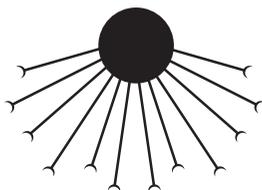




**TOMBQUEST**  
VALLEY OF KINGS



**MICHAEL NORTHROP**

SCHOLASTIC INC.

# For Ronald Martin Solan

## Artist, soldier, Porter Street irregular

Copyright © 2015 by Scholastic Inc.

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920.*

SCHOLASTIC, TOMBQUEST, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Control Number: 2014959843

ISBN 978-0-545-72340-4

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

15 16 17 18 19/0

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, August 2015

Book design by Keirsten Geise

Scholastic US: 557 Broadway · New York, NY 10012

Scholastic Canada: 604 King Street West · Toronto, ON M5V 1E1

Scholastic New Zealand Limited: Private Bag 94407 · Greenmount, Manukau 2141

Scholastic UK Ltd.: Euston House · 24 Eversholt Street · London NW1 1DB

# 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.”



## Voices of the Dead

The thin metal skin of a battered taxi was all that stood between Alex Sennefer and a city at war with itself. The car wove its way through madhouse Cairo traffic as news reports on the radio screamed of a crime wave for the ages. But as the cab sped past groups of heavily armed police, Alex thought they seemed to be huddled together less to protect the public than themselves.

He glanced around the cab at his own compatriots. His athletic older cousin, Luke, sat next to him, dressed as if for basketball, and Alex's best friend, Renata Duran, was barely visible on Luke's opposite side. In the front seat were the mysterious scholar Dr. Ernst Todtman and the taxi driver, who leaned heavily on his horn.

Alex flinched from the noise. His nerves were shot and his thoughts were dark. He tried to shut out the chaos of Egypt's capital as he remembered his time in England. Once again, he saw a man in a fearsome mask shouting questions at him in the eerie tomb beneath Highgate

Cemetery. *“Where is your mother, little boy?”* He remembered the words so clearly that the man could have been in the taxi with him.

But of course, if he had been, one of them would be dead by now. The man was Ta-mesah, a top lieutenant of The Order. The mask was a powerful artifact in the shape of a crocodile’s head and capable, Alex knew from firsthand experience, of inflicting tremendous pain. *“She must be in the Black Land,”* Ta-mesah had shouted. *“Tell us where!”*

And now Alex was in the Black Land — Egypt, named for the rich, dark soil on the banks of the Nile River.

Those words had changed everything. Before them, Alex had believed that The Order had kidnapped his mom. That they’d taken her and also stolen the Lost Spells of the Egyptian Book of the Dead from the Metropolitan Museum of Art in New York. But after Ta-mesah’s words, he knew the ancient cult didn’t have her — that they were hunting for her, too. Now Alex and The Order were in a race to find her, and with her, perhaps, the Spells.

His mom had used the massive power of the Spells to bring Alex back from the brink of death. But in doing so, she had accidentally opened a gateway to the afterlife and released the evil ancients known as the Death Walkers. Now those sinister beings were working with The Order toward some dark end Alex could only guess at.

All this evil unleashed just to save his life. He felt a familiar wave of guilt at the thought, both a weight on his shoulders and a punch in his gut.

The traffic began to slow down, and the taxi's air conditioning gave out with one last, dying wheeze. The driver shouted something in Arabic and pressed the button to lower the windows. Warm air hit Alex in the face. It wasn't so bad while they were moving, but a moment later they ground to a full halt. A toxic mix of smells settled into the still air: uncollected trash from the curb, sulfurous fumes from the traffic, and the heavy smog that hung over the city.

"Ugh," said Luke, burying his face in his hands.

"Did you know," Ren began, leaning over to raise her window back up. Alex smiled despite the stench: *Did you know* were three of his friend's favorite words. Ren continued: ". . . that living in Cairo is the same as smoking a pack of cigarettes a day?"

Alex flicked his eyes out over the city. The day was ending now and the sky was doubly clouded by weak light and strong smog. The buildings faded into a gray haze in the distance.

"It is not just the air that is bad here now," added the driver in heavily accented English. "The whole city has gone mad."

Alex's eyes were beginning to water from the combination of odors. As he reached down to pull his T-shirt up over his nose and mouth, he heard shouting from the sidewalk. He turned his head in time to see a woman run headlong into the front window of a small store. The woman tumbled inside under a razor-sharp shower of broken glass.

"Is she hurt?" blurted Ren at the exact same moment that Luke said, "That was crazy!"

The taxi began moving again as the traffic crept forward. Alex kept his eyes on the shattered window as it disappeared behind them, looking for movement inside the store's shadowy interior.

"Why would she do that?" he said to no one in particular.

It was the taxi driver who answered. "They say the voices of the dead haunt the city now," he said. "Carried on the wind. Telling truth, telling lies, it doesn't matter. They sow anger and seek to harm."

"Yeah, but that was seriously bazonkers," said Luke.

The driver paused, possibly trying to figure out what *bazonkers* meant. "That," he said finally, "was nothing."

His tone suggested that he was done with the subject, but Todtman wasn't going to let it go. "What have you seen?" he asked.

The driver paused, considering it, then took a deep breath and answered. "I was at the hospital last night. My wife had been stabbed." Alex heard Ren draw in a sharp breath.

"I am sorry," said Todtman, but the driver shook him off. Now that he had started, he seemed determined to tell the story.

"She will recover," he said. "But the hospital was like a war zone, and we left before we could see the doctor. We didn't trust him."

"Why not?" said Todtman, continuing his gentle prodding.

"Because he had attacked the previous patient with a metal crutch. It was late, you see" — he paused once more to weigh his words — "and the voices are worse at night."

Alex looked out his window at the darkening sky above them and felt a shudder of fear run through him.

The taxi pulled off to the side of the road and came to one final abrupt halt.

“We are here,” said the driver. “Good luck.”