 47 — Dark metal pendant, representation of Bastet, provenance unknown.

The ink was still fresh when it began to fail. First it faded. Then it flowed backward, as if being drawn back into the pen. Finally, it vanished.

The paper remained clean.

Untouched.

As if nothing had ever been written.

“No...” she murmured.

She tried again.

The same result.

There was no threat.

No pain.

Only an absolute refusal.

The wind passed through the tent and brushed her hair. Within it — like a voice that did not come from outside — she heard:

This will not be listed.

Fear arrived late, as it always does with things that truly matter.

Lena called the excavation lead, July H. Bogart — future curator of the Smithsonian's Egyptology section — and asked to see the catalogued photographs on the computer.

When the image appeared, her stomach dropped.

Where the pendant should have been, there was only a scarab.

Perfect.

Impossible.

Symbolism collided in her mind. Rebirth. Protection. Rising sun. Self-generation.

She scratched her head. She was not a thief. Yet she felt, with uncomfortable clarity, the weight of the pendant in her pocket.

“July... that’s enough for today. I need to stop,” she said, standing.

July studied her for a second longer than usual.

“All right. Go rest. It’s Friday. We’ll pick it up again Monday.”

That night, away from the team, Lena walked to the edge of the excavation and threw the pendant into the desert. Not in anger. In nervous respect.

The object traced a brief arc and vanished into the sand.

She exhaled in relief.

For exactly three steps.

The weight returned to her jacket pocket.

Lena froze.

She pulled the pendant out.

The metal was warm.

Satisfied.

“You’re not normal,” she murmured, with a short, almost hysterical laugh.

Later that night, entering a café in Luxor, she noticed something else.

The cats.

They were everywhere — as they always had been. But now they looked at her. Not with hunger. Not with curiosity.

With recognition.

Some stood as she passed. Others followed her for a few meters before stopping, sitting, and watching her go.

A black cat, eyes emerald-green, walked beside her for an entire block, tail upright, solemn.

“This is impossible,” she whispered.

She entered a small, old bar, lit with warm light and low music. She needed something solid. Human. A drink. A face.

“You always walk like that... as if the world has just told you a secret.”

She looked up.

Jorge.

Posture far too relaxed for someone who was clearly not there by chance. The smile was easy. Trained. The eyes attentive.

“And do you usually approach women alone like this?” she replied, resting an elbow on the bar while holding the pendant in one hand.

“Only the ones who look like they’re about to throw a millennia-old artifact in the trash.”

Two glasses appeared between them.

“That pendant would look better around your neck,” he said, with disarming naturalness.

Before she could react, Jorge gently brushed Lena’s hair aside. Feeling, without realizing why, his warm hands and her racing heart, he fastened the necklace. She shivered — unsure whether from his touch or from the sudden weight of the thing.

For an instant, she remembered the first time she had put a collar on a very young animal. The sensation of bond.

And of lost choice.

She removed it and placed it on the bar.

“I’m an archaeologist,” she said. “And today I discovered that some things don’t like being lost.”

“That’s usually the kind of thing that becomes a problem,” he replied. “Or a story.”

She laughed. For the first time since the chamber.

On impulse, she tossed the pendant through the open door of the bar.

“Done. Solved.”

Jorge raised an eyebrow.

“Are you sure?”

Something brushed against Lena’s legs.

A cat.

Black. Elegant. The same green eyes.

It pressed against her, purring softly.

“No... no, no...” she murmured.

The cat lifted its head, looked at her, and closed its eyes.

When Lena looked back to the bar, the pendant was there again.

Jorge watched in silence.

“Either I’ve had too much to drink,” he said finally, “or you’ve just entered my life in the most interesting way possible.”

Lena laughed, nervous.

Outside, the cat disappeared into the crowd.

In Lena’s soul, Bastet remained.

Not as a threat.

Not as a blessing.

But as something that had decided to stay.

**Because it liked the environment.**

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Thank you for reading.

— E. M. Ward

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